

CAN SERRAT 2024 RESIDENCY CHECKPOINT DOCUMENT

WORK PROCESS

Prior to coming to the residency, I compiled a “syllabus” for myself of readings I wanted to do as research for my fiction project. I devoted my mornings at Can Serrat to chipping away at the “syllabus” (the epigraph I have chosen for my novel comes from something I read as part of this exercise). In the afternoon/at night I would write, either in the writers’ studio, in the living room, or in my room. Usually around 5 or 6 I would also take a walk in the village.

WORK TITLE

The work sample below is from a novel in progress (but hopefully close to completion now!) called THE ESPERANTISTS. It concerns a group of people who were raised speaking Esperanto—one because his parents were linguists who worked on it, the others because they were raised in a cult that promoted Esperanto as part of their religious beliefs—who decide as adults to return to using the language amongst each other. The excerpt below is the opening chapter.

WORK EXCERPT

Know that there are many of us: this is what my father always said when things were going badly. There are so many of us, so very many more than you may think, anywhere in the world you can find an Esperanto speaker where you least expect one, and whenever you do, it was always—how did he phrase it?—like a kind of arrival. Every place you go is your homeland, my father would tell us, or in his more inclusive moods Every place we go is our homeland, or sometimes It is the language itself that is our homeland, that was my favorite, the most light-filled and shining. And still other times my father would say to us Look at all that I have given you, this language that is more than a language, these words that are so much more than words, this boundless belonging, these infinite gifts, but those were darker moments that I do not wish to dwell on now—there are so many of us, know it, and to this day I still catch myself repeating this mantra of my father’s under my breath at gatherings like this one as others say grace before meals. Though in truth there were not so very many of us that evening, not so many Esperanto speakers I mean, there was me and my husband and my brother and that was it I think, I suppose I should count my two nephews as one half each since one didn’t know much of the language because he was a toddler and the other didn’t say much in it because he was by disposition sullen and withdrawn, my sister-in-law I count not at all, so there were just a small group of us at the house as we prepared for the party my brother was hosting that evening. Not all that many—and yet a sufficient number! Because we did not need more than a few speakers,

indeed I did not need more than one besides myself, in order for my father's prophetic dicta to come true. Only two, only a you and an I, only another heart disposed to an attitude of unobjectifying openness beneath the upturned bowl of heaven—except that it was at this moment, as I mused upon the perfect repleteness of two, that my brother appeared in the doorway of the bathroom I was tidying and said to me *Listen, Ado*, or *Listen, Dori*, I forget which nickname he used but it was in that precise instant that I knew he wanted to extract some or other promise from my throat. *Listen—at the function, when you speak to me, can you do it in English? It's just*—and here he flashed a quick conciliatory smile like the nictitating lids of a snake snapping open and closed over its slash-pupiled eyes—I *have to give a certain impression, you know, carry a certain bearing, and I can't do that in Esperanto. You understand*. And turned and walked away—yes, this was one of my brother's classic tactics, transparent to me as glass after so many years being victimized by it, the way he would declare that the other person had understood his request instead of asking if this was the case, and the way he would act as though that were the final word on the matter and march out of the room before this assertion could be challenged. Well! If that was what Ludo wanted, that was what I could do, but that didn't mean I would pretend not to see what was what. Oh my brother, my poor brother who declined categorically to be the You to my I, who saw my outstretched hand and refused to take it—only never mind! I would not think about all of that, would construct for myself the evening I desired if he would not be the one to give it to me. *There are many of us*, I said aloud as I walked down the upstairs hallway making one final sweep of my poor brother's frankly enormous home before his first guests were due to arrive (I myself being neither a guest nor a resident of this house per se but belonging to some other nebulous category, belonging yet not belonging, a tutelary shade as it were). Many many—for having long ago been emptied of all my other prayers this was the sole scrap of piety left to me, and at the landing I stood and observed impassively the distant strivings of everyone below like the sun taking stock of the land it illumines: I saw my sister-in-law in her sea-green dress through which I could glimpse silhouetted the movements of her legs, saw the corps of waiters she directed this way and that as they marshaled champagne flutes into ranks and files, saw my brother all dressed up in his best party clothes, visibly glistening with sweat before the proceedings had even begun, and not even my brother's great slickness and suavity could prevent me from peering into his heart, into the very heart of his heart—until something bumped me at knee height and I looked down to see that it was my younger nephew, not yet three, who had taken refuge upstairs because he could tell that his house was about to be (was already) overrun by a great wave of strangers. So many of us—and with the toddler scooped up in my arms I went from room to room to room greeting the objects we came across, making a little game of it, *Saluton*, table, *saluton*, desk, and with more than a little pleasure I coaxed from my baby nephew's lips the words his own father had expressly forbidden me from

saying mere moments ago. *Saluton*, lamp, *saluton*, mirror, and at the last we both waved to and were waved back at by the object itself. This would be my great vengeance: impregnating and imbuing everything I saw and touched in my brother's home with the words he apparently so reviled. By the time we had reached the end of the upstairs hallway I had worked myself back up from a state of near-dejection into positive cheer, and the little boy on my hip could sense this and we laughed and laughed and laughed at nothing, or at the good fortune of being together in this moment, a fact which sounded like nothing but was, in actuality, a great deal—I, you—so I had learned in the cult. *Saluton*, stairs, *saluton*, doors—my nephew's older brother was on the back lawn when we came out again, and to him as well we said hello in Esperanto with exaggerated mirth, *Saluton, bonan vesperon*, and in Esperanto, uncharacteristically, the boy responded. It was still early evening, yet to get dark; I felt the sun and the light of the words in all we did. Yes, I decided. Everything would go well.