

LESSONS IN AMERICAN ENGLISH

JEHANNE DUBROW

TAKE 1

Stand still. The mic is sensitive—it hears your hands touching your hair or making gestures in the air. Your job is to make the voice a body full of movement. The voice can jump. It can skip across the grass. The voice can be a girl much larger than you are.

TAKE 2

For many weeks, when I'm fourteen, I stand in the padded box of a recording studio in Warsaw. Behind the glass, a Polish man is turning dials. He's signaling my silence in the room.

TAKE 3

I read my lines.

“Hello,” I say.

“I love vanilla ice cream too.”

“I like brown dogs.”

“Don't you.”

I leave space between my sentences for someone to answer back.

TAKE 4

I often find myself in strange roles: soloing on the soundtrack of a Polish movie, singing the role of Mrs. Hem in Benjamin Britten's *Noye's Fludde*, sitting for an interview on Polish TV to explain what it's like to be the child of U.S. diplomats. I don't remember how I am asked to do any of this work. I don't remember how I come to play Little Girl Number One on a series of English-language tapes. It must

be the precision of my speech. My consonants are sharpened pencil points. My vowels, round, American.

TAKE 5

To be more specific, my English is of no place anywhere. This is a consequence of living everywhere. I am three the first time we move to the United States. The next time I'm eight. The next time eighteen.

TAKE 6

In third grade, I am learning how to be American again. We have just returned from a posting in communist Poland. This is a world before internet and satellite TV. For the past three years, I have watched fifteen minutes of television a week, *Pszczółka Maja*, *Maya the Bee*, an animated show that celebrates the united workers of the hive. Maya has a head of a pollen-yellow hair, her body striped in black. I know every word of the theme song in the opening credits, Maya washing her face in a dewdrop, Maya flying deep into a flower, Maya rowing a small peapod across the surface of a lily pond, Maya weeping in the moonlight. I know nothing in America as well as I've known the Maya the Bee.

My new math teacher phones my parents to complain: "You didn't tell us your child was retarded." On the other end of the line, my parents are silent for a moment. Finally, my father answers, abruptly, angrily, "What are you talking about." He is not asking a question. "She can't solve a simple word problem," the teacher says. If Jack has three pennies in his pocket, five nickels, two dimes, and a quarter, how much money does he have? "Our daughter's never seen American money before," my father says, "she's never seen American money."

On the playground, my classmates tell me, "You don't sound American." I say that I do. "You were born in Italy—you can't be American." I say that I am. "You just moved here," they say, "you're not really American." I am. I am.

TAKE 7

Now read the line again. Read it as if you're sledding on a winter hill. No, read as if it's warm outside, and you're traveling to the sea. Or read as if the night is full of glimmering.

TAKE 8

Decades later, at a concert at the Polish Embassy in Washington, DC, my parents are talking with another man and woman, all of them sipping champagne and biting into tiny crepes dotted with gray-black lumps of caviar. *Dubrow*, the Poles say, "By any chance, are you related to Jehanne Dubrow." When my parents say yes, that I am in fact their daughter, the couple laughs. "Our children learned English by listening to her voice."

TAKE 9

I am always alone before the microphone.

TAKE 10

I try to imagine a whole generation of Polish boys and girls echoing my words. They press PLAY to hear me sing or talk. They press REWIND to hear me say *three, that, there*, the pairing of t and h so difficult for the Polish tongue. When they're tired of practicing the sounds, they quiet me by pressing STOP.

TAKE 11

Let's go to the top of the page. Please, read the nursery rhyme like you're telling a funny story. Or read it like a secret. Or read it like you're remembering a small animal, which is to say with tenderness. Which to say as if you feel its fur against your fingertips, as if you hold its tiny weight.

TAKE 12

I have never heard these cassettes. But, perhaps, somewhere in the world, my words are still encoded on slender strips of tape, stacked somewhere in an archive of displaced voices. I am speaking from the magnetic spooling of the past.