

## 2022 Short Story & Essay Contest: Honorable Mention, Adult Essay Contest

### **Becoming**

By Emmy Song, Rockville

I developed a strong command of Mandarin Chinese growing up, thanks to daily conversations at home with my parents. Learning English was a different story. Due to limited interaction with native speakers, I didn't realize my inability to pronounce certain English consonants until elementary school. My pronunciation of "thing" as "sing," "this" as "zis" was often the subject of my classmates' ridicule:

*I'm thinking.*

*You're drowning? You can't swim?*

I resented my accent for so easily identifying me as an English for Speakers of Other Languages student. Though I now cherish being bilingual, all I knew back then was this: Taking ESOL made me different. And I cared too much for my classmates' opinions of me. I was afraid that a single mispronounced word would discredit me for being less American or less intelligent. I was ashamed of the way I talked.

So, I forced myself to discard the accent, repeatedly chanting "these" and "this" and "that" until the awkward, bulky consonants felt like second nature to my tongue. I combed dictionaries for new vocabulary, desperate to prove my English ability. I wanted to master words for the power they held; I would mend the injustice my mother faced when coworkers autocorrected her name from Zheng to Jane.

My ambition to reclaim English through speech carries over to my writing. I strive to find the best words to communicate my thoughts with confidence and purpose. Through writing, I can be unapologetically myself.

At the same time, I write to elevate the stories of those who are overlooked and unrepresented—people like my mother, who arrived in Washington, D.C., 20 years ago, bright-eyed for the endless possibilities awaiting her. She symbolizes strength, fighting with her broken English and ignoring the exasperated looks she often receives from cashiers and waiters.

I write for Ella, a 4-year-old Chinese-American girl I tutored at Kumon. On her first day, she skipped through the door dressed in pink from head-to-toe and wearing a brilliant smile. When we sat down together, she could not read a single word of English. Not that she didn't try—in fact, she worked incredibly hard to sound out syllables and memorize definitions of words after I translated them to Mandarin. We worked through sentences in a patchy mix of English and Mandarin week after week, until Ella could finally read and comprehend entire sentences on her own.

I saw my younger self in Ella and her determination to conquer all challenges. We both had to learn English without the help of fluent parents. I share my voice in poems, uncover and amplify compelling stories through journalism, and serve as a community leader for people such as Ella and my mother who cannot do it for themselves. I once stood in front of audiences with shaking hands and insecurity in every word. Now I am assured of the value of my voice—it may be a little clumsy, a little idealistic, but it rings true with my fears, my aspirations and my dreams.