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PHONETIC

On each of my birthdays, my mother would tell me about the day she had me in the hospital. It was a beautiful story, maybe a testament to my mother's solitary love, how I showered in her words until my newborn skin began to wrinkle.

On that day, we felt that there was a glass wall around us, told ourselves that the hospital was silent that day, except for my mother and her lullabies; the nectar that trickled from her mouth were prayers, encapsulating us in wonder and light.

If wonder, light, and prayers were enough to create euphoria from ash, how easy would this life have been?

I lived in bliss until the day that marked five birthdays after I found myself in Mother's arms, written in obnoxiously red Expo marker on the dry-erase calendar. That day marked my newfound curiosity of childhood, and like anyone else, I began to scrutinize and question the world. Why can't penguins fly? Where do we go when we die? *Where did we come from?*

Soon enough, I became limitless; I began to piece together the alphabet like legos as my teacher would set books in my lap, and sound out each letter of the sentences. Rat. Bat. Sat. If my wonder was stars, I was the sky.

I especially found interest in observing my mother. Yet, the scope of books couldn't answer the questions I had about her.

From the knowledge that dawned from my preschool adventures, Mother was a maternal force like every other. She dragged me along as she shoe-shopped, she dropped me off at school,

she was a tired shade of beautiful; tenebrous, graying hair, skin stretched too tight across her face, pronounced wrinkles on her temples. As soon as I would come home from school, Mother would even ask me how school was, what we did, what we learned. I would tell her about *snack time* and *reading workshop* and *recess*, and she would respond with “How nice,” every single day.

However, as days at school turned into weeks and weeks into months, I began to comprehend the fine differences between us. Our hair, our smiles, our favorite animals... Most significantly, though, our words were different. In fact, Mother’s words didn’t sound like anyone else’s: not mine, not my teacher’s, not the three Olivias’ in my class’s words. They were something uniquely herself, how Mother’s words were like taffy stuck on the roof of her mouth. Like a requiem, like a suffocated cry.

Her words were broken.

On the other hand, mine would flow gently out of my mouth like waterfalls, and discreetly, I prided myself in the fluency of my words; I just didn’t realize it yet.

Nonetheless, after my dramatic monologues reenacting the *wonderful* times I had picking on the threads of alphabet carpets, I would extract picture books from my backpack, wondering where words would take me as I read. Mother would sit beside me, she would listen intently to my fragile words. Shattered words and jumbled phrases would stumble from her mouth as she tried to read along with me.

“Cat eat food, cat take nap,” she whispered as we traveled to our own particular worlds, the story that time being about the maintenance of cats. Mother struggled to a world of confusion where she didn’t comprehend the letter *a*, how it could be hard, and how it could be soft, how *y*

could be both a consonant and a vowel. My world was one of imagination, where I had a pet cat named Tabby and she had bright, soft orange fur and I would feed her wild-caught sardines every night.

As Mother spoke, you could practically see the rusting gears through the whites of her eyes, turning, spinning, only to have words tangled upon her mouth.

However, it didn't take long until the day that words lost the magic inside my vocal cords, becoming more like something mundane and ordinary brewing in my throat. The day I grew accustomed to the dull grayness of English words, I truly began to believe that Mother would never become authentically American: she rolled her R's, she filled our kitchen cabinets with exotic smelling spices, she clung to me as she spoke to the grocery store clerk that time, trembled as words fluttered from her mouth and the clerk glanced at her. I had long grown used to the jagged ends of her desperate language, but it became clear that others did not.

"Could you repeat that?" he asked loudly. "I didn't quite catch what you said."

Pleas of agony and *shame* shook through her body—she looked at me, and by the look on her face, you could tell that she needed my mouth to emerge us both in the jejune waters of the *American* accent she so badly wanted to bathe in, painting the checkered floor like a canvas.

Hand in hand, we walked home with a stalk of broccoli that day.

Time passed, and we accepted the bold, Sharpie line that touched our toes, straddling the distinction that revealed between us. *I was American, Mother was something else.* We came to accept that Mother's tongue was homeward bound—not the home that was our one-bedroom flat,

but the home that was lively colors and vibrant flavors—the *real* home that she would visit in her daydreams each day as she ate lunch.

Still, as much as I denied it, deep down, I believed her accent to be something beautiful; how her words were poetry, emotions that I didn't quite wrap my hand around, but were so in reach; I didn't inherently understand them, I *felt* them. However, that didn't stop me from meekly correcting her while she would decode her English textbooks at 11:29 PM, pronouncing phonetic as "poh-neh-tic." I would teasingly laugh, stroke her graying hair. Tell her that "When a *p* is next to an *h*, it makes the *fuh* sound, like the noises of a tractor." Probably also explain the differences between there, they're, and their. It seemed normal. Expected of her. Obligated, maybe.

She, on the other hand, didn't find love in her tongue at all, though, she found shame in it; each time I corrected her, you could see her become increasingly frustrated at the inability plastered across her neck. She became desperate; I remember the time I turned on her phone in hopes to search her camera roll, instead, I mislicked on an app. I remember the boldly painted words on the screen declaring, "Learning to master the American accent because you don't want to appear foreign, sound like a native speaker today!" That was when I knew that if words could be so beautiful, they could be so hideous they made your throat well up, too.

In the very end, I guess you could say that Mother's hope for America was unrequited. Her hopes to be heard, hopes to actualize her dreams, hopes that the land of opportunity would indeed furnish her with opportunities were left unread. Still, she clutched to hope in the clefts of her hands as she slept, she clutched to hope as she woke up with the sun every day, she clutched to hope as she waited day after day for the celestial fate that had been promised as she walked

within America's borders. Most importantly, we *both* had hope that the *love* between us knew no language other than sheer affection. We aren't sure if that one hope was granted or not. We wonder if it did.

Mother was fire, fueled by idealizations, blanketed by willpower, just like gum lingers in your stomach for seven years.

And seven years it was, until the fire that was my mother burned to a somber mass of ash.

I could blame Mother's withering on many things.

Maybe it was the time I refused to eat the lunch she packed for me, insisting that it wasn't American enough and pleading for "normal" food. Oblivious to how food was her language when English failed her, how cardamom meant "I love you," and yuzu was hope—sad Mother would repent in the kitchen, capturing the memories that oozed from her palms.

Maybe it was the endless taunts and slurs that punctured her plastic armor. How mother would always squeeze my hand until it went numb as the world demanded her to speak; we remember the times where Mother would conquer the world like she was King George the Third, head held high, bold and unafraid. Now, she sits in the subway, neck hunched over in her turtleneck sweaters, with this constant look in her eyes as if she KNOWS she's different, like she has some permanent leaves of spinach nestled in her teeth or a bird's nest in her hair. But she *doesn't* have dislodged spinach or aviator habitats atop her, she has the mark of being not-American on her forehead. We wonder what things would have been like if she learned to wear her burdens like feathers?

Maybe I could blame Mother's helplessness on higher beings, on the murder of crows we saw that day when we went to visit the statue that promised a better life during winter break.

That day was four winter breaks ago. When she still had hope.

Really, she actually had a lot of hope back then, but ever since we came here, hope became a constant influx pouring out of her mouth like a river. So, she kept her mouth closed. The first time hope escaped her was a long, long, time ago, so long ago that the memories have dissolved in my hippocampus, at terminal three of the airport the day we came to America. This stocky man with a deep, marshy voice welcomed us, he told us that America was this huge melting pot of people and love and culture. So therefore Mother called America the melting pot too, but later on, she also began to call it "the expensive restaurant we can't afford."

The view of ourselves, finally relocated in this American fondue pot was beautiful, so beautiful, until she, herself, began to melt, her tongue accepting the prosaic English words it used to reject. She lost her voice—just like when rainbows collide on paper, they become sepic shades of brown.

Oh, how we wish we could unmix ourselves from this pot before we lost ourselves completely?

THE END