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An Unspoken Language, Translated

The running water wraps itself around me,
a silky quilt fecund with timeless love—
eternal in the language I could see,
always conversing without a speech of
words that sparkle to be decorative,
which are often used for fleeting exchange:
verbal sounds that are unnecessary.
On breathing volumes such words are arranged,
yet these pages are not just carryin’—
the sandpaper frictions against my flesh,
sinking wooden fragrance into my skin,
vibrating, communicating, and fresh.
My mind is folding out into the world,
And right into my mind it also swirls.

“Doctor? What do you think?” I gripped the neck of my blouse and looked away from the child. She was unbothered by our presence as she buried her face into that second-hand copy of *William Wordsworth: Selected Poetry*. I knew she was not reading the text—the lines, the diction, the metaphors—for no one could read from such a proximal distance, but somehow she was engaging with it, physically—but for what? We had all stroked our fingers across the book and smelled its earthy scent, so what is more in there to be felt except for reading the various texts that such pages carried?

The doctor fixed his eyes on my daughter, reading her repeated actions, while the intern looked down, as if he was suddenly captured by the tip of his shoes.

“Does she always do this?” The doctor asked me, his eyes flickering behind those reflective glasses.

“Yes,” I nodded, “Sometimes, she would also turn on the faucet and just let the water run down her fingers. Other times, she’d repeatedly touch—or hit—an object.”

“That’s interesting,” the doctor nodded as he mused over my daughter’s behavior, jotting down several lines of notes that I failed to recognize from where I was standing.

Now I could understand the flicker in his eyes. It was a flicker of curiosity.

“I’m more concerned about trying to connect with her. I know her actions may seem strange, but I am just...I am trying my best to understand them—”

“It’s just such an interesting case,” the doctor interrupted my incoherent gibberish, “I think she’s communicating with these objects.”

I responded, “But how am I supposed to know what she’s communicating? Can you help her? To connect with us or other *human beings*, perhaps?”

“It’s not truly about connecting with you all,” the doctor returned to jotting notes on the clipboard, “She has her own *language*. If you could think of language as a means of communication, then yes, that’s exactly what she’s doing: connecting with the world via a sensual language.”

“A sensual language?” My heart pumped against my ribcage, and the echoes rippled their way up my ears, now buzzing in an unpleasant harmony with my ever-painful brain. Was my daughter speaking another language? I could not quite grasp what that was supposed to mean, but all of a sudden, I was consumed by a strange emotion—perhaps guilt or shame out of inadequacy—that I had failed to follow her steps into a foreign realm in which languages did not have to consist of words.

“What could I do?” I asked, “To connect with her, I mean?”

He walked over and placed a hand on the child’s hair, and she put the book down. He reached for her hand, and, to my surprise, the child accepted the touch. Gingerly, he placed her hand on my face, and I closed my eyes, feeling those fingers caressing my cheeks. Somehow, I knew she felt something beneath and beyond the texture of my wrinkled skin, so I placed her hand down on my throat at my larynx, which vibrated with an internalized sob.

“That’s a good experiment to start with. To have her connect with us, or vice versa,” the doctor nodded, taking her hand down, cutting off the linkage between us, “What’s so intriguing about people like her is that their language is often difficult to access from our stance, but we could work on it if that’s what you wish for.”

“Please,” I uttered, “I can’t bear to see her this way.”

The child’s eyes were closed. Did it have to be the way? To forcefully draw her into our world and speak our language? I had no answers. I could simply let the stream of wariness run through my own body like it always had: the worry that I was an inadequate mother, the worry that I had lost my child to an unfamiliar world, the worry that I would never be able to connect with her or have her connect with others...

September 13th: A short reflectional entry

Today, I had one of my first shadowing visits as an intern.

When we entered the room, the child was feeling a book on her face. What was she speaking when she placed her face on the page and stroked her fingers across its texture? What was the book trying to say beyond the text that it carried? I did not know what she was up to, and it upset me so much that I began to feel uncomfortable.

So I looked down. At the tip of my toes. At my own body.

Now that I'm meditating on today's occurrences, I finally understand the sources of such discomfort. I felt as if I was peeking into someone else's private conversation—a conversation that is so personal that I would feel guilty to have eavesdropped.

I could not bear to look. I felt like an unconsented intruder, rudely trespassing into someone's privacy without consent.

Is this even ethical? If she is simply conversing, what makes her a patient? What deems a patient "patient"? What is our job? Is it to pull her out of the familiar so that she could connect with us? Or is it to—without adequate consent—draw ourselves into her personal space?

I have no answers.