

Drunken Boat 21

Linda Frazee Baker

Foreign

The house we lived in that year was not near the luminous grand cafés and narrow cobblestoned streets of the old city but on the other side of the river, at the end of the 22 tram. The tram was an odd paradox—an antique tangle of black electrified wires above and shiny new metal beneath. Under an opaque sky, it passed with surprising swiftness over the narrow strip of dark churning water that was the Rhine, jerking slightly at unpredictable intervals. At the end of the bridge it creaked downwards into a 90-degree turn like the roller coasters of my childhood, then stopped abruptly, parallel with a busy street. This was our third day in Bonn, and we had come to look at a place we might rent. With some trepidation, I followed my husband and our translator down the little steps and out into the chill September air. There was a smell of beer, of meat frying in cheap oil. Next to a vendor's cart, a group of men in overalls stood eating sausages with mustard squeezed out onto cardboard squares. They gave us a look I couldn't decipher, then turned away.

A few months earlier in northern Virginia, I had gone out of our apartment one afternoon to get the mail. I was taking a break from my dissertation, a study of several minor seventeenth century British poets I had loved in high school who, I learned later, wrote during a period of civil war. In hopes of saying something genuinely new, I had decided to look at how political and social context had shaped their work. But after more than two years of patient labor, I regretted my choice.

I pulled out a thin blue airmail envelope from the rusted metal opening. Inside were few words of stilted English: dark, smudged typewriter ink on an old-fashioned onionskin. Even the date, *19 July 1974*, looked odd.

I held the paper out at a distance as if doing so could make the words less real. Their meaning was clear enough: my husband had been awarded a one-year position at a prestigious German astrophysics *Institut*, his third postdoctoral grant. Promised a tenure-track job in Berkeley where we had done our graduate work, he had been told he would first have to go abroad. But did it have to be Germany? My German grandmother in New York, daughter of a servant girl who emigrated in the 1880s, had wanted nothing to do with it, nor did I.

But it was 1974. A year earlier, the price of oil had quadrupled and the stock market dropped by half. In the worldwide economic malaise that followed, jobs were elusive for young academics, even promising ones. Everyone said the *Bundesrepublik* was the New Germany now. Wouldn't it be unreasonable to refuse to go? Suddenly I was wrapping three copies of my now-approved dissertation in brown parcel paper and tying them with kitchen twine. Our books, our dishes, some of our clothes were being trundled off to Alexandria Storage by two burly, friendly men.

And now we were on the *Ramerstraße*, waiting for the light to turn. And so it did—to yellow, below a still-bright red. I looked over at our translator Frau Rehnke, a stout woman of middle years with dark frizzy hair tied back firmly into a bun. I had been struggling not to dislike her ever since learning she had first worked as a translator during the war. It was easy to imagine her younger and thinner in her uniform with its swastika symbol on one arm.

"The yellow light tells the drivers it is time to get ready," Frau Rehnke said.

Wasn't this carrying efficiency just a bit too far? I imagined thousands of Germans all shifting into first gear at once, like blinkered horses straining at a starting bell.

We had stopped before an ordinary, solidly built villa on a quiet street. The villa was divided into flats, Frau Rehnke said. The landlady was happy to rent to foreign *Akademiker*; all the other tenants were German. We followed Frau Rehnke down a few steps into the garden, which consisted of a few bits of straggly dark green foliage languishing in the Rhineland fog. Inside, the living room was crammed with overstuffed furniture, an old-fashioned black telephone, and a faded Persian rug much like my grandmother's only nowhere near as nice. The miniature kitchen had a real gas stove with four burners and an oven, not—as I had feared—a hot plate. But the refrigerator, high as my waist, looked dwarfed or beheaded. And the bedroom—ah the bedroom! Twin beds of some dark, heavy wood pushed together with a crack between, like the beds in our hotel. They, too, had separate duvets of a glossy,

synthetic material that slithered off in the middle of the night, leaving me to wake up in the cold.

Frau Rehnke was saying something in her funny, clipped British English. What was she saying?

Use of the telephone was included, but the telephone itself was illegal. We would have to answer it not—in the normal way—with our last name, but with the landlady's. Also, there was unfortunately no washing machine. I would have to take our wash to the dry cleaner. She could recommend a good one in the old city.

This was altogether too much. I sat down on a recliner overlooking the dismal yard as Frau Rehnke demonstrated how a lever next to each window controlled the external wooden blinds. These, called *Rolladen*, created silence and kept out light.

My husband, so aggressive a questioner in scientific settings, had fallen silent. In the cold air of the apartment he had not taken off his hat or scarf or the camel's hair overcoat he had worn each winter since we had met. He sniffed and pulled a crumpled handkerchief from a pocket, his head almost brushing the low ceiling. His blue eyes, perpetually strained from staring at punch cards and computer printouts, were pale and watery. Even now, after the blank space of so many years, I can feel the touch of his camel's hair coat under my fingers, the smell it had in winter and in rain.

Did I say, "Do you like it?" Did he say, "What do you think?"

Someone said, "We'll take it." Someone must have.

Two days earlier, the airport bus had set us down before the main train station. Not sure if we were hungry or needed sleep, we had walked into a crowded restaurant, a large old-fashioned room with a high ceiling and wooden floors. On its glass door, a single word in gilt, *Gäststätt*—not the word I knew, *Restaurant*. A smell of tobacco and boiled vegetables came at us as we entered; a din of conversations and clattering dishes made it almost impossible to hear. At a nearby table, a man in a formal tweed suit puffed with slow pleasure at a large cigar. He set it down next to his coffee cup and turned a page in his newspaper, which was attached at its spine to a long, perfectly polished mahogany rod.

We waited, but no one came. After a while, we sat down. At once a waitress in a starched white half-apron stood over us, pencil poised. On the menu, I saw *Schweinshaxe, Sülze*. What were those?

The waitress said something, no doubt, "What would you like?" But despite the hours I had spent working through Fehling and Paulsen's *Elementary German Grammar* and listening to my Dieter Fischer-Dieskau cassette tapes of Mozart's *Magic Flute*, I couldn't understand.

But I wasn't worried. My husband would order for us, he would take charge. It was he who took care of the money, he who drove our Lambretta motorscooter safely every day through the lush Berkeley hills. After all, he knew German—he could read papers and attend scientific lectures in it.

On the other side of the table, I saw the same pale eyes, the same thin, serious lips I had seen every day for the past six years, but all in a face I didn't know. Words formed in my mind in the same instant I rejected them: *He is afraid*.

I looked down at the menu as if I already knew that calm is the best response in such a situation. As a child I had sometimes been taken to German restaurants. What had we eaten there?

Schnitzel.

Kartoffelsalat.

Bier.

The three most common, most ordinary of all German foods. How strange it felt to speak German, even to try!

Afterwards, we walked out into a scene from a 1920s German film. On a large plaza, buses and trams scurried back and forth. Bustling crowds squeezed through narrow cobblestoned streets that twisted, then disappeared in a pedestrian maze. In the damp autumn air, a smell of coal fires rose up over ancient red-tiled roofs: distant promises of warmth under a gray, forbidding sky.

[Back to top](#)

In the mornings I would heat water in the glass tank over the small aluminum sink, wash the dishes in a

stream, then venture out with my new green canvas shopping bag.

In the bakeries of my New York childhood, you took a paper slip from a little machine, then waited for your number to be called. Here, a crush of people filled and overfilled the shop, shouting orders all at once. Women in black uniforms and white half-aprons rushed to and fro, frantic, behind the counter.

“*Three pieces poppy seed cake!*”

“*One dark bread!*”

“*Five Florentiner please! Here please! Here!*”

I froze. I retreated. I froze again. Then, desperate or perhaps just caught up in the frenzy, I shoved back, hesitant at first, then less so. Something hit my shin—a black folding umbrella, wielded by an older woman with short, white hair. Dispirited, I found myself forced back by the surge. But even when I succeeded in ordering the crisp, hard rolls I had known in New York as “Vienna” rolls, that was not the end. I had come with a reasonable command of basic syntax but not the vocabulary of everyday life. When a shop girl said “two and forty marks,” I might hear “twenty-four,” then leave too little on the counter dish. If by chance I left a large enough bill, I would then complain in my halting German that I had been shortchanged. Either way, the glares and shouts of unintelligible fury that followed never failed to terrify even after I understood that I myself had caused them.

After a few weeks, out of a strange indifference, I took a job at a commercial language school in the old city. Four nights a week and daytimes on demand, I would teach English to secretaries and clerks, “the *real* English”: British English, Frau Rehnke’s English.

“*Have you a pencil?*”

“*Yes, I have.*”

“*Have they a pencil?*”

“*No, they haven’t.*”

In this new life with neither future nor routine—for every day the lesson times changed—I had hours free to stroll. In the open-air market, vendors with coarse red faces hawked wet vegetables that smelled of earth. At the end of an aisle, I stared transfixed at poles thick as those at barbershops back home, trying to decipher the advertisements and newspaper headlines pasted on them. I had given up feminine styles in the late ’60s, but now I found myself lingering at window displays of skirts cut on the bias for maximum swirl; blouses with short fluffy sleeves; ermine coats even I who hated fur thought beautiful compared to my own scuffed brown *faux*-suede. Strangest of all, by nine in the morning in the open air *Marktplatz* cafés, old men would already be drinking tiny glasses of dark-colored *schnapps* under a slight, intermittent rain.

And all the while the Europeans hastened by, expressionless and impeccably turned out. Women in hooded dark green *Loden* coats, their hair neatly bobbed and lips carefully reddened. Men unexpectedly good-looking in formal topcoats and short, carefully trimmed beards. How American I felt with my bare, unpowdered face; my long, straight brown hair; my brand new scarlet polyester pantsuit of which only a month earlier I had been so proud! Nights as I walked across the deserted square, Turkish men were slicing bits of meat for *doner kebab* off a spit turning slowly under a neon orange light. At the tram stop on the *Bertha-von-Suttner Platz*, Turkish women waited strong and sad-faced in head scarves, their children by the hand.

As I came down the steps into our garden, the *Rolladen* were already closed. I would find my husband settled in the living room recliner, deep in the latest issue of *Astrophysical Journal* and wrapped in the dark blue velour robe I had sewed for him when we were in graduate school. Some nights he would ask me to read an article draft he was working on. Even though this too was in a language I didn’t understand, I could tell by the syntax where he was unsure of his conclusions. By now we both had colds that would not go away. Some nights we would sit together over the *schnapps* the old men drank in the cafés.

In the old city, as in New York, the cheapest wares were in department store basements. One afternoon as I walked through the *Kaufhalle*, the cheapest of all, I stopped short at a table display of coffee cups with matching saucers and shallow soup bowls. All were of a white porcelain almost covered with tiny spidery sketches in a powder blue. Farmers in nineteenth century peasant costumes; fishermen on narrow rivers; large country houses; a windmill. All in meticulous detail but without perspective, as a child draws.

I had seen this style before, in the three canisters on the highest shelf in my grandmother’s kitchen. As

[Back to top](#)

would glance surreptitiously at these totems from, as the grown-ups called it, “the other side.” Each had a name: *Essig*, *Zucker*, *Öl*. I knew better than to ask my grandmother, who had refused to speak German from age six on. *Vinegar*, *sugar*, *oil*, my mother told me. Someone must have brought them, but who? And why a place of such honor in the household for objects kept empty, perpetually unused?

These mysteries would never be solved. But now, afternoons in my kitchen, I thought of those strange objects as I drank a coffee whitened with condensed milk as in the cafés, the same shade as the coffee my grandmother used to drink. Like hers if so much smaller, my kitchen had blue-and-white porcelain tiles above a dark blue linoleum floor. As a child, I had loved to help her roll the dough out on a cracked wooden board that she rinsed but never washed. I would cut out the shapes using an upside-down water glass, then gorge on scraps as my mother never let me do. When the cookies were in the oven sending out their hot sugary smell, I would wander off to the living room to play Schumann’s *Scenes from Childhood—Kinderszenen*—on her old reconverted player piano, its keys yellowed with age.

She was old by then, Nana, her body wrinkled, corpulent, soft. In the kitchen’s heat, tiny beads of perspiration would form on the faint moustache above her lip and on her forehead just below the tight white curls. I thought her beautiful, even the unsmoothed dots of rouge high on each cheek and the amaranth lipstick that highlighted, rather than hid, the cracks of age. Each morning, she applied the colorless cologne in the cut glass bottle on her mirrored vanity: one drop each on temples, underarms, inner elbows, wrists. Its light scent, lilies mixed with peach; its label, a medieval church in azure and gold. I had seen the bottle in the old city, in a shop window. The church was the great cathedral we had visited further up the river at *Köln*, as the Germans called Cologne.

I understood now, as I had not then, how entirely German Nana had been—she who had changed her name by *fiat* from the unmistakably *deutsch* *Wilhelmina* to *Mathilda*, a name that went much better with her new married name, O’Neill.

In her house, as in the *Ramerstraße*, the heat was turned down each night by ten, sending everyone to shiver alone under their duvet. But no expense was spared on food or clothes. Her meals were huge, like the daily *menü* in all the *Marktplatz* restaurants. Even in years when money was scarce, her Sunday roast—a shiny chicken or redolent standing rib—came only from Bruno’s, the most expensive butcher in the neighborhood. Flushed with heat and pride, she would bring the platter to her dining room table, its mahogany protected by a piece of specially cut glass. And under that glass, her tablecloth: two-inch wide lacy beige octagons, identical as if made by a machine rather than crocheted by Nana’s merely human hand. Now on the *Marktplatz* when I passed the Russian furriers’ shops, I thought of her stole that I had so disliked—five little dead minks with green glass eyes, each holding in its mouth the next one’s tail. A German idea—not mine—of elegance.

At Christmas 1968, I had come home from graduate school elated. I was engaged. After the wedding, I would join my new husband in Berkeley and finish my studies there. Within a day, Nana had summoned me to afternoon coffee. As heat hissed, clanking, from the old radiator, a pale winter sun filtered through the perfectly pressed white curtain onto the kitchen table I remembered so well. I took a cookie from the plate and set it on the rim of my pale jade china cup.

“You are making a mistake,” Nana said.

“He’s a melancholy German,” she went on. “He’ll always be like that. You think you can make him happy, but you can’t. No matter how hard you try.”

Was that really it? Did she want me to marry an Irishman as she had done? Or was it because, unlike my mother, I was proposing to go far away, beyond her knowledge and control?

Four months later, I eloped. Within the year, Nana was gone, her hip broken in a fall as she dusted the piano no one played now I had left. That was the last time we sat together in her kitchen, or anywhere.

Afternoons over coffee in the great cafés, I mused on this by the warm luster of Tiffany-style stained glass lamps. If she, who hated all things German, was herself what she despised, then what was I? Certain traits I had once thought uniquely mine were, I saw now, merely cultural ties. An intense desire for privacy and discomfort with self-revelation; a preference for formality in human relations and processes; an obsessive thoroughness; a rigid discipline; an insistence on perfection in all tasks; an overwhelming need for routine—I saw these every day now in the people I taught at the school. These ways of moving in the world that had always marked me as different I would have learned from Nana and my mother early on. Unless—and this was an even more troubling thought—they were mannerisms encoded over generations, stamped deep within.

This was disturbing. Still more disturbing was how, as I pampered myself in those afternoons, I felt cor

[Back to top](#)

guilt-free in a way I'd never known at home.

I could make nothing of it all. I wished with all my heart that I had never come. The idea that I could have anything in common with people who had stood by silent at murder or, worse, joined in—the old women in the bakeries with their little black umbrellas, the red-nosed old men in the cafés. What had Frau Rehnke said? That she had worked in Romania during the war?

Oh for Berkeley, where the eucalyptus spread its mentholated yet pungent scent over a land—well, perhaps not a land without history, but a land where the past mattered less than the future, a sybaritic Utopia for which no one need sacrifice or struggle. How I had scorned the orange-robed monks as they danced down Telegraph Avenue shaking their tambourines and waving burning incense sticks, chanting *Ha-re Krish-na, Krish-na Ha-re*. I had passed the *Lotos* on when it had come to me. But now I would have been glad to be there, out on my little balcony as the hummingbird circled the hanging fuchsia, its invisible wings noisily beating the air. As the California sun fell slantwise through the afternoon, I had made my way through the poems of Horace, translating from Latin that line I thought both beautiful and true: *They change the skies, not themselves, who run across the sea*.

But Berkeley was not the choice I had. The choice was to deny or try to understand, a task perhaps for a lifetime. For I was German, but not German. A shop girl might be fooled by my bone structure into smiling, but the smile would vanish at the first word I uttered in that accent, part American and part Rhineland fishwife, that was to cause me so much trouble later on. The cold stares, the swift turning away—all this hurt even more now I understood that, while I would always be purely foreign to these people, they were not so to me.

Sind Sie vom Ausland, Frau Dr. Bok-ker?

Ja, genau. Von der USA bin ich.

Ausland. Outside the country.

Ausländerin. A woman from outside the country. A foreign woman.

I told myself it was all really nothing. I was lucky—this daily hostility would end for me when I went back. Feeling excluded would make me a better person. More empathetic, more compassionate. I told myself lots of things. But every night on the *Bertha-von-Suttner Platz*, my long American hair hidden under my brown *faux-suede* hood, I'd watch a German give a Turk that unforgiving stare and be glad it wasn't me.

One afternoon at the tram stop, a man in worker's overalls watched me fumbling with my coins at the ticket *Automat*. At once he came over and, in a slow and careful German, showed me how it worked. It is a measure of how confused I was then, how desperately I wanted to be accepted, that I thought him insincere. I thought he acted out of ideology, that he was a Social Democrat or a member of one of the two communist parties, the DKP or the KPD, whose doctrinal differences remained obscure to me. I thanked him, but not from the heart.

At Christmas we flew back over the Atlantic as in earlier years we had flown over the Rockies, the Great Plains, the Mississippi.

As the plane dipped below the clouds, the lights, blurred at first, glimmered and winked as if in welcome. On the ground, things were different. Air travel telescoped the time, betraying me to people who knew not me but someone else. Unreasonably, they expected me to be her. After a while I tried, for that was easier. But the old self was a mask that fit comfortably one minute only to fall off the next.

For gifts I had brought two red velvet pillows with gold edging from the Christmas fair at *Köln*. As my mother set them down on her off-white couch, I could see she thought the colors did not "go." I was sure she would squirrel them away on the uppermost shelf of the back closet or, worse, give them to Goodwill.

To my surprise, she ran a finger over a soft furrow, then held the pillow up.

"These are beautifully made," she said. "Much nicer than anything I could get here."

What was that in her voice? Envy that, alone of all of us, I had seen that unknown, far-off place from which we had come? Curiosity? Suppressed pride?

"Thank you, darling," said my mother with a gentleness unusual for her. "I'll keep these for when you c

[Back to top](#)

Januar, Februar, März, April. Measured in a Celsius I couldn't seem to learn, the temperature dropped, then dropped again. And always—always!—that occluded sky.

My husband flew off to conferences in search of job offers but found only conferences with no jobs. Afternoons I lingered, morose, in restaurants.

I had mastered numbers now. When the illegal—unregistered—telephone rang, I said in my worst German that I was the cleaning lady. Could they speak more slower please? Each week I took our wash to yet another dry cleaner in hopes of finding one we could afford. On the *Marktplatz*, the Russian furriers disappeared and were replaced by Italians selling *gelati*: rum raisin, *Málaga*, pistachio. Slowly, the air became warmer, although no less damp. I bought my first pair of *espadrilles*, cheap because made in Romania, but with fashionably high cork heels.

One afternoon as I went upstairs to give our landlady the rent check, I passed another tenant carrying a basket of wash. *Wet* wash.

“Foreigner germs,” said a cheery British colleague at the language school. “No German would rent a flat without a washer. That’s why there are no laundrettes. But they wouldn’t have them anyway. They’re much too afraid of foreigner germs.”

I remember all that clearly but not where I was when my husband told me he had just signed a three-year contract with the *Institut*. It had been his only offer. The job in Berkeley had been given to someone else. A friend; a colleague; a good man.

I don’t remember what I said. Did I say anything? Later on, I did. Later on I said things I’m glad I can’t remember.

A few weeks later I was driving the tiny Fiat 128 we had just bought secondhand onto the autobahn. I was going to meet an American professor who taught English at a university two hours north. It was, at best, a vague connection. The professor, a school friend of a friend of my graduate advisor’s, had hardly sounded eager on the phone. After several rebuffs, I demanded he grant me an “informational interview” in which he would explain the baroque intricacies of the German educational system. Then I would at least know where I might apply. I had no idea why I had been so insistent, nor did I know where my new bullying manner had come from. Given my autodidact German, the idea that any school would hire me, let alone a secondary school like a *Gymnasium* or that more mysterious entity a *Realschule*, was a bad joke.

This was my first time driving a car on the autobahn, a two-lane highway with no speed limits where the fastest vehicle had right of way. As I drove onto the ramp, the car’s engine chirruped like my sewing machine back home. I fumed as the Fiat trailed behind a slow truck. But every time I edged out into the passing lane, a pair of headlights—BMW? Mercedes? Porsche?—flashed in my mirrors, then flashed, larger, again. Cursing, I pushed the accelerator down. At 133 kilometers an hour (what was that in miles?), the poor little car began to shake.

I thought then of how Frau Rehnke our translator had told me that cars should always be driven flat out on the autobahn. That was best for the car, she said. It was how she drove her *Deux Chevaux*—a 1930s-style tin can of a car that leaned into every turn as our *Lambretta* had done. At the time, I had taken her advice as one more proof I was in a country inhabited only by the deranged. I still thought it bad advice, but now I understood.

I drove down the exit ramp suffused with gratitude that I was still alive. I was outside the Rhineland now. The sun had broken through the clouds—not a pale yellow ball you could stare at for hours, but a real sun. By the side of the A-34, in a lush green field, a group of black Arabian horses were cavorting to a sweat. The countryside, gorgeous as northern California, brought with it an ache of remembered happiness.

But this was not home. Home was a place where bad things didn’t happen to me or anyone I knew. And if they did, I of course would behave with dignity, with unflinching grace. In this sense, home was a place I would never know again. The difficulties of making a life that would be truly mine lay all ahead, but I knew now, as I had not known before, that they were there. They lay before me like distant alpine crags only I could see, like white-tipped Mount Soracte in Horace’s ode, an emblem of trials and strivings a sensible person will avoid. I thought of the life in which I had studied that poem as I drove on, slower now, through the north German plains.



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Next

[Juliana Piccillo](#)

- [Poetry](#)
- [Nonfiction](#)
- [Translation](#)
- [Reviews](#)
- [Hong Kong](#)
- [Union](#)
- [Book Contest Finalists](#)

Nonfiction

- [Rachel Jamison Webster](#)
- [Sharon Dolin](#)
- [Hannah Kittle](#)
- [Kurt Caswell](#)
- [Linda Frazee Baker](#)
- [Juliana Piccillo](#)

Blog

- [Dispatches from Glazy Places, Part 4 by DB Guest Blogger Oki Sogumi](#)
- [Vintage DB 52: Gray Jacobik's "The Eleanor Roosevelt Letters," DB 12](#)
- [Read Pulitzer Prize winning poet Gregory Pardlo in Drunken Boat](#)

[More](#)

Meta

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[Books/Media](#)

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[Back to top](#)

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Back to top