

Chanting Flowers

by Zsuzsanna Bacsa Palmer

Ha folyóvíz volnék
Bánatot nem tudnék
Hegyek völgyek között
Zengedezve járnék

Ahol kiterülnek
Virágot növelnék
Hegyek völgyek között
Virágot növelnék

Leányok leszednék
Bokrétaba kötnek
S az o' édesiknek
Kalapjára tu'znék

If I were a river
No sorrow would I be knowing
Between mountains and valleys
I would run forever chanting.

Where I would leave the riverbed
I would make flowers grow
Between mountains and valleys
I would make flowers grow.

The maids would pick the flowers
Tie them into a bunch
And pin them onto the hats
Of their sweethearts.

trilingualism,
Dreisprachigkeit
háromnyelvűség:
native-like control of
three languages

It hasn't always been like this. *Es war nicht immer so. Nem volt mindig így.* In the first half of my life, I was able to think in one language only. I did not have to constantly and unconsciously go through each thought in order to fully understand all the connotations it may have in my three languages. That is the hard part; the thinking, talking to yourself when there are no listeners. Seeing all the hues of colors that appear with each translation, smelling all the odors, scents, and bouquets.

I admired people speaking many languages and assumed that they could use them at their liking, but their mother tongue would always prevail as the deepest inner voice. And now that I am in this same situation, I know that songs and prayers stay monolingual. For me, they will always be in Hungarian. However, I also learned that emotions, caresses, and embraces are above any language. Now, as a mother, giving my tongue to my children I am made aware with every word and silence of the gift I am giving them.

A flower contains a plant's reproductive organs. The male parts of the flower produce tiny grains of pollen. These are carried to other flowers by the wind or by visiting animals. There, the pollen fertilizes the ovules (clusters of female cells), and seeds are made.

~~Ibolya.~~ (In English: ... I can't think of it. Have I seen any here? Yes, back in the woods, a few of them, not quite as purple as those in my childhood's forests. Maybe the word is violet. I have to ask Ralph: "*Wie heißt diese Blume das man im Frühling p ück?* You know, *lila farbig, da hinten bei dem pond.* What is that flower you can pick in the spring? You know, purple color, back there, next to the pond.") ~~Violet.~~ Sweet smelling. Who can hold the biggest bunch in her hand? Over there, a lot of them, I can just sit down and pick them until they are so densely packed in my tiny hand that they can no longer breath. But that is all right, violets don't have to breath in, all they need to do is exhale their sweet incenses into my mother's presence. "*Ezt mind neked szedtem.* I picked all these for you," I said proudly, giving her a beaming smile as an additional gift for mother's day. My hair is combed strictly into two pony tales, a straight, unyielding line in the middle, my grandma's creation. "*Neked is hoztam egyet.* I brought one

mother tongue,
Muttersprache,
anyanyelv:
one's native language

for you, too,” and I tiptoed to my grandma, hugged her and sang this song:

Orgonaága, barackfa virága
Öltözzetek új ruhába
Anyák napja hajnalára
Illatosan.

Twig of lilac, blossom of peach tree
Dress up into your new clothes
For the dawn of mother's day
And spread out your bouquets.

Pollens are dust-like plant particles produced by a flower's anthers. Pollen contains male sex cells, which fertilize female sex cells. It is made up of microscopic grains and often looks like yellow or orange dust.

Pipacs *Poppy*. Before the endless summer vacation started, I went to the ruins of the old castle with my two girlfriends every day. We had to follow the steps of our ritual religiously: walking through wheat fields and gathering the unopened buds of poppy flowers. Each of us had to have ten. We also looked for marigolds, those were the best to play: “He loves me, he loves me not.” Then, hidden under the shades of the torn down walls, we waited anxiously for our turn to force open the poppy buds. When the green sepals were opened, the poppies preparing their petals for the big show emerged in many different hues of red. Some were a light pink, some were orangey, a few had the red-purple color of sky before a windy day. A white one, once in a while. All were caught at a different stage of their preparedness. And all were witnesses to teenage girls' restless apprehension. The flowers fell victims to our impatience.

A typical flower contains male and female sex organs surrounded by a collection of flaps. The female sex organs (carpels) contain ovaries, which in turn contain ovules. The male sex organs (stamens) have a pollen producing structure called an anther, which releases pollen when ripe. The sex organs are surrounded by petals, and also by another set of flaps called sepals.

Frühling. *Spring*. I rolled down the window of the '85 VW, and inhaled the spring air. The first sunrays of dawn illuminated the orchards on both sides of the curving road. The peach trees were blossoming, displaying their pink beauty in full awareness of this moment's importance. This was their chance. This was their only opportunity, lasting just a few days, to attract their pollinators and ensure their future as a fruit. The appeal of their dazzling appearance and the sweet smell to people was only a byproduct of these flowers' life. But I felt as if these blossoms were blooming for me and to celebrate the day. I held Ralph's hand, and followed the lines in it with the same exhilarating and smooth touch that came from it stroking my hair just an hour ago. There, in the small loft apartment, as his hand rested on my hair, I felt like it was a flower stem delivering energy into my petals. There was something intrinsic about it, something natural, carrying inevitable change with it.

The car strolled slowly among the hills and approached the sign:
“*Willkommen in Schwaikheim*”. *Sparkasse*. *Postamt*. Nobody on the streets yet, just the aroma of freshly baked bread coming from the *Backerei*.

“*Wir sehen uns in der Sprachschule*. We'll see each other in the language school.
Tschüß Bye. “

foreigner,
ausländer,
külföldi:
situated outside one's
own country

Flowering plants, also known as angiosperms, are by far the most successful of terrestrial plants, with around 80 percent of all plant species. They have colonized almost every habitat; from deserts to rain forests and mountain peaks, and they are the dominant type of vegetation in most places. They occur in almost all conceivable forms - herbs, shrubs, trees, vines, and epiphytes.

Akácfaék. Robinien. Locust trees. Bystanders to many of my memories. Locust trees, in front of my grandparents' house, provided the shades to my practice as a ballerina. Having returned from kindergarten, I quickly devoured the meals my grandma spent several hours to make and headed out to the brook side. I walked up and down the cement railing rehearsing each movement of my imagined ballet performance. Not that my body was built for ballet. Not that I cared. At that age everything seemed possible.

Blossoming locust trees created the atmosphere of another memory, fifteen years later. The air of Nürnberg was filled with their sugary fragrance. The smell penetrated every corner of the city, from the Burg, down to the curving alleys by the old town wall. It made me feel intoxicated. This was the first time Ralph and I walked hand in hand. Each of us was far from our home, embracing what we hadn't found there. I could see that displaying our love publicly made him feel intoxicated, too. Our newfound euphoria was only disturbed by the shrill voice of a woman, as we unknowingly entered the red light district:

“Was schaust du denn so? Hast du noch nie eine Hure gesehen? What are you looking at? Have you never seen a whore before?”

This was sobering, but we didn't let go of our hands. She couldn't smell the blossoming locust trees sitting on display behind her immaculately clean window.

A year later, a flowering locust tree looked on as I was living in the future. It stood outside my window, in the courtyard of the century old apartment building. Within a square mile, it was the only tree. It stood by while I wrote my literature papers, in both my German and Hungarian major, and untiringly learned my new words in English. I counted the days left until our next get-together. *Onehundredthree. Onehundredtwo. Onehundreone.* I inhaled the fragrance that invaded my room. I inhaled it deeper and deeper as time went by. A sweet, intoxicating smell. It's been many years, that I smelled it the last time.

The division of Anthophyta (to which flowering plant belong) is split into two classes -- the monocotyledons (or monocots for short) and dicotyledons (dicots for short) -- depending on whether the embryo plant within the seed possesses one or two leaves.

**language acquisition,
Spracherwerbung,
nyelvtanulás:**
*the process of learning
a language by one's
own effort*

**visitor,
Besucher,
látogató:**
*a person who goes
to see something or
someone*

Jégvirág. Ice flower. The windows of the cab I took at the airport were covered with them. I traced the curving lines of ice forming delicate flower patterns on the glass. The first time I came here, it was winter, the coldest winter in decades. But I had to visit Chicago. Who would have ever been interested in my stories about Elkhart, Indiana? Skyscrapers started to emerge behind the slowly evaporating curtain of ice crystals; I was here, in the Windy City. I had not known before that this was Chicago's nickname, but soon I experienced its real meaning. Walking down Michigan Avenue, Ralph and I had to step into every second store just to get a break from the cold. I recalled my mother saying:

“Vigyél magaddal elég meleg ruhát. Épp most hallottam a rádióban hogy szörnyen hideg van Moszkvában. Pack plenty of warm clothes, I just heard on the radio that it's extremely cold in Moscow.”

I should have listened to her motherly advice, even though it did not make much sense. Then, I wouldn't have to wear all three of my nice pants on top of each other. But even if I were prepared, I couldn't have anticipated that my Kleenex will freeze in my purse. This was the only indication to me what “30 below zero” really means. Even now, ten years later, I can still only appreciate how hot or cold it is when I know the temperature in Celsius.

The ice flowers were there again on the window of Ralph's truck when he drove me back to the airport. By then, I greeted them with joy. It was the same joy with which we

greet friends we have known all our lives. These ice flowers were familiar, unlike all the things I experienced during this first visit. Everything was different here: the streetlamps, the doorknobs, the lights with a ceiling fan, the cars, and the people. No major differences, just little things that when added together require a lot of adjustment.

Dicots (class Magnoliopsida) are a diverse group found in all parts of the world. They include both herbaceous (nonwoody) species, such as poppies and daisies, and woody species (shrubs and trees) such as sycamores and oaks. Dicots have seeds with two cotyledons (seed leaves), leaves with a main vein that divides into successively smaller branches; and flower parts (such as petals) arranged in groups of four or five.

Geraniums. Even after a year of living there, our house still seemed bare. I wanted to make it more welcoming for my parents, who came to celebrate my engagement with Ralph. I stopped at a greenhouse on the roadside displaying flowers in every color of the rainbow. A pale pink geranium caught my eyes right away, so I took it up to the checkout clerk.

“This is a nice, fresh color. Really springy,” said the young woman at the counter to start the usual small talk.

“Yes, I like it too. It will t the light blue paint of our living room,” I answered adding some detail to be an obedient participant in this tradition of talking about nothing.

“You have a beautiful accent. I really like it,” she replied.

This was the ultimate comment. Every time I hear it, I never know how to respond to it. Although I am sure that she and all the others making the same comment say this to be nice, I am also sure they don’t think of its implications. In my dictionary, these implications can range from: “I recognize that you are not from here,” and “I hear your English is not like (or as good as) mine” to “Although you don’t look different, you are different. Try as hard as you can, you won’t be able to hide it.”

The words: accent and beautiful have meanings to me with a very different charge. They are almost opposites, like hot and cold. The stiffness of my tongue is not something I would call beautiful. But every time it is mentioned, it always makes me think about how there are two words for home in my mother tongue. “Itthon” which means “here at home” and “otthon” which means “there at home. The second word has a distancing quality. It is the word I use when I describe my home in this country.

The geranium I bought on that day, bloomed without a pause for several years. It only stopped blooming when my mother decided during one of her visits that the original pot is too small for it, so she moved it to a bigger pot. Then, it started too lose all its leaves. The pink geranium did not survive the transplantation. I deeply sympathized with this flower. I know the challenges of transplantation all too well.

Asszony lesz a lányból, a bimbóból rózsza
Sok-sok édes percből sok-sok boldog óra
Az órából napok, a napokból évek
Fekete hajából lassan hófehérek
Lassan hófehérek

The girl becomes wife, the bud becomes rose
Many sweet minutes will be many happy hours
Days will be from hours, years will be from days
Her black hair will have more grays
It slowly will have more grays

Meg nem állíthatjuk az idő múlását
Késő ősziöben virág hervadását
De jöhet a tél is, a szírom lehullhat
Csak a mi szerelmünk soha el nem múlhat
Soha el nem múlhat

We cannot stop time from passing
In autumn the flowers from wilting
But even if winter comes and all petals fall on the oor
Our love will stay forever more
It will stay forever more

accent,
akzent,
akcentus:
*a distinguishing
manner of
pronunciation*

immigrant,
Einwanderer,
bevándorló:
*one who comes into a
new country to settle
there*

Flowering plants scatter their seeds by forming fruits, which can be soft and fleshy, or hard and dry. The seeds of fleshy fruits are usually distributed by animals, whereas the seeds of dry fruits are spread mainly by wind or water.

Autumn. The parade of fall colors couldn't be seen in the small, windowless room. I was only trying to picture it to avert my attention from my pain, but the image of colorful leaves fell apart as soon as I heard the nurse's voice.

"The anesthesiologist should be here in a few minutes, pretty soon you will see that baby."

Eszter. I always wanted to call my daughter Eszter. Even before I met Ralph, even before I was biologically ready to bear children, or before I knew what it entailed to have a child. She will wear her brown hair in a ponytail and her middle name will be Katalin, after my mother. She will pick wild flowers, paste them into her diary with a heart shaped lock, and be comforted in my arms when her heart is broken.

"But what if it's a boy?" I asked Ralph, brought back from my daydreaming by the unbearable pain of labor.

"*Statistisch gesehen, das ist sehr unwahrscheinlich*, Statistically, that is very unlikely," he answered in a convincing voice "*wir haben schon zwei Söhne*. We already have two boys."

Yes, that was very compelling, but I wasn't a true believer of numbers. "*Aber, sagen wir, es wird doch ein Junge. Wie werden wir ihn nennen?*"

But, let's say it will be a boy, what are we going to name him?"

This question hung in the air, unanswered, when a nurse aid entered and rolled my bed into the operating room. A few pokes, exhale, the pain is gone. The perfect little baby, enveloped in a white moist. I was wrapped into blankets. Between the small, curled up legs, I saw the sure sign of his sex: another boy. Boxing the air with his reddish fists, he burst the last bubbles of my dreams about ponytails and big bows. The high chords of his powerful cry marked the intensity of the moment when a new life begins. His profound presence made the dreams of the past completely irrelevant.

But he did not have a name for two days. We wanted him to have a Hungarian name, like the other two boys, so they preserve part of their heritage in their name. But we could not agree on a name we liked. We called each other several times a day, only a few hours apart asking the same question first: "*Hast du einen Name?* Do you have a name?"

Ralph insisted on Farkas -- an old name, meaning wolf -- but I couldn't possibly give this gruesome sounding name to our sweet little boy.

"*Wie wäre es mit Csaba?* How does Csaba sound?" I asked during one of these phone calls.

"Everyone would call him chubby" he objected.

"And what about Lóránd?" I hoped he would like this. It sounded noble and unique. It sounded like the right one to me.

"What is the nickname for that?" he wanted to know.

"Lóri".

"That is a woman's name here. *Auf keinen Fall*. No way."

Soon enough I ran out of names. But when they brought my son to nurse and on his crib there was still only the number 2064, I became creative. I didn't want to completely give up the name Lóránd, so I came up with the name Roland; it had the same letters. It sounded like a hero from medieval ballad. This name wasn't particularly Hungarian, but it was used there too, just as it was used in Germany and in the US. It did not feel like a compromise, but rather like the representation of the fusion of our different heritages and languages.

Flowering plants are vascular (they possess specialized tissues to conduct water and sugars) that reproduce sexually by forming flowers, fruits, and seeds. The ovule is fertilized and

**name,
Name,
név:**
*a word or phrase
by which a person,
thing, or class is
known*

develops into a seed in an enclosed ovary, which is usually part of the flower. This is in contrast to the gymnosperms (such as the conifers), the other main group of vascular seed plants, in which the seeds develop exposed on the surfaces of cones.

Petuniák. Petunias. I planted them around the house. I remember trying to sit on my heels ~~while kneeling~~; planting is no easy job. In all other flowerbeds, perennials were growing, but around the house I liked to have petunias. I enjoyed inhaling their poignant smell while sitting on the porch. Every time I entered the garden through the back gate, I received their greetings with pride. I waved. Their heads bowed deep in the western wind, as the colorful flowers fanfare a welcome to the lady of the house.

The petunias displayed their luscious dyes faithfully, every summer, unconstrained by weather conditions. Only this summer, there seemed to be fewer flowers than usual. I suspected my three-year-old twins, and the tiny footsteps in the flowerbed seemed to prove my suspicion.

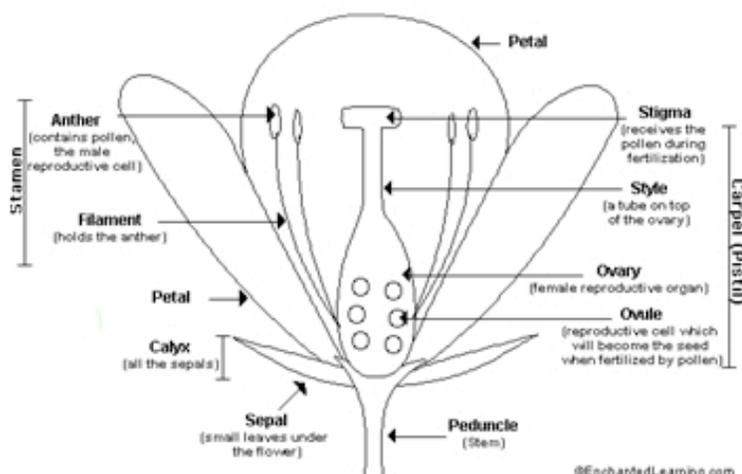
“*Anya azért ültette ezeket a virágokat mert szépek. Anya szereti őket nézni itt a kertben, és szomorú lesz ha már nem lesz több virága.* Mom planted these flowers because they look nice. Mom likes to look at them here in the garden, she will be sad if she won’t have any flowers,” I told my boys, trying to save the handful of flowers left.

With these words, I went inside the house. A few minutes later I heard András and Zsolti knocking. As I opened the door, they stood there with a beaming smile, their tiny hands filled with petunias.

“*Ezt mind neked szedtem. Anya már nem szomorú.* I picked all these for you. Mom isn’t sad anymore,” they said proudly.

The petunias, that so far had merely been spectators of our lives, became heralds in my sons’ hands. These heralds told me about the true meaning of gardening in a language spoken by none but understood by all. It was the language of flowers, not perceptible by ears but resonating deeper, on a level indescribable by any human language.

language,
Sprache,
nyelv:
*human speech or the
written symbols for
speech*



Zsuzsanna Palmer has a Master’s degree in Hungarian Language and Literature and in English Language and Literature. She works as an adjunct instructor of Professional Writing at Davenport University. Her interests include multilingualism and creative nonfiction. She lives in Michigan with her three boys and husband.