

Reflection on: “Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love.”

CHINGLISH

亲爱的妈妈¹,

You learned English out of survival—
they bullied you until the tears from your face
dribbled, flowing onto your textbooks
reminding you that you will never be
native to their land until you understand
that you, dear mother, were a young
naive mind trying to grasp thoughts of translated verses.

You learned Chinese from dancing letters
of something-thousand-year-old history lessons
with the characters bending and stretching
and curving to the rhythm and grace
of your proud, neat handwriting
in a class somewhere-I-don't-know across the Pacific
where life transcends the boundaries of time.

I learned English by nature—
hugged tightly by the arms of schoolteachers
pointing their magic wands to the whiteboards
and tricking our impressionable minds with the ABCs,
telling us our future will be determined by our ability to
read Flat Stanley and spell “because”
without the devilish logograms from home.

I learned Chinese from your lessons of
bold packaged labels lining Asian supermarket shelves
beside the greased cash register deciding our final payment,
catching a glimpse of our charges for
白萝卜² and chosen assortment of 奶糖³
used to draft a new sheet of white in our American home
of Goldfish and Oreo lettered boxes.

We read the same words with different eyes,
insufficient in each other's first languages, and yet,
our connection is yet to be severed by the sharp blades of difference.

¹ Dearest mama,

² White radish, also known as daikon

³ Milk candy

You taught me how to be close to our family
 when we visit the motherland where I must not lose myself
 amongst the translationless catalogue of street names
 and disgrace the name of our ancestors in my art
 by remembering who I am and helping me
 read the songs and poems of others like us,
 loving the language of the famed central kingdom⁴.

You found the joy of working with your English-proficient colleagues
 who don't understand the texts you send to your family
 written in ancient code indecipherable to their minds,
 smiling when your children use an incorrect character
 but at least they are communicating in shared voices
 sitting out on a phone over spreadsheets
 of universally understood datasets.

I taught you to understand little bits of our life
 hidden in the graphic letters of Halloween candy wrappers
 consumed greedily by little ones forgetting to read stickers
 marked on their report cards when
 we look over medical histories of unrecognizable diseases
 spelled out like a witch's chant on midsummer's night
 sneaking into our movie titles rented out on weekends.

I found the joy of reading more than you think I know,
 unexpected strings of characters in sentences
 bound by Confucian poetry you deemed too difficult to read
 even with 平阴⁵ marked on top, a cherry on the cake
 when I finally understood five characters without their aid,
 my Chinglish finally good enough to keep up
 in a 2nd grade classroom with friends nearly as illiterate as me.

We have yet to recommend the same books,
 our fluency spread thin across different galaxies of text
 but until then, we will keep practicing through small moments of our life, 一起⁶。

爱,
 你的安琪⁷

⁴ When translated, the Chinese name for "China" is literally the "central country", but it is also referred to as a "kingdom"

⁵ A romanization system used for Chinese learners, used more for deriving speech from text

⁶ Together

⁷ Love, your Anqi

