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# Sehnsucht in Pacific North-Rhine Westphalia

## How to Cross an Ocean in an Office

Erschienen in: Meine Ecke | My Corner, Wohnen | Dwelling

Von: Randi Beardslee

An enormous semi-truck pummels down the Ruhrallee, sending ripples through my black coffee and rattling the walls of our small apartment in the southeast quarter of Essen, Germany. I have my elbows propped up on the IKEA ‘Lehrman’ dining table that I use as a desk, curled into my usual masochistic, hunchbacked posture. My dad would tell me to go to a chiropractor – his island of pseudoscientific spine-popping solace in the archipelago of blue-collar pain management in my rural American hometown. I prefer ibuprofen and lukewarm caffeine.

Straight past my computer monitor and potted spider plant, a maple tree rustles in the wind, framed in a picture window. It flashes its leaves to and fro, shimmering light and spring greens against an overcast sky. I think of schools of chinook salmon jumping and frothing up a fish ladder, greedy, clamoring for more and more life.



Fig. 1. Photo: Randi Beardslee

On the small white wall to my immediate left hangs a cork board displaying a collection of texts, a photo hanger and a single framed portrait of my family. I am in my corner: a convergence of two walls, the space where two planes of my identity meet.

My photo hanger, a simple wooden frame around a net of sturdy craft string, hosts various snapshots of my life thus far: two postcards featuring the Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg and the mural “My God, Help Me to Survive This Deadly Love”, immortalized on the Berlin wall; senior photos of my siblings and a snapshot of our backyard in Tenino, Washington circa 2004.

With a population of 1,774, Tenino, Washington is a small town hidden between two west coast goliaths, 2 hours south of Seattle and 1.5 hours north of Portland, Oregon. 22.9% of the population of Tenino live below the poverty line, which is more than double the rate of poverty in the state of Washington.<sup>1</sup>

My family lives on the outskirts of the city, a few miles up Old Highway 99. In the photo that hangs on my wall, our father is still in the process of building a barn for the livestock he has yet to purchase.

The barn, a plywood newborn shining bright, bursting with bales and bales of summer hay, is my father’s hope made manifest, lodgings for his farmland dream – he has always preferred ranch work to building and remodeling kitchens and bathrooms, his nine-to-five

job. This photo was taken just a few years before my family's status quo was demolished by the economic crisis of 2008 – my father lost his job and started his own small home-remodeling business to keep us afloat. We canceled our family trip to Disney World, I received free lunch and breakfast at school, and eight years later, Donald Trump conquered the hearts and minds of impoverished, angry conservative Americans like my parents with charismatic cholera. The barn still stands.



Fig. 2. Photo: Randi Beardslee

At 18, I moved from Tenino to the eastern Washington college town of Pullman to begin my studies, majoring in cultural anthropology and minoring in German language at Washington State University. I had chosen the German language for no particular reason other than to learn a foreign language as a complement to my anthropology studies.

Upon completion of my degree and with little idea of how to begin the next chapter of my life with \$30,000 in student debt, I moved to the small town of St. Hubert on the outskirts of Kempen, North Rhine-Westphalia to begin work as an au pair. I purposefully chose to move to a small town, thinking that I would be forced to practice the language in a more rural area – and realized, quickly, that I had completely overestimated my German language skills. I struggled to communicate with my host family and my peers for many months and was suddenly unfunny and stupid – a decidedly unpleasant person to have a conversation with.

After years of anxiously stuttering through orders at *Fleischthecken* and *Bäckereien* and learning (and unlearning) outdated German jokes — my internal monologue, my dreams, how I swore when I stubbed my toe, slipped more often into German.<sup>2</sup> After a few years of living abroad, my once regular contact with friends and family back home reduced drastically — the only people I spoke English with were a handful of international friends in the area. Now, I use my native language in my studies and work, in communication with a few close friends, and the occasional phone call with my family.

One barely legible, sun-bleached study sheet occupies the bottom right corner of my cork board and illustrates my years-long battle with the German language. A reference table of adjective declination rules: rows and rows of “-er’s”, “-e’s”, “-en’s”, “-em’s” and “es’s”, scattered haphazardly amongst “der’s”, “die’s”, “das’s” and their accusative, dative and genitive mutant brethren “den”, “dem” and “des”. To quote Mark Twain, “Now let the candidate for the asylum try to memorize those variations, and see how soon he will be elected”.<sup>3</sup>

And yet, other texts reflect my (albeit tentative) passion for the German language: “Gang im Schnee” (En. “Walk in the Snow”) by Ernst Stadler, for example. An atmospheric expressionist piece on *Sehnsucht* – arguably one of the most eloquently melancholic terms in the German language, Till Lindemann be damned.



Fig. 3. Photo: Randi Beardslee

Stadler describes a pair on a pensive winter walk as the sun sets, exchanging words across planes of velvet snow. At first, snowflakes fill the collective footprints of Stadler’s subjects:

| Now white snowflakes trickle into our footsteps<sup>4</sup>

As they continue their stroll, the walkers are immersed in conversation, rising darkness and falling snow, struggling to express themselves and understand each other as the night settles in.

| Now the land is veiled in velvet carpets, / And our words grasp up and sway down /  
| Like young birds with their anxious plumage – / The plain is boundless filled with  
| twilight<sup>5</sup>

Stadler ends his piece anaphorically, replacing the pair's physical steps with the heavy emotion shared between them:

| Now white snowflakes trickle into our "Sehnsucht" – this, too, leaving craters in their  
| wake.<sup>6</sup>

But how does one begin to define *Sehnsucht*? It can be roughly translated as "longing" or "desire", though both of these English terms are often positively, even sexually connotated. It is an amalgamation of the German words *sehnen* and *Sucht* – "to long for" and "disease or addiction", respectively.

It is important here to make the distinction between *Sehnsucht* and *Heimweh* – a German term literally translated as a pain for home. I find myself caught between both of these on the nine hour flights from Düsseldorf to Seattle. *Heimweh* is sharp and immediate, a stitch in my side. *Sehnsucht* is a chronic, all-encompassing craving, sliding between my bone and muscle. In English, we are simply homesick – a compromise between the two.

When the maple leaves are rustling mad in my picture window before me and to my left the photos of my home and family are silent and still, "like a strange dream by my side", I feel it all, in its many languages and forms – agonies and aches for places that I have loved – mangled by extremist propaganda, veritable honeypots of hope that promise stable economies and safe streets – places that I may never love again.<sup>7</sup>

While the German pieces I have selected (unintentionally, on a whim, picked from a daily desk calendar on German literature) consider the emotion of *Sehnsucht*, the singular English poem I have pinned to my cork board represents my overwhelming experience of *Selbstentfremdung*, a state of being outside of oneself or self-alienation<sup>8</sup>: Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro":

| The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
| Petals on a wet, black bough<sup>9</sup>

Pound translates jaded human countenance into serene, gentle flora: I think of jostling bodies at a Mariners' baseball game, working themselves into a Bud Light-soaked frenzy; of rainfall bouncing across the manifold fronds of a western sword fern. The subjects of Pound's poem, numb and rushing through a train station, are phantoms of self in a sea of shared existence.

The individual losing and again finding itself in the collective, in the corners of here and there – I am a convergence, a threshold, I have dropped my self on the sidewalk and watched it slip down the storm drain like so many dollars and love letters. And when I read Pound's piece, pinned delicately to my corkboard, *Sehnsucht* and *Selbstentfremdung* aside, I feel that I am not alone in the in-between.

I am neatly wedged between the before and after; then and yet to be; spanning oceans and languages and yearnings in this corner of my office.



Fig. 4. Photo: Randi Beardslee

## References

1. U.S. Census Bureau (2020): "American Community Survey 5-year estimates.", URL: <http://censusreporter.org/profiles/16000US5370630-tenino-wa/> (last accessed: 20.06.2022).
2. This footnote is dedicated as a sincere apology to all of my acquaintances and friends who had to experience my personal advancement through the evolution of eye-roll-inducing German humor. Bielefeld gibt es wohl, das tut mir Leid.
3. Twain, Mark (1879): "The Awful German Language." In: *A Tramp Abroad*. Harper and Brothers Publishers. New York and London, p. 290-307.
4. "Nun rieseln weiße Flocken unsre Schritte ein" – Stadler, Ernst (1910): "Gang im Schnee" In: *Vier Gedichte (Frühlingsnacht – Frühe Dämmerung – Untergang – Gang im Schnee)*. In: *Das literarische Elsaß (18)*, p. 30. Translated by the author.

5. “Nun ist in samtne Teppichen das Land verhüllt / Und unsre Worte tasten auf und schwanken nieder / Wie junge Vögel mit verängstetem Gefieder – / Die Ebene ist grenzenlos mit Dämmerung gefüllt” – ibid. Translated by the author.
6. “Nun rieseln weiße Flocken unsre Sehnsucht ein” – ibid. Translated by the author.
7. [Dein Schritt ist] “wie ein fremder Traum an meiner Seite” – ibid. Translated by the author.
8. Amlinger, Carolin (2018): “Entfremdung.” In: Kopp J., Steinbach A. (eds) Grundbegriffe der Soziologie. Wiesbaden: Springer VS, DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-20978-0\\_18](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-20978-0_18) 
9. Pound, Ezra (1913): “In a Station of the Metro.” In: Poetry (2,1). Poetry Foundation, Chicago, p. 12.

SUGGESTED CITATION: Beardslee, Randi: Sehnsucht in Pacific North-Rhine Westphalia. How to Cross an Ocean in an Office, in: KWI-BLOG, [<https://blog.kulturwissenschaften.de/sehnsucht-in-pacific-north-rhine-westphalia/>], 04.07.2022

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37189/kwi-blog/20220704-0830> 

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**DOI:** 10.37189/kwi-blog/20220704-0830

**URN:** urn:nbn:de:hbz:465-20220704-110936-6

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