

Reading and Remembrance: [Linda Frazee Baker \(1946-2020\)](#) – Creative Non-Fiction, Fiction, and Translation, on the 77th Anniversary of Linda’s Birth, December 16, 2023, 3-5pm EST

Michael Replogle, moderator

I. Introduction

- 1. Michael Replogle** – Welcome and introduction to the event, including two short readings totaling 525 words.

I’m delighted that you all have joined today’s reading which will bring to life Linda Frazee Baker’s delightful literary voice as we remember her on the 77th anniversary of her birth. I was blessed to spend 40 years with Linda, my wife and partner, who passed away in 2020. She and I were blessed to share love for so long, to travel the world together, and to enjoy the company of wonderful friends and family.

Linda filled many roles– as a civil servant working at the U.S. General Accounting Office, as a University of Muenster *Lectur*, as a devoted daughter, as a dear friend to many. But among her fondest wishes was to be recognized as a writer and literary translator. She published many pieces in literary journals, but much of her considerable output remained unpublished at the time of her death.

As her literary executor, I’ve made much of her unpublished work accessible for the first time on Linda’s website, www.lindafranzeebaker.com. Please peruse it after this reading to further explore the many pieces we’ll sample today.

I want to thank those who have selected and will read brief passages from Linda’s work today.

I would like to start the reading with a two-sentence fragment from Esther Dischereit’s *Berlin Splinters*, 2020 (Translated by Linda), a piece from which we will hear more samples later:

'He is the Lord of the Fish Counter and gave me a double portion for the price of one. Once, when I wanted to buy a fish head for soup and he didn't have any, he offered me his own head.'

Linda delighted in observing, writing about, and translating texts that bring new insights out of the ordinary. She often focused on the nature of identity and issues of moral responsibility, examining how injustice, alienation, and exile shape the interior lives of people. She brought an ironic eye to writing, revealing the simultaneous absurdity and seriousness of situations, with dialogue uncovering the complications of feelings. Her creative writing and memoirs were often grounded in adventurous global /travels.

I would like to close by reading Section 8 from Linda Frazee Baker’s *Unnatural Acts: A Journal from the First Year of Retirement (Out of It)*, written in 2012, from which we’ll also hear more later. (483 words)

8. On the way to an airport the cab driver asks me what I do. I tell him I am a translator.

The cab driver is from Uganda. He speaks several languages and owns a house in Gothenburg Sweden where he used to live. As the cab rolls down Wisconsin Avenue in the pre-dawn darkness, we have a little

conversation about Gothenburg Sweden, where I have been, and the importance of languages. When I tell him I am a translator for German, it feels as if I am talking about someone else. Increasingly, I am spending a large share of my life in moving vehicles: taxis, planes, buses, auto rickshaws.

A friend asks me how the translation course is going. I tell her I am thinking of taking a dual certificate in French and German. I tell her the program coordinator has suggested I do this since I know both languages.

“Well, that doesn’t make any sense for you,” she says. “You’re old.”

I think of the great nineteenth century German novelist Theodor Fontane, who started writing novels when he retired at 67. I think of the wonderful British novelist Penelope Fitzgerald who began at about the same age. I think of di Lampedusa starting to pen *Il Gattopardo* at age 60 and being told by an editor shortly before he died that it was unpublishable.

But I say nothing; in my heart I agree with my friend.

At Thanksgiving I am at a dinner at another friend’s house. I am meeting most of the people there for the first time, as a retired person. Over prosecco and prosciutto my friend asks me how the translation course is coming along. Others become interested; all eyes turn toward me; I am peppered with questions.

As I listen to my answers, I feel strange. Is it really true as I say that I am serious about translation? I don’t even like German that much—I’m an autodidact in German, and the course was something to do, something to pass the time. Pressed about my plans, I hear myself explaining that there are some anti-fascist German writers I think should be translated. Who on earth am I talking about? I don’t know any anti-fascist writers who haven’t been translated except Peter Weiss. I can’t imagine that his novels about German émigré communists living in Scandinavia in the 1930s would be publishable in the U.S.

The conversation moves on. The wine glasses are refilled and the second course is brought out. No one seems to have guessed I was lying. I relax a bit.

All my life I have been a very honest person—annoyingly so. Who is this person who makes things up? Who is this person who hides behind a mask that doesn’t fit very well?

The German translation class comes to an end. I get an A. I sign up for two more.

I’d now like to introduce Susan Thorne, who will begin a series of readings drawn from Linda’s creative non-fiction work.

II. Selections from Linda Frazee Baker’s Creative Non-Fiction and Fiction.

2. Susan Thorne introduces and reads 535 word selection from [*Naked on the Chaise*](#) (2013)

I put my face back into the marvelous water. It was taking us somewhere, I did not care where. Never had I given myself up in quite this way to a natural force.

I felt only the beauty of the colors and the ceaseless motion. How hard it was to watch when every minute everything changed like a kaleidoscope—or two kaleidoscopes mirroring each other, because while the fish were moving and we were moving as fast, or faster than, the fish. My eyes darted helplessly here and there as rapidly as if I was dreaming in REM motion. They tried desperately to hold onto something, anything, and—gloriously—failed. Was it Zeno who believed that everything in the universe is constantly changing? I had always thought that true, but now for the first time I felt it in my viscera. Nothing stayed still, neither us nor them.

And this thought had a converse, another twist of the ceaseless kaleidoscopes.

You can't hold onto anything, I thought. Everything has to be let go.

I could of course have had these same perceptions by listening to several friends who had become students of Buddhism. Or, for that matter, by paying attention to what was happening around me as I waited for a traffic light to turn any day in New York, a city I visited with some regularity. I could have had this same insight, on Forty-Second Street, coming and going past the Library and Bryant Park; or in the approach to Rockefeller Center, thronged at all hours with tourists and locals snapping their cell phone camera. But I didn't. I had it off the coast of Nusa Lembongan, and it changed forever how I thought about my life.

And then we were on land, and it was after six and still not sunset. After I showered, I fell into a lounge chair next to the small swimming pool inside our tiny villa. The walls of the swimming pool were painted light blue, as if even here the spirit of the sea was perpetually present. In the warm Balinese air I lay back naked on the chaise. Every part of my body felt good. Prudence said I should rise and find the 30-percent DEET mosquito repellent—only a few months earlier I had spent a week in a Manila hospital watching Michael be very sick with dengue—but I did not.

I just lay there, naked as a baby, thinking there would not be many more years when I, now old by Balinese and almost old by Western standards, would be able to have such experiences. Thinking of how impossible it is to remember a moment like this when one is unhappy. Thinking of all the people of Nusa Lembongan who must have lain naked in the sun, all the people in warm climates all over the world who were so poor and worked so hard at things like gathering seaweed and who tried to enjoy every minute that could be enjoyed. And wondering why I had reached so late an age, I a lifelong city person, without ever before having been naked and peaceful out in the sun and being glad I finally did so.

3. Leslie Knowlton introduces and reads two selections from “She and I”: 712 words

All daughters have difficulties with their mothers and all mothers with their daughters, but the central fact of my life is that I did not, and could not, love my mother.

I cannot describe the effect of her anger on me, so oft and so unpredictably expressed, always and only “within the family”—that is, when she and I were alone or if just my father were present. Like a flamethrower, it would come without warning, then disappear into air, leaving nothing behind. A spontaneous combustion no sooner begun than ended. Yet to everyone else she was wonderful. My father, my cousins, her friends, my husband—all of them loved her, all found her admirable.

Once, towards end of her life, we drove a day to see her, my husband and I, as we so often did, to see if she was all right, or as all right as she could be. She had by then a heart problem; osteoporosis; glaucoma; the beginnings of dementia; and a cancer she had decided to ignore but had not yet bothered to mention. She was fine, she said, just fine. She didn't need anything. Why had I come? I was just being—another one of my deficiencies—a *worrywart*.

My eye fell on some crewelwork she had done and hung over the ancient couch. Some white and pink flowers against a gray background, done to a printed pattern like the paint-by-numbers picture opposite it: a crudely drawn sailboat in a garish harbor. All *kitsch* to me; to her, achievements in a life where achievement was now hard to come by.

Along the length of the frame, I noticed a line of dust. *Dust!* I had never seen dust in her house before, not in any of her houses: a visible sign of the decay within. I was deeply shaken. An emptiness opened up in front of me. What would the world be like without the fixed banks of her stubbornness, her independence, her anger?

I mumbled something stupid and incoherent about the crewelwork, the frame, *dust*.

Her features contorted into a sneer. "You're a fine one to talk," she said. "What did *you* ever do for me anyway?"

"I saw it coming," said my husband, who up to that moment had loved her. "I tried to warn you, but there was no time. It was awful that I couldn't warn you."

We had left the house and were sitting on a wooden bench in a deserted little park. It was a pale spring day; the bare branches were twitching in the breeze. A chaos roiled inside my brain. I could not form a thought or break through to a feeling.

"I understand now why people do hard drugs," I said. "I never did before. If someone gave me heroin right now, I'd shoot up."

Often I have wondered: in myth and literature, fathers and sons often want to kill one another. Why should mothers and daughters be any different? []

In some ways, my life has been very simple: its goal was to be as unlike her as possible. Little by little, this became a set of principles. The first was that I should never get my way by my anger, nor give in to others who did. Then, to return good for evil wherever possible. And not to display anger, which elided into a different and more dangerous goal: not to feel anger, not to allow it to enter my consciousness, to discomfit my soul.

The decision not to have a child was less a decision than a fear that the child would bring out some anger in me I would not be able to control. Was this not what had happened to her? After all, was she not tremendous in all other areas of life? A good wife to my father, a thoughtful mother-in-law to my husband, a perfect housekeeper, competent church secretary, Sunday School teacher.

But wasn't the goal *not to be in any way like her* merely a variant of the more normal and ordinary goal any woman might have of being like one's mother? Wasn't a negative imitation, in its own way, still an imitation? Did this goal really keep me any less inside the wingspan of her shadow?

4. Annie Weinstock introduces and reads two selections, one from Linda's novel, "*The Water Castle*" and another from Linda's memoir, "*Agrodolce: A Sicilian Journey*"; together totaling 565 words

He brushed together the trail of bread crumbs, cheese bits, and caraway seeds now scattered willy-nilly across the old wooden bread board. Above his rimless glasses, he felt a bit of moisture—a fever? some unknown, obscure, perhaps fatal disease? Little drops of perspiration clustered, then multiplied in the high furrows of his forehead. His heart began a series of brisk, erratic thumps like a rabbit in a wire cage. How could it be that here he was sitting with Fritz in the watch-and-clock shop as if nothing had happened?

Everything looked as it always did: the absurd cuckoo clock, the Rolexes silent below the glass, the Japanese watches, the little midafternoon meal. But inside himself, inside—ah, there everything had changed.

The clocks ticked, loudly and not all at the same instant. Should he say something? The silence felt odd, or at least odd to him. Surely it was important to keep up appearances, especially now.

"Ah--you go to him--for your teeth? The dentist, I mean."

To his relief, Hermann's voice came out at its usual pitch.

Fritz frowned.

"Oh goodness no. I go to Kramer--you know, over on the Schlautstrasse. But really, Hermann, what difference does it make?"

Hermann took a large white handkerchief from his pocket, wiped his forehead, and sighed a slow, small sigh.

"I just meant, it would be awkward for you if you did. I mean, whatever would you say when you saw him?"

"What would I say?"

Fritz laughed again, and his laugh had an unpleasant quality that Hermann had never noticed before.

"Why, the same thing I say when I see him now--'Good day, Dr. Bartelsmann.' Or 'Good evening' depending. Good grief man, what else would I say?"

Fritz cut himself a piece of the cheese, put it on a slice of bread, and began to eat, leaving a trail of crumbs all the way from the breadboard to the table's edge. With some difficulty, Hermann resisted the desire to sweep them up. His obsessive neatness, while useful in his engineering practice, was one of the parts of his personality he would change if he could.

Annie Weinstock introduces and reads from "Agrodolce: A Sicilian Journey"

"Come," said Michael, who had been watching me with a thoughtful expression.

Taking my arm, he guided me into a little shop advertising olive-oil tasting.

"This will be fun," he said firmly. And then he was darting with enthusiasm here and there, trying each of the olive oils the charming young woman poured out, dipping little squares of bread in each as if in a gentle parody of the mass. And just in case we didn't understand that olive oil was as important, as various here as wine, each was described with an adjective that surely constituted a legally valid and clearly defined standard: "fruity"; "aromatic"; "peppery."

One after another, we tried them, clearing our palettes in the interval with the local mineral water. I was surprised to hear Michael carry out a learned conversation with the young woman on the different tastes of olive oils. Where had he learned these adjectives? Fruity, like persimmon. Or with the tang of orange, chocolate, jasmine.

As always, we disagreed, and as always, we found a compromise. This time, it was the "fruity" olive oil, with a scent of lemons, the young woman said. This would be our souvenir of Sicily. For now, that time in the journey had come.

5. Walter Hook introduces and reads from "The Beggars of Jacmel": 539 words

The next morning, we were going to take a bus to go north. We walked the last half mile or so to the bus station so that not all of our travel of the day would be in vehicles. By daylight the city did not seem menacing. It had familiar signposts of shops, children carrying schoolbooks, street vendors, but all closer

together, in greater numbers. Then there were the women washing clothes in a river underneath a bridge, and a man selling dirty bottles filled with psychedelic-colored liquids on the other side of the bridge.

People looked at us with amazement and sympathy, pointing to the packs on our backs. How painful it must be to carry something on your back rather than on your head! How peculiar!

The bus station turned out to be a parking lot filled with brightly painted buses. Men approached us asking where we wanted to go, motioned us toward a large, almost filled bus with people crammed into it as I had crammed clothes into my pack two days before. We passed it by and boarded a twenty-person van, crawled into seats in the back, and waited.

Vendors passed the window. Did we want cookies by Shabisco? Did we want Chiclets? Did we want Coca Cola? Seven Up? Knives? Bread? The slightest eye contact provoked sets of hands coming through the window.

In the front of the bus a radio was turned up to full volume, Haitian melodies with a slight rock beat. An hour passed. Two hours passed. People boarded. More people boarded. Seats were pulled out into the aisles and the rows become walls of people. An old woman in the back three times repulsed people who sat next to her, hurling vehement Creole through the air. As the van filled and overfilled, first one person, then many shouted at the ticket seller to stop selling tickets. No effect. A young woman climbed over people to get to the back, almost sat on the lap of the old woman, who then drove to drive her away by standing up. The people in the next row began to argue with the old woman. The young woman climbed back toward the front and tried to sit in the aisle. Those nearest shouted at them both.

The bus lurched forward into the street but immediately turned into the gas station next to the bus station. The driver got out and began to change a flat tire. In front of us a baby, a little girl about a year or less in a pink calico dress and braids, was passed out the window by her mother to a friend outside. The friend fondled the child, tossed her up in the air and walked around to the other side of the bus to show her off. At that moment the bus moved forward. The entire back of the bus made a sound like "Psssst," and the baby was passed through the window on the other side and handed through the rows of people to her mother.

This was like being on the New York subway at rush hour, except that the next stop was more than three hours away. I closed my eyes. We were off.

6. Sarah Brown introduces and reads a selection from *The Goatherds of Dwarka*: 1250 words

I liked Harzinger Singh, our driver, immediately. I was impressed by how his first act on getting into the car was to fasten his seat belt. The drive to Agra would take four or five hours, he said, depending on traffic and the number of accidents. From his pocket he retrieved a small crumpled paper and slowly read out the list Rajiv had given him of all the places we must see.

I was looking forward to getting out into the country, which I imagined as green and smog-free. For the first few hours we drove through one grimy industrial town after another. Under a cloudy sky, crowds as large as in downtown Delhi thronged the intersections. Harzinger Singh obeyed traffic policemen and signs but otherwise pushed his way through, honking loudly. Except for other white Toyota SUVs like ours, all vehicles were overfilled with people and goods. In seats designed for two passengers, tuk-tuks squeezed in four or five—more if some were children. People hung off the roofs of buses and trucks. Women in gorgeous saris rode sidesaddle on motorcycles, keeping one hand on the driver's shoulder. I was in awe of their balance until I remembered what Rajiv had said. At one point a line of motorcycles roared toward us along the shoulder. For a long while we followed an open pick-up truck on which old three old men with white turbans sat facing us. They held walking sticks with snake heads as their feet dangled off the back.

When we finally got out into the country, the smog was unchanged. Long stretches of emptiness alternated with buildings that looked the way I had always imagined the mills owned by Mr. Gradgrind in Dickens's *Hard Times*. Faded signs identified them as textile factories. Even the green of the rice fields was dull, as if they too were covered with dust. A bearded old man in a soiled white turban drew water from a hand well like the one near a summer cabin my family had once rented in Vermont. By the side of the road a naked man peed into a small lake. Hard, bitter eyes followed us everywhere as we flew by.

At a railroad crossing barrier far from Delhi, I breathed more easily as Harzinger Singh stopped the car.

"I am Sikh," said Harzinger Singh. "From Amritsar. You have seen the Golden Temple?"

Actually what he said was "I Sikh, (unintelligible) Amritsar Golden Temple you visit?"

At this level of English, meanings were hard to glean. But I tried hard. His gentleness and conscientious manner were entirely disarming.

His parents had died when he was very small, he said. He did not remember them. He had a wife and three children, ages ten, eight, and two. For the last fifteen years he had lived in Delhi. Sometimes he went back to Amritsar. It was much more beautiful than Delhi. His oldest sister raised him after his parents had died—a common arrangement in Indian families, he said. I could feel the great sadness within him as he spoke, and I thought of how my grandfather was raised by his oldest sister in a tenement on the Lower East Side.

An ancient train the color of rusted iron was approaching at about ten miles an hour, spewing white smoke in the air. Ignoring the train and a railroad employee blowing a whistle nonstop, people darted across the tracks. About a hundred yards away on the tracks, a young man started to ride a huge Yamaha motorcycle across. It stalled midway. As I watched, he got off and tried to push it by the handlebars, without success.

As the train came closer I could see it was a freight train. Men rode on top, on the links between cars; men held onto open doors as they leaned out. Only men, no women. Were the men all free riders, I wondered. Had they jumped on as we had watched men jump onto dangerously overfilled trucks stopped at intersections?

The young man was still struggling with the Yamaha. Harzinger Singh was explaining why he had no turban and why he had shaved off his beard, but I could not understand. At the last second, the driver finally got the Yamaha off the tracks, then was lost to view. As the train lumbered by, men stared back unsmiling. No one waved. Eyes looked out with expressions expecting to see only the same suffering, deprivation, hardship that was within.

As the Toyota drove faster now down the road, the clouds that had followed us all afternoon lifted to reveal a weak late-afternoon sun. At once I felt incredibly cheerful, as if a miracle had happened. Just then we passed a group of children walking by the side of the road. They were smiling and laughing and holding hands. They wore identical dark blue pinafores over pristine white blouses and had newly washed hair. Except for the monkey swinging lazily above from branch to branch, they could have been prep school children anywhere in Europe or North America, although of course in those places they would have been on a bus. Where on earth had they come from, I wondered? Were they real?

Just outside Agra, we passed a modern apartment building with tiny sky-blue balconies that would not have been out of place in any American city. I had read that Agra was now home to many drug manufacturers and other industrial firms, and so as we approached I began to hope that, unlike Delhi, Agra would be a modern city.

Instead, the two-lane road narrowed, narrowed again, and became a winding, medieval street. Above, on both sides, dilapidated buildings of mustard-colored stucco, their second-story balconies filled with people, monkeys, dogs, cats. On the street level, tiny shop after small shop, open to—no, *in*—the street.

A carpenter planed a piece of wood on a trestle using the same kind of hand plane I had used in seventh-grade woodworking. A woman ran a seam on an old black sewing machine that looked like a 1930s Singer, its cord plugged into an illegal overhead electric line. Steam rose from cook pots and blackened woks; butchers brought cleavers down on animal carcasses. A man sitting in a wooden chair leaned his head back so another could shave him.

As I watched with horror—or was it fascination?—cars, tuk-tuks, bicycle rickshaws piled into the street one after another, until finally everything stopped and stayed stopped.

We had reached gridlock. On our right a bicycle rickshaw carrying a man, a child, and two women swathed in black except for their eyes. The eyes flickered above the veil, then looked away. On our left, a child begged. An old man begged. Two men were drinking tea on a second-story balcony so flimsy I feared it might collapse at any minute. A motorcycle pulled up next to us: a man wearing a helmet and a scarf tied around the lower half of his face against the atrocious air with a woman in a sari behind him sidesaddle and without a helmet. And over everything a chemical smell unknown in nature—a smell like that in the Dwarka hotel—seeped in through the Toyota's closed windows.

Trapped. Trapped indeed. Yet never had I felt more intensely alive.

I turned to look at Michael, his face obscured by the *Times of India* he held open in his hands. "What are you doing?" I asked.

"I can't take it anymore," he said. "I'm tuning out."

7. Christie Platt introduces and reads sections 6 and 14 from [*Unnatural Acts: A Journal from the First Year of Retirement \(Out of It\)*](#). 886 words **6**.

In the late autumn I went to New York, where I was born and lived until I was seventeen. Always I had intended to return, but things happened and I never did.

On a day warm as summer, as the rays of the sun filter down into the man-made caverns, I walk slowly and with delight through the streets of Midtown. Then south to Union Square; I drift lazily through the aisles of the Strand Bookstore. At night, I lie back among the pillows of the tiny, modern, comfortable, Chelsea hotel room feeling the rattle from the 1 train fifteen stories below. It comforts like a lullaby.

I thought of my Irish grandfather who had lived nearby in the Lower East Side as a young man, clawing his way out through hard work and a personality that endeared him to all. I thought of my German grandmother waiting tables in her parents' bakery-restaurant across the street from my grandfather's fish store, carrying all those schnitzels and sauerbratens and pieces of apple streudel watching and waiting for my grandfather to finally pay attention to her.

Images of the old neighborhood flew through my head, vivid and comforting. On impulse I downloaded, free, Whitman's 1850 *Leaves of Grass* onto my Kindle and read 2 percent before falling asleep. I decided I would buy an apartment in New York and live there part of the year. I was so happy I hardly missed not having the page numbers I had in my non-electronic, so-much-less-portable books.

In the morning I realized that no way did I have the money to live in New York and in any case I had no idea how I would spend my days there if I did.

But with each successive visit the fantasy persisted.

For even if the problem of Time and the problem of the emotional typhoons remained the same when I went north, at least in New York I knew who I was. I was the daughter of Dorothy and Charles, the granddaughter of Mathilda and Jim, the niece of Winnie and Jimmie and Elizabeth, the cousin of Janet and Bonnie. I was the friend of Myra and Rebecca and Dick and Fran and Andrea. I was the little girl who won the spelling bee of P.S. 89 two years running and got a brown-and-gold Paper Mate pen and cried when she lost the district bee because she couldn't spell *antinomianism*. No matter how many other beautiful cities I may visit before I die, the sight of sunlight on the steps of a New York brownstone or the sound of a tugboat's horn in the East River will release a complex of feelings that add up to what I know of happiness.

I went home again and from there rotated out to many cities, many countries. In all of these places, I continued to wander blindly through the day feeling at all times not quite right.

14.

The German program holds a competition in literary translation as part of the University arts festival for all those in continuing education programs. I spend a week working hard on my submission even though on the date of the reading I have a frequent flyer ticket to be in Geneva. Between this and the two German courses the days go quickly. There are moments when I almost resent all this activity. It feels like, well, work.

When my submission is accepted, I am seized with a determination to go and read. To do this, I will have to change my ticket, pay a ridiculous sum to a midtown hotel, and my companion, whose flights can't be changed, will have to fly to and from New York and Washington twice on the same day just so he can be there. He agrees to do this.

"After all," he says, "you've made sacrifices for my career."

It's hardly a career what I'm doing, but I give him a small nod, then a hug.

As I read from the podium, I feel frightened and triumphant and—since I am decades older than everyone else—ridiculous. Still, the words are beautiful—mine and not mine. The audience seems to be listening, but for me the experience is also painful. Is this what zombies would feel like if they existed?

In the reception that follows one of the professors compliments me on the translation. She tells me she had liked Ingeborg Bachmann when she was young and my translation has given Ingeborg Bachmann back to her. For the first time since retirement, I feel that I have done something useful.

As we walk back to the hotel, I stop in the middle of the street and look up Broadway. Once more I marvel at how beautiful the city is at midnight, the Art Nouveau cornerpieces of the buildings illuminated, the people strolling peacefully through the new pedestrian zone. A ferocious murmuring bubbles in my brain of which the only coherent syllable is "Me! Me!" This is so big a feeling it is unbearable. I tamp it down and continue meekly on my way.

After this experience, the emotional typhoons recede. I join the association of literary translators and register for their annual conference. My wrist improves and I think about baking bread.

I have survived the first eight months of retirement.

8. Monika Bargmann Brown will introduce, and she and Robert Brown will read selected passages from “Foreign”, followed by Robert’s concluding remarks. 1170 words

[Bonn, 1974] 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. []

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, daytimes on demand, I would teach English to secretaries and clerks. []

Afternoons in my kitchen, I drank a coffee whitened with condensed milk, the same shade as the coffee my grandmother used to drink. 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. 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.

I understood now, as I had not then, how entirely German Nana had been. []

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.”

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 [in Bonn] 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 tics. 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.

[Robert Brown will continue reading same piece]

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 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.

III. Linda Frazee Baker's Literary Translations from German

9. Susan Bernofsky introduces and reads Ödön von Horváth's "[A Little Love Story](#)"; 653 words

How quiet it is in autumn, a strange and unearthly quiet.

Everything is just as it always was, it seems nothing has changed. Neither the marsh nor the farmland, not the fir trees on the hills, not the lake. Nothing. Only that summer's gone. October's end. And already late in the afternoon.

A dog howls in the distance, and the earth smells of sodden leaves. It's rained heavily in the last few weeks, soon it will snow. The sun is gone, and twilight shuffles over the hard ground. It rustles in the stubble as if someone were skulking around in it. And as the clouds come in, so does the past. I see you again – oh days of yesteryear! Your mountains, your trees, your roads – we can all see each other again now.

And the two of us, you and I. Your light-color summer dress gleams in the sunlight, joyful and wanton as if you had nothing on under it. The stalks of grain swayed back and forth, the earth breathed in and out. It was hot and humid, do you remember? The air buzzed like an army of invisible insects. In the west, a storm threatened. And the two of us far from the village on a steep, narrow path, then walking through the sheaves of corn, you ahead of me – but good heavens, what has this got to do with you? Yes, I mean you, dear reader! Why should I tell you about this? Come on now, don't be like that! What's it to you if two people once disappeared into a cornfield? After all, it doesn't affect you. You have other things to worry about than someone else's love affair—and it certainly wasn't love anyway.

The fact of the matter was, I wanted every girl I saw, I wanted to possess her. God knows I never felt any "spiritual" connection. And her? Well, I thought she trusted me completely. She told me so many stories, both colorful ones and dreary, about her work, about going to the movies, about her childhood – the sort of things that happen in every life. But it all bored me, and once in a while I wished she were deaf and dumb. I was a brutish fellow then, conceited out of a roguish emptiness.

One day she suddenly jerked herself to a standstill.

"You," she said.

And her voice sounded shy and wounded.

"Why don't you leave me alone? You don't love me at all, and there are lots of other women who are much more beautiful."

"You're good in the sack," I answered, and my own crassness pleased me. I would have happily said these words a few more times – that's how I was then.

She looked down. I acted bored, squinted through one eye, and observed the shape of her head. Her hair was brown, a completely ordinary brown. She wore it combed over her forehead the way she had seen famous models do who are walking advertisements for hairdressers. Yes, of course there are women with hair far more beautiful, more attractive in other ways too – but please! It comes down to the same thing in the end. The hair darker or lighter, the forehead covered or bare—

"You poor thing," she said suddenly, as if she was speaking to herself. She looked me straight in the eye and gave me a gentle kiss. And then she was gone. Her shoulders lifted up, her dress crumpled. I ran after her for ten paces or so, then came to a stop.

Turned on my heels. Didn't look back.

Ten paces long our love lived, bursting into flames only to go out the same moment it began. Not a love like Romeo and Juliet, that lasts beyond the grave.

Only ten paces. But for that brief interval of time, this tiny love blazed heartfelt and intense, filled with splendor like a fairy tale.

10. Steve Cerf introduces and reads a selection from Linda's translation of Esther Dischereit's, *Berlin Splinters*, (348 words)

[March 20, 2020. Berlin]. The Metropolitan's stopped paying salaries—the opera's been cancelled. Won't be carried on German Public Radio. What would happen, actually, if we were to keep on paying in full but without seeing a performance? Why do the tickets we have already paid for in the theater have to be refunded? Yes, of course, under ordinary circumstances—but we're not living in ordinary circumstances.

A florist has put out signs: *Not sold*. He means, not for sale. He doesn't want to attract customers, he wants to observe the government orders, but he's there anyway, watering the flowers, taking care of them, probably because that's what he always does. He'd rather not know that they'll decay, unsold, under his hand.

At the checkout, the man keeps his distance. Everyone keeps their distance. Until it's time to pay. Then the distance suddenly shrinks, and he can't wait until the previous customer has packed up and gone on his way. In front of the checkout, there's a sign mandating distance. After the checkout, no sign. The man tells the cashier it's unacceptable that she has to sit there without a plexiglass protective shield. What is the cashier supposed to do?

She talks to us, the women customers; we don't talk to each other. I didn't meet anyone else today. On the lower floor, a door opens. The inhabitant comes out and offers to run errands. She talks to me almost as if I were a child, just in case I might need ... She gives my purchases a reproachful look.

He is the Lord of the Fish Counter and gave me a double portion for the price of one. Once, when I wanted to buy a fish head for soup and he didn't have any, he offered me his own head. As if I were Salome and had demanded the head of St. John. Which I hadn't. The fish heads today were enormous and very good value. Bye, he said. See you next time. I thanked him and took his good wishes with me out into the street.

11. Melissa Holland reads a selection from Linda's translation of Esther Dischereit's *Berlin Splinters* (369 words) and offers closing commentary

[March 16, 2020. Berlin] I walk down to the lake. Lots of people go down to the lake now. They exercise vigorously as a form of sport. More and more people are exercising. The branches of a willow hang over the water's surface, ducks are making circles. People sit on the benches separate from one another. It looks as if the park has been transformed into a clandestine marriage market, all these people looking the other way as you come closer. Otherwise they'd be asking you to have a seat and linger. I, too, look away, as if looking at others were an indecent harassment. I don't want to breathe in this direction, I mean ... Here and there, mothers are playing with their children. I think they seem especially nice, completely absorbed in their children. But after I see a mother telling her two small children in the most severe tone possible that they should lean up against the stone wall of the hill when someone comes the other way, I avoid that path. Besides, it leads into a tunnel narrower than medieval alleys, you can't keep your distance.

And then, too, I breathe loudly and distinctly when I'm jogging ... So I go somewhere else, leaving the park by the steps, then coming back in by another entrance. Here is someone sitting on a mattress. Two police officers on bicycles stop. The man looks fantastic in his helmet and sportswear, like a male model. I don't remember how the female police officer looked. The park is famous as a red light district in certain areas for gay male prostitutes. The policeman wants Mattress Man to leave or be fined an enormous amount of

money. But where to? How can a person disappear who doesn't have a home? He can't pay the fine either. The prison doors have just been flung open for these kinds of offenders and the inmates sent home.

I jog further along a broad path that leads upwards. I certainly won't encounter anyone here, one lone man almost at the top of the hill. A thick cloud blows towards me. He's smoking marijuana. The sun dazzles my eyes a little now at around noon.

12. Berlin-based poet, Esther Dischereit, discusses how she worked with Linda bringing *Berlin Splinters* and other works from German into English during Covid-19.

13. Karen Green introduces and reads a selection from Max Frisch, [*From My Knapsack*](#):
443 words

Autumn.

And who hasn't thought sometimes that we should experience all of life like this day, as a single, grand, continuous farewell ... To roam and not to linger. To wander from city to city, from goal to goal, from human being to human being, always roaming and moving on, even where you love and would be happy to stay, even where your heart breaks when you go ... Not to put things off to the future but to experience the moment through and through in a perpetual mutability. And to do this one's whole life long, seizing things only in order to lose them and then moving on, from farewell to farewell ...

Ah, who has a soul with that much resilience!

Sometimes, on a day like this, you almost think you could do it. And perhaps that is why, of all the seasons, autumn, over and over, affects us the most deeply.

Spring is an evolution, nothing more.

And summer is a condition. You lie under a green tree, draw a stalk through your mouth, and listen to the chirping in the meadows. You see the trembling in the haze, in the hot blue, and the still clouds hanging white and hard over the land as if they were made of plaster. And you don't ask what was, and you don't ask what will be. Summer has no time. Summer is without questions, like the happiness of love. Summer is the plenty that rests in itself, that is simply there, as if nothing could be any different, as if all were eternal—

How different is the autumn!

Look at the air, how full of gold it is. You cannot get enough of it. And when a little breeze passes by, it brings a slight coolness that is suddenly a little cooler than you expected—and this gives you a gentle fright. Everything is transition, movement and time, ripening and withering. Everything is farewell.

I love the autumn because, like no other time, it turns the sound at the center of our existence into poetry.

Once more we are there, sipping in the moments, and it's like the mist over the fields and forests, the mist that in so dreamlike a way reconciles the burning colors. That takes the whole world out of its stubborn heaviness, revealing it to be a mere transitory flame, a hovering glow breathed onto a bluish

background whose existence we can only divine, or perhaps just onto a dark and cool nothingness. It is life, and that is enough. It is the moment, and that is enough. It is just, over and over, the epiphany of farewell.

IV. Open Forum

14. Linda Keenan and other discussants comment on the readings, on Linda Frazee Baker.

15. Michael Replogle closes by asking if there is interest future salons focused on Linda's work. With quite positive energy, the consensus is that another salon in a year or two would be welcomed with interest by the remaining several dozen participants.

To read more of Linda's work, go to her website: <https://lindafrazeebaker.com>

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