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Another Life

By Linda Frazee Baker

It was almost time for me to go. The desk of the tiny windowless office that had been mine for almost thirty years was nearly bare, revealing a scratched gray surface I felt I had never seen so clearly before. Not much was left—only a handful of medium size black binder clips; a worn three-ring notebook someone else could use; two packets of little stickie flags in primary colors; a blank, switched-off computer monitor. Printouts of draft technical reports and work papers were listing over the three overflowing wastebaskets I'd scavenged from nearby vacant offices. Above my head, the metal shelves were empty.

All day long, I had been going up and down the staircase of this federal audit and research agency where, so long ago, I had gotten my first—and, it turned out last—permanent, professional job. My arms strained from carrying books down to my car I knew I'd never need again but somehow hadn't been able to discard. *Words into Type*—an indispensable reference work I'd used to convince skeptical auditors that a still-PhD in English literature—a woman, to boot—had sufficient skill to be allowed to edit their reports. *Basic Concepts in Financial Accounting*—my personal guide to the mystifying worldview of accountants. *A Dictionary of Economic Terms*,

always at my side during the ten years I was the technical writer for a team of economists who modeled federal budget outcomes. All that work, often intellectually absorbing and always nitpickingly detailed, was over now. Six stories below in the basement garage, my blue Honda Civic, its trunk laden down, waited in the line of cars required to leave at 5:45, their—and my—required departure time.

I looked up—there was a noise.

An older man—balding, a bit stooped, in his late sixties or perhaps early seventies—had leaned himself up against the lintel. I had seen him recently in the hallway, but had no idea who he was. He was wearing a crumpled white shirt, maroon tie, and faded navy pin-striped suit jacket, once the standard uniform for men in this organization. I thought he might be an older worker who had left and then come back on a time contract—an easy way the agency saved money. More and more seemed to fill the halls every day.

“Retiring?” he said in a manner I found overly familiar.

I nodded slightly. I wasn’t exactly, but it was too complicated to explain to someone I didn’t know and would never see again. As of tomorrow I would be traveling full-time with my husband, a transportation expert whose work regularly took him to places like Delhi, Manila, Singapore, London, Leipzig, and Guangzhou, which, I had learned, was pronounced *Gwan-jo*. In less than twenty-four hours I would be going with him to Gothenburg, Sweden. According to my research on the Internet, this was a charming university town. Why not? After all, I had never thought of anything I did inside the walls of this massive, 1930s WPA-style building halfway between the White House and the Congress as a *career*. I had traveled and

taught English in Europe for some years when I was young. I was sure it would all be fine.

The old man gazed around the drab little room with its blank desk, its sickly peach-color walls. He took it all in, then laughed a small, old person's laugh.

"Congratulations," he said with a Gioconda smile. "I lasted five months."

Then he disappeared.

The next morning in our house just outside Bethesda, I hesitated over the last-minute packing, putting sweater after sweater in, then taking them out. Would I have enough warm clothes when I got to Sweden? It was only September, but I knew from my time in Europe it would be much colder there.

Suddenly I became aware of my heart beating. This was nothing new. The three cardiologists I had consulted all assured me that nothing could possibly be wrong. My blood pressure was low, my cholesterol ratio good.

I sat—or rather, fell—onto the bed. The ramifications of my decision to stop working were starting to become clear. What would I do all day? Who would I be? I had worked at one thing or another ever since grad school. Beyond traveling with my husband to places whose names I didn't know how to pronounce, the future was vague. Many of my retired friends had secured volunteer slots or signed up for classes at the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute before taking the leap. The ones who hadn't were home now watching daytime TV or playing video games. All these people had been capable administrators, researchers, passionate advocates, high-

status executives once. What was wrong with them? Did they have early Alzheimer's? Were they grieving?

The thumping under my rib case had speeded up, like the climax of an experimental jazz riff.

Thump. Thump-thump-thump. Thumpthumpthumpthumpthump.

The room swayed back and forth as if I had just downed that entire bottle of Babancourt rum someone gave us last Christmas.

My husband was standing over me, his face grave.

"I'm not going to the hospital," I said with a touch of defiance.

"OK," he said. "'Hold on while I get the blood pressure monitor. Will you at least let me call the Blue Cross Blue Shield nurse help line?"

The emergency room was filled with bright lights and bustling, hyper-competent people. I had taken care of my father in the last years of his life, including during his three different heart problems, so this was all, in one way, familiar. Still, it was a bit unnerving to watch the jagged red line and hear the irregular beep and realize these now belonged to me.

A pleasant-faced woman in blue scrubs stood under the monitors. A doctor? A nurse? A lab tech? They all dressed alike, so I couldn't know. For the first time since clearing out my office, I could feel myself beginning to relax. This was a good hospital. I would be well taken care of. Was this what it took for me to relax now I had retired?

"Hmmm," said the woman in blue scrubs.

"Looks like you need to return your heartbeat to normal," she said.

And just in that moment I did. The red line over my head became smooth and predictable as a wave in the Chesapeake. I lay back on the pillow, stunned at how grateful I felt.

Pale but calm, my husband was hunched over his laptop in a chair much too small for him. According to the clock on the wall, our flight to Stockholm was now in the last stages of boarding.

“Can we re-book the plane for later today?” I asked.

He frowned. His travel agent skills had been finely honed since he had gone on the road, but even for him this was a stretch.

What was that poem by Thomas Nashe I had liked so much in grad school? Ah yes—*Brightness falls from the air, / Queens have died young and fair, / Dust hath clos-ed Helen’s eye. . . .* Well, no matter. However beautifully you said it, “death is coming” would never be a welcome thought. At least it didn’t look like it would come today.

I climbed awkwardly off the high, stiff mattress and began to dress.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” my husband asked.

“No,” I said. “But go ahead and make the call.”

I was still in a daze twenty-four hours later as the landing lights on the runway came into focus. It was ten p.m., Swedish time. We had arrived in Gothenburg—or, as they said here said in a cheerful-sounding singsong, *Yah-teh-borkh*. Beyond exhausted, we waited at the baggage claim only to have an SAS Airlines clerk inform us in excellent English that our luggage had been mis-

transferred in Copenhagen when we changed planes. It was now on a plane to Kiruna, the northernmost city in Sweden. But not to worry. It would promptly to our hotel tomorrow night by midnight at the latest.

“But that’s two hours after we leave for Stockholm,” said my husband.

His short, clipped beard was ruffled; he spoke with an unaccustomed whine.

“And I don’t have a shirt and tie now. How can I go my meeting with Volvo without a white shirt and a tie?”

Thump, went my heart. *Thump-thump. THUMP-THUMP-THUMP.*

Stop it, I said silently, looking down at my rib cage. *Stop it right now!* Where was the heart anyway? On the right side? The left side where, as children, we had pledged allegiance to the flag? I took several quick deep breaths, as the ER doctor had advised. Where, oh where, was that little vial of metoprolol she had given me at discharge? Had I sensibly put it my backpack or was it now winging its way north towards Lapland?

The next morning my husband went off in a ill-fitting white shirt and funereal tie the concierge had cadged from somewhere. In the hotel dining room, a young waiter in a dark formal suit poured my coffee from the long spout of an old-fashioned pot that looked to be made of real silver. I got a fresh roll, a pat of real butter, a tiny jar of Seville orange marmalade from the buffet table. Nearby, an older couple who looked to be from Russia or Eastern Europe seemed to be discussing a matter of great importance. I didn’t understand a word.

The privileged anonymity conferred by high-end travel, the tantalizing, enticing sound of voices whose messages would remain forever unknowable—I felt

an unexpected pang. It was all so very familiar even though it had been so long ago. I had gone to Germany after finishing my dissertation for what I had expected to be a very late gap year only to have it turn into four. I had taught English, first at a Berlitz-type school, then at a proper university—the only time in my life I had been able to do the work I was trained to do. Now, unaccustomedly, I let myself remember what it had felt like: strolling through the open-air markets in search of a *Suppengrün*—a bundle of leeks, carrots, and herbs for soup; rising early each morning to review my lesson plans, eager and a bit anxious; standing proudly at the head of the classroom—at last!—in my new rust-color European-cut suit with its long, pleated skirt; lecturing in a no doubt pompous monologue on the intricacies of metrical analysis, modal auxiliary verbs, and—my favorite—translation of literary texts. Thomas Mann, Joseph Roth, Kafka.

But what was the point of thinking about that now? I felt a sorrow coming on, a sorrow that if I wasn't careful would descend into pain. My throat tightened. I rose and pushed the table back, almost pulling the heavy white tablecloth off in my haste. The Russian couple fell silent and stared.

Outside the hotel, it was a bright September day with only the slightest hint of chill in the air. I walked down *Kungsgatan*, the town's main avenue complete with still-flowering trees and a red-and-white tram. City map in hand, I headed for the art museum. This turned out to be an imposing baroque stone structure on an equally imposing square. But this was *Jah-teh-borkh*, not London or Paris or Rome. After two hours of trying to interest myself in pastoral landscapes, sea storms, and

portraits of the local merchant class elite in nineteenth century gilt frames, I had to admit I was profoundly bored.

Was it time for lunch? No? Well, I could declare it time. I could do whatever I wanted now.

I took a seat at one of the many outdoor cafés. At once two young women sat down at an adjoining table. They settled themselves and their Art-Nouveau style paisley shawls, silk with black fringe. Their eyes were rimmed with *kohl*, their high cheekbones make up in a natural shade of blush. They looked to be about the same age—and same style—as my German students from thirty-five years earlier. I remembered—

Stop it, I told myself firmly. *Stop it now*.

Above my head, a modern infrared lamp was putting out heat comfortable as the wicker chair in which I sat. Not even vaguely hungry, I ordered the “*menu*, the daily tourist special: Swedish meatballs with capers and cream sauce over egg noodles, a vinegared cucumber salad with freshly snipped dill, and a glass of sparkling white wine. This last had, as I hoped, an unmistakably pure European *zing* at the end of every swallow. I took another.

On the other side of the cobblestoned street, an old man was smoking a huge cigar with undisguised gusto. He seemed entirely free from American health anxieties or perhaps just knowledge of the Surgeon General’s report. Guilt-free, I inhaled as much secondary smoke as wafted in my direction. I had smoked briefly, in my European years—delicate, lady-like little cigars, finger-thin. I had first seen women smoking them in Amsterdam cafes, women with pastel streaked hair and

black fishnet stockings. The cigars came in a small metal box; its logo was a rakish, dark-haired vaguely South American man sporting a gaucho hat and dark *mustachio*, a contrast with the Dutch brand name, *Schimmelpfennick*. I had loved the scent almost as much as the sophisticated, vaguely rebellious image it gave me of myself. I felt myself almost that person once more until the waitress, deferential to my age, brought unasked a stiff, horse-hair blanket for my lap. *How dare she?* I thought with a ferocious, even feral rage. Recovering myself, I thanked her politely—a wind had come up from the harbor, it *was* cooler now—and tucked myself in.

After a whirlwind tour of European cities with transport problems, I was glad to be home. I decided to stay home during my husband's next trip and try to make a better plan for my life. How about baking bread every week as I had done in grad school? I dug out the recipe for my favorite, a Swedish rye with orange peel, molasses, and fennel seed. An hour into the first of three risings, I caught myself surfing Internet sites on my new iPad for dough hooks, quick breads, bread machines.

"Smells great," said my husband as he came through the door that evening.
"Did you bake bread?"

"Yes," I said. "But don't get used to it."

Our travel schedule precluding my volunteering or taking courses, not that I was sure I wanted to do either. Well, I had always loved languages. Why not re-learn Latin in a rigorous way? I had been required to pass a two-hour Latin exam before being allowed to register for my English lit courses in grad school. I had only one

year of college Latin, so I spent the summer after college working again through Wheelock's *Latin Grammar*. I bought a used Cassell's dictionary and translated as many of Cicero's speeches, used for last three exams, as I could. But when I turned the paper over in the exam room, my eyes fell, horrified, on a passage from Caesar's *Gallic Wars*. Frantic, I spent almost the whole time looking up words for *kill, maim, slay, slaughter*.

I passed, but the grader added this humiliating if mildly encouraging missive: "I feel sure that someday you will learn Latin." I hadn't, at least not yet. Why not now?

Three weeks later, after reading this explanation of the active and passive periphrastic verb conjugations, indicative and subjunctive moods, I gave up.

a. The First Periphrastic Conjugation combines the Future Active Participle with the forms of **sum**, and denotes a *future or intended* action.

b. The Second Periphrastic Conjugation combines the Gerundive with the forms of **sum**, and denotes *obligation, necessity, or propriety*.

c. The periphrastic forms are inflected regularly throughout the Indicative and Subjunctive and in the Present and Perfect **Infinitive**[LB1].

Amo, amas, amat was fine to learn, but had anyone ever really used the tense illustrated by *amandus fuero*, "I shall have deserved to be loved"? Someone should digitize all the surviving Latin texts and run frequency distributions to identify the most commonly occurring grammatical locutions, I thought crankily.

It was beginning to feel odd to be with people. I called up my friends Gina and Esther and suggested we all have lunch. They had retired before me; surely they had mastered the art of life after work. Gina, a tall platinum blonde, had been a health

care policy analyst; Esther, tall, slim and graying at the temples, had practiced federal procurement law.

Over BLTs in the Tyson's Corner Cheesecake Factory, I listened to them talk about their grandchildren and their dogs: Barney, a fierce-seeming but actually very sweet black Lab, and Lilly, a three-month old white Pomeranian. I pondered certain ineluctable facts of my life, such as that I have no children and pet dander gives me asthma.

"But tell us all about Gothenburg," said Gina. "How was it?"

"How exciting, that you get to go to all those places," said Esther, wistful.

"You're so lucky. I wish Larry would take me to Sweden."

I loved these women, and they loved me. We had been each other's support system in the workplace, pooling our collective worldly wisdom at moments of crisis. But I didn't know what to say. Were they really as contented as they seemed, or were they just making the best of it?

It was only a few steps from there to watching back-to-back episodes of "Law and Order" in the afternoons even when I remembered the endings. One evening after dinner, I was doing the dishes in our country-style kitchen, so strangely huge compared to all the hotel rooms. I held a baking sheet over the sink, scrubbing vigorously at it with a wire brush. For an instant I forgot I was retired. It seemed just one more evening when the goal was to increase the little space in the day that was mine. Only a bit of encrusted pizza held me back—that, and my own lifelong

inability to settle for less than perfect. I trained the water spray on the offending particle, rubbed at it harder, and, still not satisfied, scraped away with a fingernail.

“Good enough,” I thought as I moved the baking sheet over to the stovetop to dry. I wiped my hands on a dishtowel, folded it carefully, and put it down.

Then I remembered. I didn’t need to review a draft report on federal budget simulations. I didn’t need to go to bed early so I could get up at six. There was absolutely nothing I needed to do.

I had an impulse to seize the baking sheet and hurl it to the floor. I sat down at on a counter stool and took some deep breaths. Good heavens—how had I gotten here?

In November we went to New York, where we stayed at a hotel on 28th Street just off Eighth. The room, on the twenty-fifth floor, was an oblong so tiny we bumped into each other if we tried to dress or undress at the same time. I didn’t mind. I was born and grew up here. I didn’t need to wonder who I was, or would be. I was the daughter of Dorothy and Charles Frazee, the granddaughter of Matilda and James O’Neill. I was the best friend of Myra Kaltun, who lived on Ithaca Street, with whom I walked every morning down Britton Avenue to P. S. 89 in Elmhurst Queens. I was the eight-year old with dirty blonde braids that Bobby Parker, who sat behind me, once dunked in an inkwell. I was the little girl who lost the district spelling bee when she couldn’t spell *susurration*.

All day long I wandered happily through familiar streets, fitting myself easily into the kaleidoscope of the ever-changing crowd. At night I lay back on the hotel

pillows and turned on my new iPad. Next to me, my husband was snoring gently, his eyes covered by a sleep mask we had first used on the airplanes and now used routinely. Far below, the C train hurtled every eight minutes towards Brooklyn, its rhythm calmer than my heart's.

Thump. THUMP. Thumpthumpthump. I breathed deeply, in and out. I wondered uneasily whether I should take the advice of my new cardiologist and agree to a procedure—how benign and legalistic that sounded!—called an *ablation*. After a small incision in my thigh, a tiny wire camera would be snaked up through my blood vessels and into my heart. From images transmitted by the camera, the surgeon would locate and burn out defective tissue that sent out electrical impulses triggering the arrhythmia.

“It’s very straightforward,” the cardiologist had said. “Ninety-five percent success rate.”

Burn, I heard. Fails five percent of the time.

I swept the screen over to the Kindle app, which magically opened to where I had left off in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. I had been amazed to find I could download this—and many other books out of copyright—for free. Actual books were too much weight in the new black rollboards we planned never to check. The prospect of taking all the late novels of Henry James with me to our next venue, an Indonesian island I had never heard of called Sulawesi, was downright intoxicating.

I CELEBRATE myself and sing myself,

And what I assume you shall assume,

For every atom belonging to me as good as belongs to you.

How long it had been since I had lost myself in Whitman's long lines, in this voice so confident in its mingling of desire for absolute control with a bold and careless generosity. These first lines of *Leaves of Grass* had seduced me into literature when I was fifteen. Yes, that was when it had started, that doomed quest for a larger than any life I saw in our quiet middle-class immigrant neighborhood in Queens. A life with fewer restrictions, more pleasure. A life without absolute obeisance to time clocks.

*I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,
Hoping to cease not till death.*

I held down the *off* button, turned out the bedside light, and padded over to the window. Tiny lights quivered everywhere on the huge, dark rectangles that in daytime were tall buildings; beyond all, even at midnight the night sky glowed. The little dots on the street were the night kaleidoscope. No doubt many lights shone only on frustration, conflict, anger. Yet it was hard to believe that as I scanned these man-made horizons. The lights, like grounded stars, seemed images of of unrealized, perhaps unrealizable, possibility.

The next afternoon we took the 3:05 Northeast Regional going south towards home. As my husband clacked away on a PowerPoint, I stared at a landscape of three-story 1950s "garden" apartments with grimy terraces and aging gas stations with Russian names.

I fired up my iPad, but the train's erratic bumping was conducive to neither Whitman nor late James. Well, there was always mindless Internet surfing. I opened

Google search and thought a minute. Then I typed: “translation course,” “German,” and “on-line.”

NYU Translation Certificate Program, I read. *An online program for commercial translators in Spanish, French, Italian, German, Arabic.*

I raised a finger in the air. Took it back. Raised it again. Timorous and uncertain, I swiped to the next screen.

Four-thirty a.m. I was in yet another cab, going south from Bethesda to yet another airport to meet my husband in yet another city whose name I didn’t know how to pronounce—Shenzen, in southeast China. As the taxi sped down Wisconsin Avenue, the pre-dawn dark, the world was suddenly lit up as we passed the display windows of Tiffany’s, Cartier’s, Barney’s, Ralph Lauren. I hardly bothered to look. I had seen these shops only recently in Hong Kong.

“Where are you going?” said the taxi driver. “Is this a business trip?”

“Translation,” I heard myself saying.

Would I do anything to avoid saying *I’m retired?*

“I take on-line courses in German translation,” I said. I’m hoping to sign up with an agency once I’ve finished the course in Commercial German.”

The taxi driver nodded sagely.

“Translation is very important,” he said.

The taxi driver was from Uganda. He had lived in many countries, including Sweden. Two of his children lived in Gothenberg.

Yah-teh-borkh. Six months—so long ago now. That outdoor café with the infrared heat lamp red as burning coals. The two young women with their fringed

paisley scarves. The thinly sliced, acidic cucumber atop my salad. The sweet, northern European white wine.

Some weeks later, we went to Maggiano's Restaurant in Friendship Heights with Esther and Gina and their spouses. As we started on our salads, I realized I was the only woman who didn't have perfectly shaped, professionally done nails. Esther's were Persimmon, Gina's Beautiful Beige—this season's fashion colors. Mine were bare, some broken from keyboarding.

"How is that on-line course going you mentioned?" said Esther with friendly interest. "It's German translation?"

I stared down at the wilted green leaves, then looked up to find all eyes turned in my direction. I felt a desire unknown since adolescence that the floor open up and swallow me whole as the whale had swallowed Jonah.

"The course is good, very good," I mumbled. "But really, it's just something to fill the time."

"She gets all As," said my husband, smiling proudly.

"Not all," I corrected him. "Three A minuses and one B plus."

"There's one exercise per week—all kinds of topics," he went on. "A really interesting variety—last week was an explanation of mortgage rates, the week before a recipe for pear tart."

I gave him what I hoped was a meaningful look. With what I hoped was a meaningful flourish, I raised a forkful of arugula in the air to signal that, as far as I was concerned, the conversation was at an end.

“That’s wonderful--you’re acquiring a whole new skill,” said Gina. “Where are you taking this course? What do you plan to do with it?”

A voice amazingly like mine explained that certain anti-fascist German writers had not yet been translated into English.

Who was this mendacious person who looked just like me? And what on earth was she talking about? There weren’t any anti-fascist writers whose major works hadn’t yet been translated into English except Peter Weiss. I couldn’t imagine any U.S. publisher interested in novels about German communists in 1930s Scandinavia.

“It’s not literature,” I said. “In case you were wondering. I’m hoping to get a job with an agency and do commercial translation. All my expertise on the federal debt should come in handy.”

I was in a hotel room in Jakarta, Indonesia, when I got the e-mail. My translation of a short story by the Austrian postwar antifascist writer Ingeborg Bachmann had been accepted by a prestigious journal pending certain necessary revisions.

I clicked to the reviewer’s report, ignoring a few little heart *thumps*. “This translation is felicitous in parts, but seems off in others . . . an apparent failure to understand the punctuation in the title . . . errors in the subjunctive. . . .”

I read the report again. Then I broke out in tears not of joy, but as if I had just received an unforgivable insult, or news that someone I love had died.

I walked back and forth in the little space, tears cascading down both cheeks. My head hurt. I looked blearily out into the distance, over the sprawling new skyscrapers and decrepit slums, my eye muscles feeling like the legs of a gardener straightening up after a full day of weeding. The anonymity of the room weighed on me. It black walls with a bit of gold trim and a luxurious maroon bedcover—an effort to simulate a nineteenth century Javan chief's dwelling, or maybe the home of a wealthy Dutch spice merchant. It's not—it's a Comfort Inn in downtown twenty-first century Jakarta, pronounced *Ja-kar-ta*.

I made myself a cup of tea using the electric thermos, available in every Asian hotel room, which I also use to boil water so I can drink it safely. My head continued to hurt, as much from rage as from crying. *I'll show that reviewer*, I thought childishly. *I'll show him*.

I went back to work, seating myself again the uncomfortable wire chair at a shelf designed to be a night table. It's a paragraph in a World War II soldier's diary, from a memoir written in 1939 by the Swiss writer Max Frisch. At the time he was a new draftee stationed in the Alps, on the border with Germany, whose troops were expected to invade any day.

The paragraph describes the soldiers' routine. They rise early, do calisthenics, then eat their breakfast standing up from little oblong bowls. Some of those who have been on the border longer than Frisch have learned to sit down

while they eat “*platterdings auf jeden Boden. . . und munter-wortlos ihre warmen Brocken fletschen.*”

Platterdings, the *Duden* informs me authoritatively if unhelpfully, is the same as *glatterdings*, a colloquial and rarely used form for “thoroughly” or “absolutely.” What is a word in English for “thoroughly” that is slangy but hardly ever used? And why did Frisch choose such an unusual word when German has more common words with the same meaning?

Auf jeden Boden setzen. “Sit on any ground.” “Any kind of ground”? “Any kind of terrain”? Probably not the latter. *Terrain*, I find in the OED, can mean “a tract of country considered with regard to its natural features, configuration, etc.; in military use esp. as affecting its tactical advantages, fitness for manœuvring, etc.; also, an extent of ground, region, district, territory.” I toy with *terrain* because it’s military and because, according to the frequency distribution on the Google N-Gram program, its usage had been increasing throughout the late 1930s. Better yet, it is neither strongly American nor British—ideal for “MidAtlantic” English, that elusive chimera of translators. But I’m going off point; this is a simple phrase. *Boden* here just means “a surface for walking or sitting,” as the *Duden* says.

Munter-wortlos means “cheerful-wordless.” “Cheerfully wordless”? “Cheerful and silent”? I’ll come up with something for that. The last phrase is a conundrum, or more precisely, a “translation problem”: *Ihre warmen Brocken fletschen*. *Brocken* means *fragments* or *rocks*. *Fletschen* doesn’t seem to have a meaning on its own; it’s always in the phrase *die Zähne fletschen*, “to bare one’s teeth,” i.e., “to snarl” like a dog or a wolf that feels under threat. But the soldiers aren’t baring their teeth in a

show of aggression, they're peacefully eating breakfast. What is Frisch is trying to convey here? That when they open their mouths, they reveal the half-eaten lumps of food between their teeth? But if so, why? What does that mean?

I need to back up and look at the larger context. Frisch is describing how the more experienced soldiers eat breakfast. Is the idea that these soldiers are showing aggression while even they eat—or, on the contrary, that they are harmless as the new draftees, none of them ever having been under attack? Or that the war is being imposed on them, degrading them to the level of animals? And, on the linguistic level, what why did Frisch choose these words and this syntax? What, in other words, is the aesthetic strategy of this sentence?

I have no idea—*platterdings, glatterdings* no idea.

Back again in our house—we have a week between Jakarta and Leipzig—I think about taking the books out of the trunk of my Honda, which continues to list to the back. I don't. Six months later, I drive to the Bethesda Library and donate the books. Then I sell the Honda. My husband has taken a job in New York, and we are moving there—a city where many others are also afflicted with the delusion that literature is important. Despite my new cardiologist's claim that the surgeon found and destroyed the defective tissue, my heart persists in its jazzy, erratic *thumps*.

But all this is in the future. Now, in my study at home, I look through my bookshelves for *Stich-Worte*, an anthology of Max Frisch excerpts I brought back from Germany. I find it wedged in between Wheelock's grammar, whose spine has come unglued, and my now-faded Latin *Cassell's*.

With hushed, even fearful, anticipation. I open the dark blue, slightly tattered cover. I whisper the opening paragraph, distressed at how bad my accent is. Was it always that bad or has it decayed? Suddenly I'm riddled with doubt. Why I am doing all this? Shouldn't I just spend my days enjoying exotic travel and reading Henry James on my Kindle?

*I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,
Hoping to cease not till death.*

Some days later, I arrive at this translation:

“It was an evening in March. We had been sitting in the leathered alcove of a coffee house, as we did every evening on our way home from work. We drank a cherry brandy, we read the newspaper. Suddenly, after years of waiting, we were struck by the question of what, after all, we were really expecting to happen in this place. At least half of life was over now, and—“

Note: The final quotation is my translation of the first excerpt reprinted in Max Frisch's *Stich-Worte*, ed. Uwe Johnson (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt am Main, 1975), p. 13. This is taken from *Bin, Oder die Reise nach Peking* (Berlin and Frankfurt am Main, 1952).