

Letter B

In the kitchen, Mama starts to sing: *Letter B, Letter B!*
She sways to The Beatles in her fuzzy pink slippers.
I turn towards her snickering: *Are you serious? It's let it be!*
This occurs not when I am a jawbreaker kid,
but well into college—even now my brothers & I
sometimes tease her pronunciation, crow at how
Mama says “bah-tur” instead of “buh-ter.”
We 傻美国佬: Silly Americans.

As she drove us to this or that extracurricular she'd try
to articulate something in Chinglish—rather than listen,
we'd parrot the way her “english” sounds.
Despite the fact that Chinglish is our family's first language,
and that Mama's English level far surpasses our Mandarin,
our American accents stayed cackling.
We tease Mama more than Baba,
a gendered choice, no doubt.

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Starbucks, San Diego (2011)

I am 11-years-old witnessing another barista
write Mama's name *Bin* instead of *Bien*.
She frowns when she gazes down
at her latte. I wonder if it bothers her
that here they can't write
her real name: 张彬.
Did you know Chinese characters
aren't allowed on U.S birth certificates?

Years later, Mama learns
her name means *good* in
Spanish. She likes this a lot,
uses this to speak barista.

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Irony is a leaf mocking a tree.

It stings like hot oil when Mama corrects me.
My lungs rattle and I want to shout: *I'm trying!*
I want to be a decibel with you.
Yet I don't: I zip up: Headphones on,
stew and play Victoria Monet.
If all you're going to do is scoff at me
about my attempt, what's the point?
You know what I'm trying to say!
I wonder if she feels the same when I correct her.

Another time, Mama points out
my incorrect intonation on speaker phone
as I am boiling pasta in Jersey City and
she is watching Chinese news in San Diego.

We are discussing my irregular
bowel movements. *Chong*
said in one inflection
means *to flush [a toilet]*
but uttered another,
means an *insect* or *to rush*.
When I'm about to hang up, I hear Fox News.
I resist my usual conniption and say "I love you."

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Even when you are still—your cells, atoms, cattle,
ex's and oh's—all foam and froth—words do the same.

Tonight on the phone, Mama fixes how I say *feng*.
She says I say *crazy/feng*: 疯. instead of *wind/feng*: 风.
I hope to communicate that Hurricane Ida weather isn't so bad.
Turns out we're both wrong: it's the same
pronunciation, different visual aid: 疯 vs. 风.

The order of my Mandarin chops:

(1) Listening (2) Speaking (3) Reading (4) Writing
These are ordered from best to worst.

