

A Silent L in the World

To all the people who are trying to give voice to a silent part somewhere in this world

My dad used to ask me

how to pronounce *world* and make it sound different from *word*.

In the world he had grown up never did the sound L occur after a vowel in a word. That was a world where his tongue could let out the vowels of life without being stung by the mockery of L.

Moving from that world to this world resembles a poem leaping on the sight

of a new horizon and plunging into the eternal shadow cast by

the Tower of Babel. Defined not in its own right, a poem is now what has been lost in its reckless boundary-crossing act. So does life, a word that begins with the letter L, which leaks anxieties of loss.

Like an orange gazing at a box of orange juice concentrate displayed at Walmart, reflecting on its round flesh before and after the transformation, the fragments of its previous life that now can only be glimpsed on a small label proudly announcing “pulp free.”

Meandering through his world from the Great Wall to Walmart, the letter L stretches—

its line marking the borders that define and redefine this man. Whenever it is time to

pronounce, he always stands straight like a soldier, taking a deep breath and thinking about his favorite poet Li Bai, brush to paper, chanting his mantra that might make Walt Whitman frown:

“Either define the letter L or the letter L will define you.”

Often he is too focused to note that he is not the only fighter,

the phantoms of L, an army of strange odors that combines the sweaty smell from the gold mines, the detergent’s fragrance folded into Chinese laundries, and the scent of

Lo-Mein wafting out of a takeout box with the forever mysterious pagoda stamped on it,

marching to this battlefield in quiet but firm steps.

Oh, 爸爸¹—

you just need to put the tip of your tongue behind the top front teeth and let air out.

¹ 爸爸 means dad in Chinese; the character contains a stroke “乚”resembling the letter L