

L's and R's

In the Korean language, *l*'s and *r*'s don't exist.

Instead, a single consonant “ㄹ”(ryul) serves as a combination of the two, and is the reason for the iconic Asian accent. Words like “lord” and “road” sound strangely rounded on the tongue, and “laughing” leaps out at you, the first syllable overemphasized to land that tricky English letter. This phonemic disconnect makes reading English with my mother entertaining, and also a little melancholy. Listening to her struggle through a sentence reminds me that she doesn't quite belong, that she is transplanted in foreign soil. My mother is incredibly intelligent, abundantly resourceful, and supernaturally wise. She is a font of humor, quirky and creative, and the epitome of motherly love, taking every opportunity to feed the body, mind, and soul of everyone she encounters. And yet she cannot say “through.” She cannot enunciate “specifically.” She pieces her sentences together incorrectly, placing the object before the verb in accordance with Korean syntax. To a stranger, she may seem unintelligent.

Watching my mother navigate the gaps between her two worlds is at once laudable and rattling. She's a no-nonsense woman, my mother, so she doesn't waste time and she doesn't care what you think of her. She goes about life with due confidence and doesn't pause to think about how long it takes her to read road signs. Her culturally unique perspective makes conversation with her stimulating and, at times, frustrating, but people tend to walk away having learned something. She is happy to share her perspective and culture, through food especially, but in sharing it she is alone in understanding it. No matter how long they converse, how could a new friend understand the toll of the hours she spent bent over kimchi vessels with her mother and grandmother, or the nostalgic pleasure of hopping on a bullet train with a view of both mountains and the sea? How would they know that, in Korea, my mother is incredibly witty and

experienced, and how would they know how hardy and competent she is after years of brutal academic competition and frantic city living?

It's taken me so long to realize how lonely and rueful my mother's little half-and-half world is. She came to this country a stranger, and birthed two strangers to share it with. Her children are just as foreign as the world outside. We may speak her language and share her face, but our mannerisms and tastes are of the outside world. Our home is a sanctuary of our little cultural blend, where we piece together the discrepancies between us in safety. Around our table, forks and chopsticks reach between side dishes and bowls of rice as we share about our days in our stunted family language, some syllables falling flat from my brother and I's untrainted tongues. We make the most of the halves that we hold.

Sometimes the pieces don't fit. Sometimes my mother and I are at odds, my adopted American ideals clashing with her traditional Asian values. It's hard to leave them at the door with the shoes we don't wear inside. Sometimes we speak but don't comprehend each other, colloquialisms and metaphors misaligning in both directions, and there are days when no amount of words can convey what I wish I could say to her. I know she feels the same.

I wish I could give my mother my *l's* and *r's*; she could take them and fill in the cultural gaps that I have managed to stagger across, making each of her half-worlds whole. I wish she could give me her “ㄷ”; I could embrace the source of my cultural disparities and find where I fit between them. But ideals are beautiful in their nonexistence. In an ideal world, my mother and I each balance two whole worlds, two whole alphabets to express ourselves, and are able to perfectly piece our discrepancies together. But in the Korean language, *l's* and *r's* don't exist. In English, a single consonant “ㄷ” does not serve as a combination of the two. In the end, we are two people, from two different places, sharing one world, and held together by one word: *love* to me, and 사랑 (*sarang*) to her.