Mother Tongue
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Source: The Threepenny Review, No. 43 (Autumn, 1990), pp. 7-8
Published by: Threepenny Review
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/4383908
Accessed: 31-01-2017 05:17 UTC
The talk was originally delivered as part of a panel entitled "Englishes," whose English was presented at the 1989 State of the Language Symposium in San Francisco.

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me. I became an English major my first year in college after being enrolled as pre-med. I started writing non-fiction as a freelancer the week after I was told by my former boss that writing was my worst skill and I should hone my talents toward account management.

But it wasn’t until 1985 that I finally began to write fiction. And at first I wrote using what I thought to be wittily crafted sentences, sentences that would finally prove I had mastery over the English language. Here’s an example from the first draft of a story that later made its way into The Joy Luck Club, but without this line: “That was my mental quandary in its nascent state.” A terrible line, which I can barely pronounce. Fortunately, for reasons I won’t get into today, I later decided I should envision a reader for the stories I would write. And the reader I decided upon was my mother, because these were stories about mothers. So with this reader in mind—and in fact, she did read my early drafts—I began to write stories using all the Englishes I grew up with: the English I spoke to my mother, which for lack of a better term, might be described as “simple”; the English she used with me, which for lack of a better term might be described as “broken”; my translation of her Chinese, which could certainly be described as “watered down”; and what I imagined to be her translation of her Chinese if she could speak in perfect English, her internal language, and for that I sought to preserve the essence, but not either an English or a Chinese structure. I wanted to capture what language ability tests can never reveal: her intent, her passion, her imagery, the rhythms of her speech and the nature of her thoughts.

Apart from what any critic had to say about my writing, I knew I had succeeded when it counted when my mother finished reading my book, and gave me her verdict: “So easy to read.”

Separation Of The Waters

“When God commanded, ‘Let the waters be gathered together, unto one place, and let the dry land appear,’ certain parts refused to obey. They embraced each other all the more closely.” —Jewish Legend

In his voice I hear the first day of the waters, before the spirit moved, brooding, over the face of them, before the firmament appearing in the wake of His Word divided upper water from lower water, heaven from earth, on the second day. Here in his voice the first day once again refuses the command to be the second, vowel and phoneme all awash, inchoate as water, when the Lord said, after he sees me, after I say the name he hears as nonsense the way the waters heard, so entangled in the waters, whelmed in the jubilant eddy of such complete embracing they couldn’t have known themselves as water, when the Lord said, “Let the waters part.”

See how, lonely for him, as on the shore of speech I call and call. See how the syllables begin to dampen, blur and dissolve back, close as they can now, toward the far surf they were torn from the shore of the sixth day calling back to the first.

—Alan Shapiro