

The accent of you

Why does she speak this way?
Broken- As if she's translating
Every.
Single.
Word.
English isn't her mother-tongue.

Mother, the tongue of yours refuses to twist, to embrace the Rs and soften the harshness of the Ts. Tell me why you do you not even try? Don't you see?? I'm already out of place here, a strange short girl wearing clothes that don't quite fit. I don't quite fit in. Why can't you be like all the other mothers, with their sharp suits, their nails glistening with red lacquer in the harsh sunlight, who open their smart mouth, each word as glossy as their pricey red lipstick. Mother, why did you insist I call you Ama instead of Mommy as a child?

My mother, her frazzled hair wavers obliviously happy in the wind. I look at her wrinkled clothes, her eyes crinkling as she tries to keep up with the person giving us the tour. She smiles, oblivious to my inner resentment, a secret shame that my parents stand out like stark yellow dandelions in the middle of an expensive rose bush.

I think of all the times I tried to teach her English

"Alarm, "Aaaa- la-rm" Mom, its not 'Ala-raaam' See the rm is soft and its short. C'mon you have to try", I'd say, getting frustrated that she pronounces alarm wrong now matter how many times we practice. Doesn't she see? I'll be embarrassed infront of my friends and the new teachers at school.

It's strange that we had always been in perfect harmony when it was just us at home. I'd clean her nails caked with garden dirt and polish them as we chattered away, a low hum of pleasant conversation. It'd never last too long. The next day it'd smell as loamy as the earth again, the dirt seeping into the cracks of her small slender hands. I'd sit in the back of her scooter as she drove at 20 miles an hour, singing songs and telling her about the things I've read. She was always gentle, always soft and yet her slow staccato English seemed to shatter fluid conversations. I'd intrude and try to make her words more palatable to white people with my American accent. Perhaps it was because I recognized very early on that this Westernness gives me a strange advantage. I thought that maybe if I spoke instead of her, nobody would speak slower; no-one would look at her with what I assumed is pity in their eyes; no-one would presume us less intelligent or educated. This empty reason now feels like a hollow excuse for my unwarranted contempt, doesn't it?

Now I look back, mother. To who you were and have always been. To being seven and rejoicing when dad would go on long trips and I could sleep next to you. They'd find that weird too, in this part of the West. But I used to love it; I'd wrap my limbs around you and even though you'd be too hot, you'd let me cling on because you recognized that these sleepovers were special for

me. I think of coming home from school; to the wafts of home-made dumplings that would welcome me and I feel a sharp pain in my chest that must be homesickness. I close my eye and hear your voice gentle and strong as you read us stories from books you'd saved from the high school you never finished.

Ama, my lovely mother, I miss you. I miss the warmth that was in your eyes as you smiled that day. I forgot that in the midst of all the sharp suits, your wrinkled clothes had held the smell of you, they were soft as you wrapped your arms around me-the comforting familiarity of your small frame enveloping mine. Your smudged lipstick had worn off but your mouth grinned at me, as if to say, "you lucky kid!" Your words aren't broken. They're so clear. Every day your entire being told me how much you loved me. Every trip to the library, every book, story, conversation, and prayer when you tucked us into bed spoke with unwavering confidence.

I shudder to think that I've asked you to be different, to ask of something as inconsequential as to speak fluently a language you didn't grow up with.

I'm a fool.

Why did I want to hear you in a tongue that isn't yours? Why did I want us to fit in when I don't either? Sometimes, I see my college friends going home, and I close my eyes to imagine being a kid again. All of us are huddled in blankets, crammed in the same bed, in a quiet rapture as you tell us stories in our native tongue; your voice brimming with imagination. Sometimes, when I'm sad, I call you for far too long. And as I listen to your updates of people I don't particularly care about, I can't get myself to tell you to stop. I feel content listening to the accent of you.