LIMBA MATERNĂ: A CREATIVE INQUIRY INTO MOTHER LANGUAGE SHIFT AND LOSS

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in:creativity journal vol. 2
2019

ABSTRACT

This creative arts-based inquiry explores an individual case of Mother Language shift and loss through poems and paintings. Language shift is often defined in the Canadian context as the process whereby “individuals abandon their native language as the principal language spoken at home and adopt another” (Sabourin & Bélanger, 2015, p. 727). But is abandon the right verb? And what about adopt? A abandona inseamnă ca ai avut o alegere de făcut. A adopta also means you had a choice and you consciously made it. What if your limba maternă hid in your body, s-a ascuns, out of fear? And what if it still lives inside of you at the cellular level, in your body’s home, adânc, așteptând momentul potrivit to resurface? These poems and paintings explore the feelings of home as mother tongue, and the effects on identity of gradually losing a first language.

KEYWORDS

poetry, mother tongue, language loss, language shift, arts-based inquiry

A NOTE ON LANGUAGES

My poems and captions weave together different languages. I code-switch frequently, but do not provide translations or a glossary in an Anzaldúan attempt to “keep my tongue wild” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 40), and to “unsettle” and question the deeply entrenched (yet largely unacknowledged) Anglocentrism in academia and publishing worlds that often erases or suppresses multilingual voices. Linguistically diverse authors who think, write, and work in non-official languages must often accommodate for mono- or bilingual spaces of publication. In this inquiry, I invite you to embrace the ambiguity and discomfort that often accompanies being a language learner.

LIMBA MATERNĂ

I should have begun by saying
that I lost my mother tongue.

I know what you are thinking
How can you lose something
that lives inside of you, unless
you chose to live languageless?

Forgive me, loss never occurs
on purpose. Think of the way
you lose a loved one, or a faith.

I did not deem Romanian
inconvenient, crumple it up
by a trash bin, hoping someone
will stumble by, find it useful.

Nor did I sweat it away
in the labour of learning
another language

S-a ascuns. It disappeared inside
corpul meu, my body's weight
and I know it's still there

Memoria mea, burnt sienna,
a clot of regret, limba maternă

Its letters still line my throat,
its old curses live in my fingertips.

Painting by Adriana Onita,
Strada Odăi, Nr. 39, Jilava,
Romania [watercolour on paper],
 2015

SEVEN SELF PORTRAITS

I

Clenched jaw like an old cathedral.
 Slant light. Stacks of books
 on your side of the bed.

II

Suitcase. Scrawled poems
 in a language care nu înțelegeți.

III

Cupped hands. Under the walnut tree
 la Biserica pe Mierlari. Frowning.
 Ai uitat cum să zici nuc.

IV

Cu ligheanul albastru
 Cu gastele. În Jilava cea de toate zilele.

Is it even a self-portrait
 if I can't say this
 în limba română?

V

Is it even a poem
if I don't say Jilava?

Three wet syllables.
Self-portrait as my village
in eternal grief.

VI

O lălea. Slabă și subțire.
Ca o amintire.

Will you look that up?

VII

Mother tongue sprouting from throat.
O zmeură coaptă. Pe o foaie de viță.

Put yourself in this painting.

Painting by Adriana Onita,
"Gâște/Geese" [watercolour on
paper], 2018

APARTMENT

Losing your mother tongue is like
misplacing your keys
în fiecare zi of your life
yet you still allow yourself to leave
with your home unlocked

and go about your business
from desk to dusk
only to return to your apartment
to find one object
missing
every day.

Azi, it's the ceramic cup from Horezu
leri, it was the green rug from Sinaia
Mâine, it will be the hand-painted icon
or crocheted ilic de la Mamaie.

One by one, your apartment is emptied.
Și tu te dezbraci de cuvinte, de amintiri.

Years later, you return to your homeland
and replace each object.

Dar nu e la fel.

The cup, de la Piața Progresul, is violet.
The rug is smaller, its pattern different.
The icon is not hand-painted.
Ilicul cumpărat de la magazin.

But you think: it's better than nothing.
Măcar am găsit o cheie nouă.

Painting by Adriana Onita,
Apartment, Edmonton
[watercolour on paper], 2019

WHAT DO WE LOSE WHEN WE LOSE A LANGUAGE?

pe scurt: entire ways of being
and knowing and feeling
ways to pray, ways to curse
ways to cure, praise, grieve
scold, love, remember

people think it's just words
vocabulariu și gramatică
syntaxis y morfologia

they say languages live limbile dispar
survival of the fittest una competencia

dar o limbă trăiește, zâmbește, gândește
è una cosa viva, that lives and blooms

we must protect a language
come se fosse una foresta

a botanical belonging

Painting by Adriana Onita,
Limbile dispar [watercolour on
paper], 2018

AUTHOR BIO

Adriana Oniță lives at the intersection between poetry, art, and languages. Născută în București but currently living in Amiskwaciwâskahikan (Edmonton, AB), she writes poetry in Romanian, English, Spanish, French, and Italian. Her chapbook, *Conjugated Light*, was published by Glass Buffalo (March, 2019) and she is the 2019 winner of the Canadian Literature Centre poetry contest. She is the founding editor of *The Polyglot*, a magazine that has published over 100 multilingual poets and artists in Canada (www.thepolyglotmagazine.com), and one of the organizers of the Edmonton Poetry Festival. Currently, she is pursuing her PhD in Second Language Education at the University of Alberta, where she also teaches.

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