

ARTUR BECKER

The son of German-Polish parents was born in 1968 in Bartoszyce (Masuria), he has been living in Germany since 1985. He studied eastern European cultural history as well as German literature and linguistics. He has been writing and publishing novels, novellas, narratives, poems, and essays since the 1990s. He also works as a translator. In 1997, his first novel »Der Dadajsee« (The Dadaj Lake) received »The New Book in Lower Saxony and Bremen« award from the German Association of Novelists. Numerous scholarships and sponsorships, among others, resident scholarships in Bremen, Krakow, New York, Berlin, Olevano Romano near Rome, and Venice, followed between 1997 and 2010. The Deutsche Literaturfonds (German Literature Fund) in Darmstadt funded work on the novels »Onkel Jimmy, die Indianer und Ich« (Uncle Jimmy, the Indians, and Me) and »Wodka und Messer. Lied vom Ertrinken« (Vodka and Knife. Song of Drowning) in 2000 and 2007. His novel »Kino Muza« from 2003 came out in Poland in 2009 in a translation by Dariusz Muszer (Borussia publishing house). He published four collections of poetry: 2008 »Ein Kiosk mit elf Millionen Nächten« (Kiosk with Eleven Million Nights), 1998 »Der Gesang aus dem Zauberbottich« (The Songs from the Magic Cauldron), 2000 »Dame mit dem Hermelin« (Lady with an Ermine) and 1998 »Jesus und Marx von der Esso-Tankstelle« (Jesus and Marx from the Esso Gas Station). 2009 he received the prestigious Adelbert von Chamisso Prize awarded to authors whose mother tongue and cultural background are non-German and whose works make an important contribution to German literature: his texts have »given the language of German literature new colours and new shades of colour, while strengthening the close ties between the Polish and German cultural realms in a poetically compelling way.«

Goethe-Institut, December 2008

»IT MAKES NO DIFFERENCE AT ALL WHAT LANGUAGE YOU WRITE IN.«

An interview with Artur Becker

This interview was conducted by Dagmar Giersberg, a freelance journalist based in Bonn.



His texts have “given the language of German literature new colours and new shades of colour, while strengthening the close ties between the Polish

and German cultural realms in a poetically compelling way.” This is, in a nutshell, what the jury says of its pick for the Adelbert von Chamisso Prize 2009: Artur Becker.

Mr Becker, you were born in 1968 in the Polish town of Bartoszyce in Masuria and came to Germany in 1985. Why Germany?

Germany’s often the simplest solution: our neighbour in the West, after all. Besides, the FRG in the 1970s and ’80s was synonymous with paradise. In the special case of my family, I’d like to point out that my family on my father’s side is of German extraction, which in those days meant we could obtain German nationality without any trouble. The one thing that still had to be learnt was a trifle: the language in the mouth, the tongue, speaking. And later on the German mentality.

“Germany was like heartburn,” you have the protagonist of your novel Kino Muza say. Is that what you think too?



What I think is beside the point. I'm a novelist. This famous passage in the novel *Kino Muza*, the opening of the book, simply relates the traumatic feeling many emigrants have: they wake up at night and suddenly want to go home. And specifically in the case of a *Spätaussiedler*, in other words an ethnic German immigrant, which is what I am, it suddenly became clear to me that in one way or another I had to take responsibility for my new country, and for what my grandparents did – you understand....

I may be Polish because I grew up in the Polish language and in Poland, but leaving for Germany made me conscious of what a searing history this country has that will never leave you in peace. Or can you explain why your compatriots came up with the idea of gassing children? To this day I still can't imagine why such a thing could happen in one of the most beautiful and cultivated countries in the world....

Do you write in Polish, too?

In Polish rarely, actually not at all, although I speak the language everyday and write it too – private and literary correspondence, e-mails and so forth.



I had to start writing in German at some point since I had no alternative: I had to reach my readers as fast as possible. So it happened that in 1989 I switched languages. For I was still very young and didn't have any readers and publishers in Poland, and I wanted to get published here in the FRG.

Besides, it makes no difference at all what language you write in, since poetry floats on air. You catch it with the language you write in. And no one language is better than any other. Any language can become beauty

and literature.

Are your books read in Poland?

Yes, as of December 2008, when my novel *Kino Muza* from 2003 comes out there – in a translation by Dariusz Muszer.

You write novels, short stories and poems. Which form is your favourite?

I like all three forms. I also write essays. A collection of my essays is in preparation.

With the novels I always embark on prolonged nocturnal journeys. They take two years. Stories or poems: sometimes you can finish them off in a day. The greatest thing for me is when I can work on a book day after day, night after night. It's as great as sex or a campfire by Lake Dadaj in Masuria. People who think literature and art are a kind of fiction don't understand a thing. Literature is reality. Robinson Crusoe is really alive.

The critics extol your zest for storytelling. Which novelists are your role-models?



Oh! So many: Marek Hłasko, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, Knut Hamsun, Dostoevsky, Thomas Mann, Jan Potocki, Cervantes, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Haruki Murakami, Paul Auster, Cormac McCarthy, Witold Gombrowicz and so on – by no means James Joyce, Franz Kafka or Thomas Bernhard! Bernhard says in an interview that a pregnant woman carries a 70-year-old greybeard in her belly. Whoever says something like that can go to hell. One has to have respect for life: life is holy and eternal.

Your stories are about border crossers and emigrants. How much of you, of your memories and experiences, do you put in your characters?

I think the whole Artur Becker is in my characters: his heart, his soul, his experience, his love of life, his faith in mankind, which should finally stop being the navel of the world.

But my characters are very independent. I observe them; sure, I only write about what I know, but I free myself more and more from my own views and opinions. The characters are supposed to be independent. But I'm not going to stop writing about my places and my people and friends and border crossers and emigrants: that's my life, my spaceship.

In an interview you once said that when travelling to Masuria you feel as though you'd "only popped out of a Polish bar for a minute to get some cigarettes". Are you homesick?



No, the image you mention has nothing to do with being homesick! But with the brevity of life and above all with how we're constantly deluding ourselves. People on their deathbeds know what I mean when I say: Actually, I just went to the kiosk to get the paper and some cigarettes. I got back – and my life was already over.

Emigrants in particular have a very keen sense of leading a bogus life, for they're absent the whole time from their real workplace, namely in their home country. But they shouldn't think returning home can do the trick. For most of the people you once knew aren't alive anymore.

And besides, our home is not on this earth, but elsewhere. Our scientists are forever groping in the dark. Instead they ought to work together with writers, philosophers, artists, musicians and clerics and prophets *à la* Jesus or Buddha. But nobody listens to us writers!

This interview was conducted by Dagmar Giersberg, a freelance journalist based in Bonn.

VODKA AND KNIFE. SONG OF DROWNING

A Novel by Artur Becker, © weissbooks.w, Frankfurt 2008

(Excerpt)

Translated by Isabel Cole (e-mail: isabel@andere-seite.de)

In 1967, when Kuba turned seven, Aunt Ala lost her left eye at her own wedding in Wilimy. It was late summer, just before the heather harvest. Like all the former East Prussians who

hadn't managed or seen fit to emigrate to Germany after World War II, Kuba's father Adelbert Dernicki worked at the fishery in Najdymowo, a village on the far shore of Dadaj Lake. In a vodka-fueled frenzy he'd stabbed his own wife as well as the groom in the belief that the two of them had topped off a long series of secret trysts by screwing in a dark closet at the wedding. In rage, impotence and despair Ala had flung herself on her brother-in-law with a fork in her hand and tried to ram it into his neck. Fighting back, Kuba's father injured Ala's left eye with his knife. If Adelbert's cousins hadn't come between them, they would have killed each other for sure. The cousins freed Aunt Ala, thrusting her into the arms of their wives, overcame the knife-wielding drunk and locked him in the cellar, where he had to spend the night. Meanwhile, Aunt Ala had fainted; after she'd been patched up and came to again, she was unable to utter a word. Silent, with bandaged head and eye, she sat on a chair outside, staring at a rotten August apple gorged on by caterpillars in the grass at her feet. She didn't even complain about the injury and the pain. The corpses of the knife victims were taken to the cold storehouse where the fish were usually kept. That same evening Father Kazimierz tried to take Adelbert Dernicki's confession, but gave up his efforts in disgust an hour later; his little sheep, as he called Kuba's father, had completely ignored him. Kazimierz got into his *Warszawa*, rolled down the window and shouted to the bride's parents that he would hold a magnificent requiem for the two knife victims, one such as the world had never seen. All find eternal life in Jesus Christ! Even the criminal and his victims!

The police in the countryside were lazy, and always hard to convince of the pressing nature of an emergency, what with all the usual petty fistfights among notorious drunks. This was no exception; they didn't arrest Adelbert Dernicki until early the next morning, when he had already sobered up, and they were surprised to hear that he had murdered his own wife and an innocent young man, none other than his old school friend Bogdan. All night long Adelbert had bellowed like a fatally wounded animal, not a man: "What have I done? Oh God! What have I done? Oh God!" he whimpered as he was led away in handcuffs.

Adelbert went to prison in nearby Barczewo to serve his life sentence in the same place as the former Nazi party leader of East Prussia, Erich Koch, whose original death sentence had been commuted due to serious illness. The prisoners spat at Koch's balaclava'd head when he took his daily half-hour walk in the tiny courtyard. Any prisoner who failed to do so was branded as a Nazi and risked having a finger broken or a tooth knocked out, at worst being forced to perform fellatio.

Kuba was taken in by Renia and Kostek Podlichowie, his maternal grandparents from Warmia. He stayed in Wilimy with the Catholics, the Polish fishermen; as Kuba's father, like all the Dernickis, had come from Najdymowo, where mainly Protestants lived and fished, the old war flared up again between the two families, one that their clans had been waging for generations. They wantonly destroyed each other's motorboats, gillnets and driftnets, the men brawled in the pub and at celebrations, and the women spat at each other.

Najdymowo was where the devils lived, the nasty Germans, his grandmother told him once. Kuba should take care not to speak to them, she warned him; they didn't go to confession, they'd murdered his mother, altogether they were just as devious as the Ukrainians and the Jews, and they'd always made lots of trouble at Dadaj Lake. The Najdymowo neighbors were smart alecks, constantly claiming to have the most powerful tractors, the biggest houses, the smartest school kids, the prettiest broads and so on.

When Kuba was just twelve years old, his grandparents took him to the doctor in Olsztyn. He had a fat belly that was completely atypical for his slight build, practically an insult. Once and for all they wanted to learn what this strange deformity meant. Could it be an enormous tumor? Kuba looked as if he were six months pregnant. He was carrying a ball the size of a watermelon. But he'd never complained of any pain, so at home and at school they'd left him in peace. He'd gotten used to his fat belly; the deformity goaded him on to excel at sports, successfully so in some of the events. No one could beat him at the 60-yard dash, and

he had outstanding results in the long jump as well. His playmates were constantly teasing him that he was really a girl or even a hermaphrodite and that he'd been knocked up by Romanowski, the forest warden who'd killed himself and whose ghost was supposed to haunt the forest. "How come you never show us your dick?" his friends accused him. Meanwhile, the girls avoided Kuba entirely.

The doctor in Olsztyn took an x-ray and was so horrified and astounded that he took another one. When he showed Kuba's grandparents the negatives, they understood why the doctor was at a loss for words. He said he'd never even heard of a case like this, and it was little short of a miracle that the boy had gone so long in good health and without complaints. Kuba carried his twin in his belly, a full-grown, dead fetus, preserved like a mummy. The fetus had grown long hair and nails; his hair coiled around his head, and his eyes, wide open, were like two white snowberries. After the operation, which proceeded without complications apart from the press circus, Kuba acquired a nickname at school, *dwupepek*, two-navel; where his brother had been removed, a scar like a navel remained – the surgeon was a butcher and ought to be darning socks rather than operating on innocent kids, Kuba's grandparents fumed at the time – nonetheless, Kuba even earned money with this new belly. His friends were allowed to view his bare belly only for a small fee. Later he impressed girls with his incredible story as well, especially in high school and at the university.

Before the fetus could be buried, a conflict erupted with the authorities, who wanted to preserve Kuba's brother in formalin and display him for educational purposes in a famous university's curiosity cabinet. But thanks to Father Kazimierz's dedicated appeal to the authorities and the church, Kuba was permitted to christen his brother *Kopernik* – the name suggested by Grandpa Kostek. "Our great countryman! And what do we owe him?" he often asked his grandson. "God bless him – the first astronomer to wrest a bit of truth from the heavens!"

KINO MUZA

A Novel by Artur Becker, © Hoffmann und Campe Verlag, Hamburg 2003

(Excerpt)

Translated by Isabel Cole (e-mail: isabel@andere-seite.de)

Germany was like heartburn. You'd wake up at night and sit bolt upright in bed as if behind a desk, head held high, to escape the heat in your gullet. No, maybe not with head held high, there were lots of questions to answer in this country, and they weren't exactly easy. At least not when they were aimed at someone called Antek Haack.

The first question came in Friedland, in the still-functioning border transit camp. The office walls were hung with strange geopolitical maps: here East Prussia, Danzig, Breslau and Silesia still belonged to Germany, even though the maps had been printed after 1945.

"Do you know someone you can stay with?" asked an official in a synthetic sweater from C & A. "If not..."

Of course he knew someone. But if not... he would have been put in a home for ethnic German returnees. Antek Haack's fate would have been a former rural brothel in Ahausen, Allertal. The brothel owner had moved and taken his entourage with him, said the official in Friedland.

But – as per committal No. 2575257 and with a one-time support payment (welcome money from the German government) of DM 150.00 (plus DM 30.00 in bridging money) – Antek was sent to Bremen. He'd claimed he was registered with the police in Bremen, residing there with a certain Lucie Weigert.

In reality he still hadn't gotten up the nerve to knock on her door. Instead he'd found cheap lodgings in a former freight depot. The whole sixties-era building complex, adjacent to the main train station, was being used by young artists who regarded Antek Haack with suspicion. "When are you going to show us your pictures?" they asked him.

He told them he wasn't a painter and art wasn't his thing, which only made the young artists even more skeptical and curious. "You think you're a genius, huh?" was how they rewarded his honesty.

The first three months were an ordeal. One time he pulled himself together and painted a picture with black paint, a Zen picture, a circle with a dot in the middle on a white background. When he got a chance he was going to show it to the young artists to prove that he was one of them. But he was afraid of making a fool of himself, and so he avoided them like a Turkish cleaning lady.

At some point – unfortunately he hadn't destroyed the picture – his first and only painting fell into the hands of a twenty-five-year-old girl called Flora. Or rather: at a small party in his flat she dragged it out from under his bed.

"You don't have to hide your work," said the girl, and after studying it for a long time she suddenly pronounced: "That's really good. I mean it! You have talent. But – how should I put it – it's too expressive. Maybe you could try to paint a little more biologically, you know: back to the organs!"

He promised her to do his best in the future, and was finally rid of the young artists.

He had satisfied them: Antek Haack was the guy who painted Japanese circles and dots and lived with no toilet or shower in two rooms that must once have been the tracking station, a kind of control tower from which the loading and unloading of the freight cars was monitored.

The quickest way to reach the showers and toilets in the administrative building was with the elevator; the stairs were like the Minotaur's labyrinth. If you got lost in there, it could take you hours to find your way back out.

But the hardest question was the one he had to answer at the employment office: "What is your profession?"

The Polish word "economist" sent the bureaucrats at the employment office into a state of panic: they thought they were dealing with an economic expert from Brussels. Antek hadn't mentioned the fact that he didn't have a degree.

And Germany had ticket-takers like sand on the rivershore. You had to take a ticket with a number on it at every single government office. That kept chaos from breaking out and gave the petitioner the feeling that he wasn't waiting in vain. In vain – never!

"Well! What's your name supposed to be?" Ultimately that was the most awkward question in Friedland. "It says Antoni in your passport? You stand out like a sore thumb as it is! I can't change your last name, it's German, after all. Your documents confirm that. But you can spare yourself some trouble by Germanifying your first name. How about Arnold? It's a one-time opportunity – and free of charge!"

Antek Haack accepted the kind offer without hesitation and was often addressed as Herr Arnold at the employment office. It doesn't matter, he thought to himself, Herr Arnold isn't as bad as Adolf – though it nagged him that he hadn't been quick-witted enough to suggest Adolf to the official back in Friedland: what of it! Whatever my passport says, it doesn't automatically mean that that's who I really am! he thought later. These days who can claim with one hundred percent certainty to know who he is? Maybe we're all goddamned Klingons!

But it couldn't have worked out better. With a new last name it would be harder for Brzeziński to find him.

Other questions he had brought with him from Bartoszyce acquired a whole new meaning here in the Federal Republic, the old Reich: Why did I beat up Teresa's poor husband and encourage her to follow me to Bremen? Was it sheer desperation, because it didn't work out with Beata and me? Was it hatred of Brzeziński? Will he really hunt me down? Get rid of me? And will Teresa even manage to get a passport in Bartoszyce? And if she does, what am I supposed to do with her here?

Actually the visa requirement shouldn't pose an unsolvable problem; Antek had sent Teresa an invitation and pledged in writing that he would cover all costs incurred by her visit, especially in case of illness. And they would have to get married immediately so that Teresa could get a permanent residence permit. Did he realize what that meant?

On the day of his departure for West Germany he had handed Teresa three thousand marks from his share of the sale of the brickworks, which ought to be enough to bribe *everyone* in Bartoszyce, not just the police officer Zbysek Muracki and his colleagues, who were responsible for passport matters. But would Teresa really spend the wretched money for that? Maybe she was long gone, phoning him from Detroit, and he didn't even notice? With three grand, a bit of luck and brains, a woman like Teresa could be in the USA already, taking language courses and creating a new, American, life for herself.

Antek had one consolation left, a slight one, but nothing to be sneezed at given all the pesky questions that kept him awake at night: he didn't have to learn the language all over again. Either at the university or at the Otto Benecke Foundation or at the adult education center. He was a bit handicapped, putting it mildly, but still he belonged to his new people, because he had papers. The only awkward thing was maybe that he had a better command of Polish. Spoken and written.

But now, for better or worse, he was here in Bremen, as physically present and photogenic as a naked shop dummy: a man with an accent from the East.

The *Solidarność* era was passé, and it was no longer in to be a Pole: all Antek Haack could say for himself was that his name was Arnold and that the employment office had found him quite a good job, even though economic miracles had stopped happening in this country.

Antek's first, official workplace was a home for the mentally handicapped in Allertal, an hour's drive from Bremen's main train station: *You're neither an economist nor a ticket taker! In other words: We have a job for you! From now on you're a nursing aide – and if you refuse, your allowance will be cut!* the employment office wrote him after he had been unemployed for three months.

He was happy about the job. All he was annoyed about was the Universum TV set from Quelle he'd bought with his first paycheck. The thing turned out to be a lemon: all the channels featured his old films from Kino Muza. He never turned it on.

West German movie theaters were comfortable, and great importance was attached to punctuality, as there was at work. There was one thing he liked: they sold beer in the movie theaters here, and you could even smoke. And the actors' voices were dubbed by Germans, while in Poland there was nothing but original versions with subtitles.

So he could have been perfectly happy, if it hadn't been for Brzeziński. At any moment he could be eliminated by his agents, even in broad daylight, in the middle of a crowd in the big city. Brzeziński was a scumbag incapable of letting bygones be bygones. For him every case was always current, even if all the suspects had long since been put out of commission. A good bloodhound never gave up, and that was what Brzeziński was.

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POEMS

by Artur Becker

From: »Der Gesang aus dem Zauberbottich«

(The Songs from the Magic Cauldron)

Verlag H. M. Hauschild, Bremen 1998

© Artur Becker & STINT Verlag, Bremen (1998 - 2008)

Translated by Isabel Cole, Berlin 2005

BORN IN A ROOM WITHOUT A NUMBER

Born

Out of I

Don't know what

Maybe out of love

After the picnic

In Prague and Paris

Born

Just after Wondratschek

Who'd long since learned to steal

From the tables

From the train stations

Born in '68

People wrote poems about Vietnam

But not about the children of the children

Who stop getting along

As soon as it hails revolutions

Born for myself

I'm grateful for a bit of forgetting

Right after the last video night

In the museum of the 20th century

I tumbled out of me

Like a kangaroo

If I make the next sailboat

Over the Styx

Call for the moon

It'll tickle my rib

In just the right place

Where man becomes woman

Depend on it

ON COPERNICUS STREET

There on Copernicus Street

I grew up

Like a star-catcher dragging all the wreckage

Down from the sky

The old missiles the solar cells the satellite arms

There on Copernicus Street

Corpses were buried

The Gestapo and the officials

From the Polish security service

Who can't tell
The Mensheviks from the Bolsheviks
Often played rugby
The drivers had to practice honking for hours
My grandmother a hundred-year-old Catholic
Clapped from the window bravo bravo more
Louder
There on Copernicus Street
Zephir Frankowski from Poznan
Ran the first fair arms trade
A Marxist gives everything away for free
It said on his t-shirt
The brilliant man must have been my grandfather
There on Copernicus Street
There was a seven-hundred-year-old cellar
With secret passageways the Freemasons built
The floor was red stone
In the winter rats and civil rights activists slept on it
But most of all I liked the grey chimney sweeps
They brought conifers and mosquitoes from the cosmos
In big ice-cream containers
Everything was surrounded the house the garden fields
For the snails
The stairs to the cellar ended in the center of the world
On Copernicus Street
Hung pictures of my relatives
When I was five the Virgin Mary fell on my head
She had the heaviest frame, oak
To this day I'm a bit surprised
At the strength of faith
There on Copernicus Street
The sun stood still for me
When I first saw
A child fathered
It was on television on the flat screen
At the push of a button
There on Copernicus Street
The dead ought to rise
I often said to myself
The Schwejks and Don Quixotes
I haven't seen them in a long time
On this street I practiced Hamlet until I dropped
It sounds like omelet
Says Zephir Frankowski from the haunted room
There on Copernicus Street
Meadows and pastures still grow
For us grass-eaters
There in a courtyard
A garden lies shadowless
Ants have wandered in there
To the plum trees and the carrots

With magnifying glass I look under the earth's skin
Always on the lookout
For which stones sing the purest
I lose my breath
When I make myself smaller
I keep thinking about insane Gulliver
There on that street no trams run
And there's no taxi stand
When you think about going away

THE CONCERT 1980

My mother under the clothesline with the laundry-basket
connected to the pines like a telegraphist
hung up the flyers from Patmos - one head
after another and the sun drew
circles on her back.

She was so brown and light-footed that nothing rang out clearer
not even the voice of my father
directing the concert -
the concert of keys and chains.

That was how he opened the boats and houses on the moraine lake
for the summers and their refugees:
the cousins from Warnemünde and the uncles from Bremen
both inseparable from my parents
in the thickets, the sea-sweep of moor
that made the forest melt
between the brush beneath the larches
and the fire of the grasses and the royal ferns.

Everyone went with us to eat boletus and blueberries
straight into the jaws of the forest where my mother
sang Russian songs - Caucasian - and her eyes
picked the thorns from my pants and
her hands poured the berries
into the pails and cups onto the enameled
grass snakes.

The evenings tasted like cotton candy and wine vinegar
and song stirred up the fruity dusk
where hominoids gazed out at us maybe just deer and foxes
still close enough for a scare.

And the Germans wrapped their cameras up carefully
in towels and fled to the autobahn because it just couldn't be
that the communists in Poland were striking -
against the Decembrists and their monstrosities.

But deer and foxes looked out at us from the forest
and my father smoked eels and fried
Little whitefish for the evening meals.

In September the heather ripened to crowns
in the kitchen the chanterelles dried for the winter
and I knew that next year the grass snakes
would be born again.

MANHATTAN

Magdalena! While you're in the bathtub
shaving your legs, without lather and scent,
I make paper boats and sink them in the canals.
A red Ferrari bleeds in the alleys, braking at every bridge,
the police set up white grates and yawn.
God knows what we're celebrating, the destruction of Pompeii, perhaps?

My good-conduct certificate shines with the best marks;
I'm still an innocent Canary Islander -
no murdering or stealing, though all my fingers itch.
But your dream is simple as an allegory:
a garden, polished shoes in the hall,
now and then a movie with Robert Redford.

And I talk like the great Gatsby
and set dollar bills aside for a rainy day -
after an overdraft there's always the question mark:
what is to become of us?

ALL THAT LANGUAGE CAN DELIVER THUS AM I LONELY

From: »Der Gesang aus dem Zauberbottich«
(The Songs from the Magic Cauldron)
Verlag H. M. Hauschild, Bremen 1998
© Artur Becker & STINT Verlag, Bremen (1998 - 2008)
Translated by Daniel Theisen, NYU

No, I have not changed sides
From the approximately 200 sovereign states I have but one tongue
On our ship
To wherever the universe may spill itself
The temptation is great
To say nothing at all

From the depths of the magic cauldron
Speaks my song,
In dissolved compounds

Out of chemical rapture
And demonic folly
Speaks my song
Torn free from the chains
Of our arrogant pride

In the thrall of no party I take up my song
In many tongues
That no one can use the way others can

From the depths oft the magic cauldron
Speaks my song,
In dissolved compounds

CONEY ISLAND

From: »Ein Kiosk mit elf Millionen Nächten«
(Kiosk with Eleven Million Nights)
STINT Verlag, Bremen 2008
© Artur Becker & STINT Verlag, Bremen (1998 - 2008)
Translated by Wolfgang Müller and Jane Müller-Petterson
»Sirena« Nr. 2009:2, Dickinson College (in Carlisle, PA)

It is crazy that on Coney Island
You can meet Walt Whitman and Isaac Bashevis Singer.

Jadwiga, Masha, Herman and Tamara –
What a carousel of names!

The saved who now eat at McDonalds.
The retired and the dead with a pinch of Yiddish

from Eastern Europe. And it is so easy to spend ten bucks
on a straw hat,

so windy and bleak. And every Saturday
Mexicans play drums on the Boardwalk.

The people. The crawfish. The fries. The losers.
At the same time memory fades and remains untold

in all languages, for here is Coney Island.
The black Americans keep an eye on the stones of the Atlantic,

whistle into the wind so that nobody gets hurt.
From the beach radios, Carlos Santana's

guitar is smiling. *Supernatural*. Far away is love
far away are the enemies and phone calls across the continent.

Even Van Morrison can't be silent
and recites his text about Coney Island

and the tattooed American Indians and their offspring
who will soon tend to cleaning toilets

and changing rooms. Imaginable wishes
for unifying humanity

come true with flirting and swimming,
when the derelicts sell water, beer, and sweet mango on a stick.

They shout. Their sneakers are filled with sand,
but nobody pays attention to the few dollars

that they demand. That is the history behind
the curtain. You would have to take scissors

and cut the umbilical cord. And it is getting cold
when the *Wonder Wheel* turns.