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## Fieldwork with a Five-Year-Old: A Summative Report

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*Judge's Note: We're told that each of the tiny individual cells in our bodies carries the DNA directions for constructing our entire body. So in this essay, it's as though the prose of each sentence embodies the intricate consciousness that the whole essay is about—the complex thinking and feeling involved in living and working in Latvia (what's deeply foreign) and being mom to a five-year-old daughter (what's deeply intimate and domestic). I also enjoyed the counterpoint play with the genre of an official research report.*

—Peter Elbow

### Introduction

In the summer of 2014 I spent five weeks in the former Soviet and new European Union state of Latvia researching the writing of immigrants' families. More specifically, but still rather generally, I was conducting an ethnographic study of how families who were separated across borders communicated with and therefore resurrected absent loved ones through the abstract symbol system otherwise known as writing. For example, frequently reported phrases tapped across cellular and Internet and sometimes postal networks included: "I miss you" and "me too." Also heart emojis.

One of the assumptions of this kind of research is that to understand writing, one must examine its context. By "context," I mean the social, historical, and geographic conditions of its production. By "the social, historical, and geographic conditions of its production," I mean relationships, time, and space. By "relationships, time, and space," I mean I conducted this research a year out from my divorce, with my daughter in tow, on the memory-laden ground on which I met her father,

with the tenure clock ticking like a small but sharp-toothed bomb just behind the spot where I used to feel my heart.

I also mean that I designated an exclusive email inbox to my ex (e.g., *ex-box*), where I received regular custody threats and which I checked every-other-daily between the hours of four p.m. and six p.m. so as to ruin neither my day nor my increasingly fragile nights of sleep.

Now that I have defined my terms, let me lay out the scholarly problem this essay seeks to solve: Writing is born on shifting terrain. Put another way, terrain shifts, birthing writing. Put more simply: Fissures. Then words.

What follows will demonstrate this thesis using the qualitative methodologies widely accepted as appropriate to keening. By “keening,” I mean spending one’s cash on a babysitter for nights out dancing on second-hand Ferramago’s, red, because sometimes the only antidote to the emptiness in one’s gut is to lose oneself in the sweat of another human being moving underneath the same flashing lights.<sup>1</sup> At other times, the antidote is writing.

## Literature Review

### *Relevant Background Literature I: The Author*

The author first encountered Latvia in 1999 during her service in the Peace Corps. The author’s decision to join the Peace Corps instead of to attend graduate school was literary. Among the many books the author read during her senior year at UT Austin, two stood out: a practice test book for the literature GRE (*Which description of a tree was written by Emily Dickinson?*) and a slim volume of essays from returned Peace Corps Volunteers (*a Mongolian yurt, a cup of frozen-over tea*)<sup>2</sup> One of these books bled the life out of words. The other promised intrigue and adventure, and also a kind of character-building self-denial that the author found seductive.

Also: Leaving the country seemed like a good way to end the author’s tormenting relationship with an economics major who told the author he loved her, but who would not introduce her to his parents (see *self-denial* above).

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1. On “babysitting cash,” see: “Student-loan Debt in Excess of \$90,000: A Case Study of One Assistant Professor,” *The Annual Review of Careers in the Humanities*; “The Failure of the Hague Convention: How Dead-Beat Dads Avoid Child Support with International Addresses,” *Patriarchal Practices in a Globalized World*. Also see Appendix E, “Receipts from the author’s high-end consignment store purchases, 2013–2014.”

2. Heller, Matthew. “Cold Mornings.” *Peace Corps: The Great Adventure*. Washington D.C.: U.S. Peace Corps, 1997. pp 97–100.

So that was the author at twenty-two—who for the purposes of peer review will remain anonymous, but who for the purposes of this study will reveal all.

Thus the United States government sent the author to counsel Latvians—a resourceful people who could make meals for five from foraged mushrooms and some yogurt cultures—in what her Peace Corps training manual described as “sustainable development.” She was to “sustainably develop” the Latvians by teaching them English.

The author felt that this literature contained a gap.

### *Relevant Background Literature II: The Host Country*

Latvia, for its part, was reeling from the crushing poverty that followed its recent independence. Words that come to mind are: hungry, disillusioned, shocked. Smells that come to mind are: stale, musty, but sometimes lilacs. The street sounds are the crack of knuckle to flesh, hoarse shouts of pain, and then silence against a Euro-techno backbeat. There were also inside sounds, including sweet nothings heaved up in Russian, singing, and/or sighs.

What the author means is that after teaching her English lesson, she would often stop at the bazaar for pastries stuffed with farmer’s cheese. There she would see a line of track-suited men holding plastic bottles to fill with beer from a barrel. But sometimes there was no barrel. At those times, there were no men.

It sounds bleak, but the author liked it. The town was both brutal and big hearted, echoing certain of the author’s early experiences in the economically depressed immigrant community of her childhood. She soon learned passable Russian. She soon felt at home.

She was so at home that by her second year (during and after such events as: giving an emotional birthday toast; laughing at a horseradish/penis joke; and/or helping to chop cucumbers into perfect one-centimeter cubes), she was often paid what she took as a compliment of the highest order: “*Ty nash.*” Literally, “*You ours.*” Figuratively, “*You are one of us.*”

In the author’s mind, being *theirs* brought her closer to her original blueprint—vaguely ethnic female person who reveled in fast conversation, an outrageous shade of lipstick, and kissing friends on the mouth, because if you love someone, why not? Being “*theirs*” was embracing life with abandon and integrity. By which I mean that during that first stay in Latvia in her twenties, the author drank homemade vodka, linked arms with comrades, sang Russian folk songs into the wind, and felt, no not felt, she *knew*, in the way ethnographers ensconced in

the passionate earth of their field sites *know*, that she had discovered something so precious, so stubbornly *itself*, that it would later defy her efforts at translation.

The author loved the Latvians. The Latvians loved the author. But as warming as the phrase was to hear, “*You are one of us*” remained figurative and not literal, because there was not an empirically documented *us* of which she was actually a part.

Her gap gaped.

### *Relevant Background Literature III: The Man*

As readers have seen, in 1999, Latvia was offering up from its ravaged earth rich gifts of love to the author. It followed that there was a man. With whom she fell into it. By “it,” you know what the author means. Please don’t make her say it.

An archival study of the author’s early courtship with the man was conducted and revealed:

- (a) notes penned in a mix of Latvian (Roman, Indo-European), Russian (Cyrillic, Slavic), and English (mostly Beatles lyrics) on thin napkins from the town’s one pizza joint (as they passed the pen back and forth across the table, their fingers touched);
- (b) an email to the author’s best friend that described romantic walks under the shadow of the pulsing red Geiger counter in what used to be Lenin Square, in which the author (young, insensitive, forgive her please as I am trying to do) wrote, “We are so in love, we are glowing”;
- (c) a photograph of the author nestled into the man’s shoulder, a plate of potato dumplings on a coffee table in front of them (her face radiated the superior satisfaction of the cat that got the cream; there was also perhaps joy, but that is difficult to make out from the vantage point of the author, so let the more qualified, limited statement stand: the girl’s/woman’s cheeks were flushed full of beautiful words).

In conclusion, when in 2001 the author waved goodbye from the bus window at the friends—no, by then they were family—who had come to see her off (*Olga, Ilona, Alla, Alexei, Oleg, Galina, Ja vas ljublu!*), she had sustainably developed. She had also met the person whom she would marry, with whom she would have the aforementioned child, and whom she would subsequently divorce.

That is, she thought the gap was filled, but it wasn’t.

That is why there are more words.

## Theoretical Framework

The plan for the present research was developed: thirteen years after the author waved goodbye from the bus window (see above); twelve years after she took a day off of work from her post-Peace-Corps job as an elementary school teacher in Dallas, Texas to go to city hall and say those two words that she is currently finding it difficult to type; five years after she submitted to a scalpel and birthed a daughter; three years after the man attached to the face that she kissed that day she took off of work misplaced his ring and blamed her for it; one year after the author threw an official divorce party that she catered with expensive cheese and to which she wore consignment-store gold Guess heels and a smoking hot aquamarine spandex dress.<sup>3</sup> The author is just sayin'.

Popular accounts, including that of the author's therapist and dwindling circle of friends, have suggested various rationales for the project, including: a) to unnecessarily stoke nostalgia and b) to self destruct. As the author's mother put it, *it just never ends, does it?*

This article, however, holds tight to the premise that these popular accounts are bunk. In fact, this article's knuckles are white from gripping this premise. The purpose of this project, as stated in the introduction, was *fieldwork*, which will be examined here empirically, using the three theoretical frames described below.

### *Theoretical Frame One: Academic*

By "academic theoretical frame," the author means that she alchemized scholarly energy and post-divorce despair in the cauldron of her university-issued laptop and sent the result to various funding agencies (see *tenure clock/ticking bomb* above).

The grant looked something like this, summarized here for the sake of brevity and dramatized here for the sake of fun:

*As Latvia's economy floundered in the wake of the global recession, the country's unemployment hit 20%, leading working-age adults to exit the country en masse. Latvian civil engineers moved to England to pick strawberries, children were left to be raised by grandparents, schools closed, and separated lovers, inconsolable, wept bitter tears of longing into their phones or computer screens.*

*"Brains are being drained!" said the prime minister.*

*"It's a demographic disaster!" said the economists.*

*"What is to be done?" cried the teachers, those tireless stewards of the young.*

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3. The dress was borrowed from her best friend's sister, but never returned. The author sometimes still slips it on for certain celebratory occasions, for example when Camila Cabello's Havana comes on the radio.

*“Never fear!” said the “I” that is the academic hero of all successful grant applications. “I will do some research!”*

And then, trembling at her own intellectual audacity, she typed the research question:

*Might left-behind family members have something to gain from loved ones’ departures?*

And then, sweating from the forehead but betraying only the slightest hint of desperation, she proposed a potential answer:

*This project hypothesizes that left-behind family members are learning new digital writing skills to stay close when loved ones are far.*

And then she threw caution to the wind:

*Writing, this project will show, reconfigures family relationships across distance.*

*Writing*, the author prayed but did not commit to words, *would heal*. She compiled letters thick with citations, pithy statements of urgent implications, and careful budget calculations. She uttered a ritual incantation and sprayed the screen with drops of blood squeezed from a fresh paper cut before she hit submit.

### *Theoretical Frame Two: The Children*

She paid no less writerly attention to the email to her ex-husband requesting permission to take their daughter abroad. He allowed her (then prohibited, then allowed her again) five weeks—not nearly enough for full-on ethnographic research, but just enough for her to almost complete the thirty oral history interviews she had promised in her grant (see above).

For the purposes of the current study, we can call this the “work-life balance” theoretical frame. Then we can laugh the kind of laugh that goes on too long and begins to frighten the children.

### *Theoretical Frame Three: Cinematic*

Theoretical Frame Three emerged only after a fourth round of increasingly tiresome data analysis.<sup>4</sup> This recursive process led the author to name frame three, “the cinematic frame.” “Cinematic” accounts for the author’s quietly abusive internal movie director who seemed hell-bent on propelling her into increasingly painful personal situations for no other good reason than to increase dramatic tension. He (such directors are

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4. See Appendix C for money spent in therapy from 2011–2016; see Appendix D for a chart of which friends, by geographical location and length of friendship, tired of hearing his name; see also “Hindsight is 20-20” (*Quarterly Journal of Mid-Life Regrets*, forthcoming for readers under 40).

always a *he*) then hurled her towards resolution, but not before rolling the credits, because if there isn't someone to credit, there isn't someone blame, and if there isn't someone to blame, words and meanings cease to correspond, which puts the author right back in those second-hand Ferramagos, mutely grinding up against a stranger (see above). Readers should note that the author had already worn her heels to stubs.

*In 2014, newly divorced and accompanied by her five-year-old daughter, the author returned to the former Soviet country of Latvia, where 15 years earlier as a Peace Corps Volunteer, she met her (ex) husband. She planned the trip to carry out anthropological field research that would secure her position as a tenured professor. But really, unmoored from the immigrant community of her upbringing and wrecked from her divorce, she was crossing languages and cultures in search of home. With her ex threatening to sue for custody from abroad, her daughter and herself increasingly at odds, and time running out on her research, this moving film reveals how one woman unraveled the threads of her failed marriage, ultimately creating a home with the tools of the anthropologist: unearthing and writing the past.*

In frame three, the author dreamed a cinematic dream, picturing fieldwork in a vibrant glow made radiant by the lengthy days of the Latvian summer and slightly uncomfortable by the mosquito-infested Soviet sympathetic region she and her daughter would be inhabiting. She would dig through the wreckage of her marriage, survey the aftermath, sort the evidence, and draw the conclusions that might help her sleep at night. And she would do it in Russian. As savvy readers have likely surmised, due to certain emotional traumas incurred in childhood (in perpetual press), she also hoped for a gold star. As the savviest of readers have also likely surmised, in this theoretical frame, the author looks like Julia Roberts in *Eat, Pray, Love*.

## Methodology

It is recommended that researchers attempting to replicate the present study do not deviate from the methodology the author employed, presented here in the second-person-imperative. On this grammatical choice, please humor the author. As is perhaps already clear, she likes the illusion of control.

- (1) *Attain appropriate funding*: They could not refuse you. You witched them with your words.
- (2) *Gather materials*: Pack dietary supplements, a stuffed bunny, a laptop, and an inflatable booster seat. No one uses a booster seat in Latvia, but compile photographic evidence in case your ex decides to paint you as unfit in court.
- (3) *Arrive*: Hug old friends. Dust off the Russian you have been storing in the cellar underneath your diaphragm. Stutter it

- out. Begin to feel something like the person you used to be. Eat *borscht*. Watch your daughter spit hers into her hand.
- (4) *Interview someone*: Occupy your daughter with: a) the educationally valuable game of popping bubbles on your iPhone; b) a face-sized plate of chocolate pudding; and c) a bribe involving knock-off Beanie-Boo stuffed animals, sold at the bazaar for four Euros each. When, despite your three-pronged plan, your daughter interrupts you in the middle of a particularly productive follow-up question to show you how many bubbles she has popped, remember the women's meditation class you took in the aftermath of your ex-husband's affairs. Breathe.
  - (5) *Ensure validity*: Repeat Step Four twenty-seven times. Worry that you will never complete the thirty interviews you promised in your grant (see above).
  - (6) *Account for historical context*: In a quiet hour or two or three, have your daughter help you cut up a piece of paper into irregularly shaped bits. On a smooth surface, push the bits together. Explain the Soviet Union. Pull the bits apart. Explain Independence. Push them in a different direction. Explain the European Union. Wonder at your five-year-old's fascination with the dissolution of previously stable governing bodies. Despite being an English professor, fail to grasp the obvious metaphor.
  - (7) *Wait for insight*: During the all-night midsummer festival, open your mouth and sing the traditional Latvian song about the reed that sways but does not break. Then run barefoot over the freshly dewed grass, because it means luck and magic. Sleep briefly and wake in your friends' cozy *dacha* to find *blini* with fresh jam for breakfast. Hold your baby close. He can't get her here.
  - (8) *Wrap up the study*: Take the train back to the capital. Look at your daughter's face. There is a lollipop in her mouth at a rakish angle, her eyes squint into the sun, and her backpack is akimbo. Run a hand over her curls, and watch her smile up at you, revealing a gap where a tooth used to be.

## Findings

In the findings, things almost come together. I hope you see what I mean.

### *Finding one:*

My daughter's curly hair flying as we run, holding hands, to the shaky red tram on our way to an interview, where I occupy her with

chocolates, and where she interrupts to perform for my interviewee her new ability to decode Cyrillic. "*Umnitsa*," what a clever one, the interviewee responds.

*Finding two:*

The rageful face of my Latvian host mother, disgusted with my divorce (think of your daughter, not your career!) and with my reluctance to force feed my daughter soup (you'll cry when she's dead!), and the fear that bleeds me for a week, because my ersatz mother might be right on one or both counts and more than that I can't afford to lose more family, ersatz or not.

*Finding three:*

My stained red backpack, stuffed with digital recorders, consent forms, crayons, a child's graphic novel written from the perspective of a mystery-solving mouse, and staling bits of those farmer's cheese pastries.

*Finding four:*

My daughter won't stop vomiting, won't stop, how many times this hour, and I neglected to purchase travel health insurance, emphasis on neglect, negligence, not worthy of a child, too career-oriented, too scatter-brained, should have stayed married, stayed in the US, stayed in my place, stayed in the kitchen, stayed under a rock, I'll cry when she's dead. And then a friend makes a house call, makes her voice soft, gifts us her stethoscope, and my daughter stops vomiting. *I might like to be a doctor*, my daughter tells us, eyes brown, clear, blessedly bright. *Or a dancer.*

*Finding five:*

In the standing-room only but silent tram, because Latvians don't speak much or loudly on trams, my daughter's high clear American voice, "But Mommy, what was the Soviet Union? But what *was* it?" And I explain again, despite the judging or curious eyes of our fellow passengers, at whom I stare back, steely. And then a carefully dressed elderly lady, gem green hat, ventures "*Vy anglichani?*" *Are you English? My daughter is there.* And I think of unions and disunions. I do not think of reunions. I am an empirical researcher, after all, and not some kind of methodological floozy who gets her kicks from flirting with fantasy.

*Finding six:*

I am longer "*nash.*" I have come apart. Have imperfectly reassembled. Though my younger self continues to peek out at me from behind corners. Open-faced. Game. Fresh.

*Finding seven:*

My ex-box blinks red, he wants her, would take her, has the right, and I think my chest will burst forth from my throat in a rain of holy fire, and my head is clanging loud,

*Finding eight:*

but then some time later it becomes quiet and still. He has vanished to Austria, or perhaps to Spain, but maybe to Brazil, and it turns out he doesn't want her /me/ us after all, turns out the pronouns do not agree, not with the appropriate verb, nor with each other, which leaves us a family of two plus a phantom limb in the shape of a man my daughter calls dad, a figure so ghostly that Dane County Child Support would later suspect I fabricated him,

*Finding nine:*

and maybe I did. While in Latvia, my daughter and I often walk past the courtyard where my ex and I first kissed, but I let the landmark stand without annotation. Except sometimes I grunt. Nothing more.

## **Limitations of Study**

Nine findings are too many, and I ask readers' forgiveness for this unruly number. Intractable, recalcitrant, ornery, my findings refused to be cowed by the hostile adjectives I was compelled to use to describe them. They balked at my efforts to wrangle them into a single comprehensive theory, a theory that appeared fleetingly in my dreams, bright and shiny and neat as a marble, but which in the end eluded the daytime clarity of print.

I wish it were otherwise, but no unifying concept was developed. There were crystals, but no crystallization. By which I mean the light refracted, but did not reflect.

To this day, my findings continue to run amok, although occasionally I manage to lure one or two in from the fort they are making in the backyard with the promise of cookies and milk, which sometimes allows me to take a satisfying swipe with a tissue at a crusty nose before they wriggle from my grasp and, God love them, tumble back out into the wild, leaving my countertops smudged with the grease from their fingers.

## **Discussion**

My daughter and I stroll the banks of the Daugava river, picking flowers and skipping stones, the same banks my ex-husband and I strolled fifteen years earlier, the same river that leads out to the Baltic sea, out

into the West, where so many Latvians, once locked into the Soviet Union, have fled, leaving family members behind.

They gaze towards their homes, the contents of which have shifted.

This shifting—it makes me wax geologic, as in tectonic plates, as in earthquakes, or perhaps less abruptly but no less dramatically, as in continental drift.

## Conclusion

*Did writing suture the traumatized terrain?* This was my question and here is your answer.

One time, long ago, before the author's ex became deadbeat (accent on "beat," beat on the beat, for he lives still, just absently, not to be confused with *beets*, see *borscht* above, and not to be confused with *bleat*, which are the noises he sometimes makes from afar), the author's daughter was at his house. The author and her daughter were Skyping. The daughter asked to do a puzzle. So the author coached her through the screen. *The edges first*, the author said. *You want to have a frame*. The daughter looked down, and as she did her downy eyelashes curled up, and as they did the author moved to wipe a lock of hair from the daughter's face, and as she did the author was shocked to knock her knuckles not against glowing warm flesh but instead against glowing cold pane.

In that moment, the daughter existed only in pixels.

Another time, just yesterday in fact, the daughter existed in sticky hands, sweaty scalp, that breathless flush from the outside, and her life and blood and body were in the orbit of the author's own.

They circled each other, these two earthly bodies, generating heat, creating their cosmos. The author taught the daughter the word "matriarchy" along with other words, including the precise anatomical terms for all her parts. The author and her daughter laughed but were also quite serious, for their lives were not footnotes to forget.

In conclusion, this study has examined the keening associated with the fraying of

family ties. This study has concluded that yes, keening. This study has concluded.

## Implications

But there is more. The more is this: The distant or close hum of the fieldworkers, the mothers, knitting their stories together. Click click tap. Click click tap. Ity tap.



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