

Multilingual Approaches to Writing

Second Most Fluent

Portfolio Construction

“I am a writer...” Amy Tan

“I am a writer. And by that definition, I am someone who has always loved language. I am fascinated by language in daily life. I spend a great deal of my time thinking about the power of language – the way it can evoke an emotion, a visual image, a complex idea, or a simple truth. Language is the tool of my trade. And I use all of them – all of the Englishes I grew up with.”

Second Most

Write for 7-10 minutes in your
second-most fluent language.

Second Most

Use your piece of writing as well as your conversation as raw materials from which to compose a poem that can be in English, another language, or in some combination of languages.

Englishes

How many Englishes? (list)

Write a piece that features as many Englishes as you can conceive of.

Jhumpa Lahiri

“If I mention that I’m writing in a new language these days, many people react negatively. These reactions don’t surprise me. A transformation, especially one that is deliberately sought, is often perceived as something disloyal, threatening. I am the daughter of a mother who would never change. In the United States, she continued, as far as possible, to dress, behave, eat, think, live as if she had never left India, Calcutta. The refusal to modify her aspect, her habits, her attitudes was her strategy for resisting American culture, for fighting it, for maintaining her identity. When my mother returns to Calcutta, she is proud of the fact that, in spite of almost 50 years away from India, she seems like a woman who never left.”

Jhumpa Lahiri

— — —

“I am the opposite. While the refusal to change was my mother’s rebellion, the insistence on transforming myself is mine. “There was a woman, a translator, who wanted to be another person”: it’s no accident that *The Exchange*, the first story I wrote in Italian, begins with that sentence.”

Jhumpa Lahiri

“I remember vividly the moment when the nymph Daphne is transformed into a laurel tree. She is fleeing Apollo, the love-struck god who pursues her. She would like to remain alone, chaste, dedicated to the forest and the hunt, like the virgin Diana. Exhausted, the nymph, unable to outstrip the god, begs her father, Peneus, a river divinity, to help her. Ovid writes: “She has just ended this prayer when a heaviness pervades her limbs, her tender breast is bound in a thin bark, her hair grows into leaves, her arms into branches; her foot, a moment before so swift, remains fixed by sluggish roots, her face vanishes into a treetop.” When Apollo places his hand on the trunk of this tree “he feels the breast still trembling under the new bark”.

Jhumpa Lahiri

— — —

“In the animal world, metamorphosis is expected, natural. When a caterpillar is transformed into a butterfly it’s no longer a caterpillar but a butterfly. A total metamorphosis isn’t possible in my case. I can write in Italian, but I can’t become an Italian writer. Despite the fact that I’m writing this sentence in Italian, the part of me conditioned to write in English endures.

Oddly, I feel more protected when I write in Italian, even though I’m also more exposed. It’s true that a new language covers me, but unlike Daphne I have a permeable covering – I’m almost without a skin. And although I don’t have a thick bark, I am, in Italian, a tougher, freer writer, who, taking root again, grows in a different way.”

Who are you?

Who are you (or who could you imagine yourself to be) in another language?

Write about that (or some other) form of metamorphosis.