

## MY MOTHER'S TONGUE

*(Song in Chinese)*

As far as I can recall, I have always been surrounded by an ocean of languages. Our home was a real Tower of Babel where Mandarin... Cantonese... Teochew... Hainanese... and Khmer echoed in turn. I was fascinated by how easily you and dad would switch between them.

Among those, Teochew – a southern Chinese dialect – is the only language that you passed on to me. Supposedly, this is my mother tongue, imparted by you, my mother.

*Classmate: You're lucky you know Chinese!*

*J-B: Not really! We don't speak Mandarin Chinese at home, just a dialect.*

*Classmate: Still, you're lucky you can speak many languages!*

I didn't feel lucky.

I secretly envied children who spoke just one language – that of their parents.

They could get help with homework and discuss all sorts of things at home.

In our family, we barely talked.

Deep conversations were impossible. My Teochew was as basic as your French. At home, we spoke a made-up, eclectic language, understood by us alone.

A language made mostly of silence.

Yet, there was so much I wanted to ask you.

Like where do your parents – my grandparents – come from? I never got to know them.

What was your life like, before you came to France? For you were already an adult when you left Cambodia – your homeland.

And how come you never taught me Khmer?

The Khmer that you learned at school, that you listen to every day on the radio, that you chat in all day long with your sisters and your friends.

I will probably never have the answers.

For I lack the words to ask you these questions.

The few words that you gave me are barely enough to speak to you, let alone to interact with the world. And so, let school and the French system teach me what you could not. Let television and books fill the gaps in my knowledge. At the cost of cutting me off from myself and alienating me from you.

\*

*(PA airport announcement)*

My quest for new horizons took me further still. Knowing French was not enough. I found myself thirsty for new words, new languages, new ways of seeing the world. So I continued to explore all but one country: Cambodia, your homeland.

A land you never talked about, except to speak of death and war. A land that I avoided, because you returned there to live, and I could not bear it. Because this land seems to be the root of all suffering.

\*

*(Street noise)*

Until one day, as an adult, I eventually decide to set foot there. Everything feels both foreign and familiar. The sounds...the scents...the colours....  
How could my body remember sensations it never knew? Or was it you who passed them on to me, even without words?

I had spent my time running away. And now, I want to understand everything around me. I devour whatever I can lay my hands on, to feel closer to you and to your homeland.

*(Different sound in Khmer)*

But to complete this quest, I would have to absorb the country's language. Without it, its people and its culture would forever remain out of my reach.  
Frantically, I begin to study Khmer.

\*

*J-B: I can't pronounce this sound.*

*Teacher: "ɑ", "ě", "ei", "oě", "oe"... This is the 'â' group. There are 21 vowels in the alphabet. But because you can pronounce them two different ways, that's about 40 sounds all together.*

It's hopeless.

It's a battle against a rough, unpronounceable language.

With its short vowels, long vowels, closed vowels, open vowels, diphthongs.

And strings of consonants.

*Teacher: Can you say: chnhoy chnhanh*

*chhlang chhnanh men chanh chhlonh*

An elusive language, impossible for me to memorise. With its tricky, sophisticated vocabulary, its roots and loanwords from Sanskrit, Pali and French... The words escape me like eels slithering away among rocks.

An impenetrable language, impossibly hard to read and write. Learning its 74 letters which make it the longest alphabet in the world is not enough! The consonants change form and the vowels are pronounced differently, depending on the combinations.

*Teacher: Here, we have "kâ". If I put an "a" after it, it becomes "ka". But with "kô" it's pronounced "kea". The same vowel here "a", in the first group, is pronounced "a", but in the second group, it becomes "ea", and so on. Children have to learn it all by heart. This is the hardest part, even for Cambodians.*

No matter how hard I try, the characters refuse to stay in my memory. The words fade away. Even when it comes to spelling, there are several alternative rules.

*Teacher: So, when I teach these rules to the children, I tell them that all the variations are correct.*

*But at the end of the day, one has to be practical: the purpose of language is to communicate.*

Exactly! The purpose of language is communication. And speaking it is simply repeating a memorised sequence of sounds in the right order. I've learned other languages, and Khmer is no different! I am determined to conquer this unruly tongue!

*J-B: chhlang chhnanh men chanh chhlonh*

I finally manage to string a sentence together.

I can't wait to show you.

\*

That day, we go for noodle soup to one of the capital's local joints. I'm thrilled. Hoping to make an impression on you, I wait until we finished eating to address the young waiter in Khmer: *Oun euy, som keut loy!*

And you blurt out casually: that's not how we say it!

Your tone is sharp as a knife.

You always admonish me for doing things wrong, without ever showing me how to do them.

After that, I never spoke Khmer in front of you again.

\*

*(Song rehearsal)*

I turn away from you, deciding that I don't need your approval.  
Ignoring your reluctance and your criticism, I settle in the land of smiles.  
You claim that there is nothing here.  
You're scathing, as usual.  
But slowly, I make this country my own.  
I soak in the language.  
It pierces through me, transcends me, sweeps me up and transforms my relationships with others. We Cambodians are one big family. There is no formal or colloquial 'you' here. Instead, Cambodians use kinship terms to address one another.  
One day, I overhear you speaking to your sister and I understand every word. It comes as a shock. I realise then that I have *ingested* the language, internalised its music, and can finally hold a conversation.

*(Song "Champa Battambang")*

\*

But the words still ring false in my mouth. Speaking requires painstaking effort. I do it only when I am forced to, or when I force myself.  
I'd rather avoid the puzzled faces of mockery and bewilderment.  
Some consider me a foreigner, and flatter me for trying to speak their language.  
Others despise the Cambodian who refuses to speak his mother tongue.

No-one views me as one of their own.  
This language will never quite be mine. It is that missing part of me which will never feel complete.

It's not a matter of simply repeating a memorised sequence of sounds in order.  
It is a matter of claiming my identity as a Cambodian – an identity which is constantly questioned. Of claiming my affiliation to the Khmer family, when our own family has fallen apart. Of removing the last obstacle that stops me from talking to you.

For we now have a common tongue  
to communicate with each other.  
I finally possess the words to ask you the questions  
and to hear your answers.

But still, the words aren't coming.

(Song “Champa Battambang”)

\*

For over four years now, I have been living in your country, Cambodia, but in a different city to you. I care only for Phnom Penh. Meanwhile, you and dad take up residence on the coast, in Kampong Som. Not far from where you grew up, where you still have acquaintances and can enjoy the pleasures of life. I loathe it there, and hardly ever visit.

J-B: *Yes? I’m busy right now.*

Whenever you and dad come to the capital, you ask to see me. I give every excuse to avoid it: too tired or too busy. I don’t want you to be a part of my nascent relationship with the Kingdom.

But the fact that we both live here now and that I am the only one of your four children who has moved here doesn’t bring us any closer. The rift between us grows larger still.

J-B: *What is it now? What?! Where? I’m coming.*

\*

Your already frail health takes a turn for the worse. They toss you about on a stretcher from one examination room to another. The doctor calls for us. He looks very serious and says awful things: metastasis, cancer, incurable...There is nothing to be done, he says, and asks us to leave the room immediately. He instructs us to give you morphine, and to let you go.

We try to find an alternative, but the hospitals are overcrowded and private clinics are far too expensive. Dad loses hope. He wants to take you to your family house and follow the doctor’s orders. But we finally agree for you to stay with an uncle in the capital. For days, you alternate between states of delirium and unconsciousness. I sit in a far corner of the room and passively watch you groan in pain.

Until, suddenly, driven by an unknown force, I decide to handle the procedures myself. I hire new carers and dive headlong into the fray.

I’m no longer embarrassed to speak Khmer in front of you. The words pour from my mouth. But do you hear them? When you finally do come back to your senses, something is amiss. Your speech is incoherent, almost childlike. But you preserve your ability to switch between languages – proof that you haven’t completely lost your head.

Until, that is, they try to make you sit up in bed. Scared or in pain, or both, you cry out to me for help: *kone, chuy mak phong!*

You address me in Khmer for the first time. You call me *kone*, my child. The words that I've been longing to hear sound terrible— a sure sign that you're fading. Unless you've finally decided to let your guard down and to let me in. I freeze, unable to move or utter a single word in response.

You are bedridden for days. Your daily routine revolves around medical care, exercise, dressing, eating... The rare times when you are awake, you ask to turn on the radio and demand to be left alone.

\*

*(Radio playing)*

I put everything on hold – daily business, our quarrels – and come every day to your bedside. We hardly talk. The silences, which once weighed so heavily on me, now feel natural, almost healthy.

Then, one day, you regain your senses and begin to speak again. You thank me for what I've done, saying that I saved your life. Again, I am speechless.

The new doctor issues a different diagnosis. Perhaps, there is hope after all. You will need to go to France for medical examinations which cannot be done here. But for now, you are in no state to fly. Your ailments multiply, the illness spreading through your bones, your organs, your skin, your cells.

Your youngest daughter travelled from across the world to be at your bedside. Everyone is here for you. We're running about in an endless dance to ensure that your condition becomes stable enough for you to travel again.

Meanwhile, you alternate between battle and surrender, strength and fatigue.

I, too, am exhausted. Overwhelmed by the endless days, the devastating situation, ongoing family disputes... I'm scared of spiralling down myself. But how can I possibly complain, when you're the one in agony? In spite of this, I decide that it's time to leave you: I will go to France, to take care of myself and to prepare for your arrival.

Before saying my goodbyes to you, I ask everyone to leave the room. I was hoping to have a real conversation with you, but you stick to platitudes: 'say hello to the family for me... send photos... take care of yourself'. I realise then that I will never get more from you, that I have

to accept you as you are. In response, for the first time I utter the words: ‘Goodbye, mom. I love you.’

\*

*(PA announcements)*

And now I’m back in Paris – this city which I used to call home. It’s been two years since I set foot here last. I see friends, I go out and feel alive again. And I feel guilty for enjoying all of it.

I prepare for your arrival – which will be any day now. A hospital bed is ready, the date is fixed. All you have to do is to get better and get on the plane.

\*

*(Chanting)*

But the day before the pre-travel check-up, you did not wake up. That night, an artery had burst in your brain.

If you had lived a few more days, perhaps we could have saved you on your arrival in France? Or perhaps, your time had come and you preferred to draw your last breath in your homeland?

That night, your body was taken back to Kampong Som. Unable to bring the family together in times of the pandemic, we organised the funeral on both continents.

\*

*Priest: Together, we—your family and friends—wish to say goodbye to you. Death took you on your last journey. Our pain is tremendous, your passing fills our hearts and souls with grief. But we hope it is the start of a new life in another world – one filled with love and happiness. Life goes by in the blink of an eye. We pray for the Buddha to take your soul to rest in peace in the afterlife.*

*(Prayers in Khmer).*

*The ceremony is over. We thank you and wish you all happiness.*

\*

Wandering through the streets of the 13th arrondissement, I search for scents, sounds, memories from my childhood, memories of you, of simple, happy moments. I feel like I’m floating. I’ve lost my sense of reality. Everything around feels bland, unreal, absurd.

\*

The ground offers no anchor. My motherland is calling. That's where I want to grow my roots. Although you did everything to keep me away from there – to protect me or yourself? I don't know. Now that you're gone, you've taken all your secrets and mysteries with you. As I mourn you, I mourn the answers to the questions that I will never have.

\*

*(Ceremony in Teochew dialect)*

When the travel restrictions eased, I set out to go to your small house on the coast to join dad and your youngest daughter in time for the 7-week ceremony. According to Chinese tradition, this is the moment when the soul leaves the Earth forever and travels to another realm.

*(Conversation in Khmer)*

We bless and burn representations of all the items that will follow you to your new home: a cardboard house and car, paper money...  
As the flames dance, the smoke blows out. May they reach you, wherever you may be right now.

\*

I continue my journey in your homeland – now, my homeland too. Your languages – Khmer amongst them – are now my own. The legacy lives on in me, regardless of how I acquired it.

Your memory is kept alive.

Just as your voice continues to resonate.

I could not hear its intonation.

But all this time, with your words, your language—our language—you were saying the essential things:

\*

*Mom: Hi, J-B. It's mum. I'm in Phnom Penh today. Dad wants to know if you are free for dinner with us tonight. Call me back.*

\*

*Mom: Hi, J-B. I haven't seen you in a while. I've been thinking about you.*

\*

*Mom: J-B... today is your birthday, I know. Happy birthday, my dear. Are you doing anything tonight? Sending you lots of love, big hug!*