

mother tongue

Amma¹,

Last night, my friends and I played Scrabble, our brown and not-brown hands pushing pieces across a board. We traded words like “lovely,” like “love,” like “dream,” like the names of boys we’d never kiss and I hoarded syllables like bits of lunchroom gossip. I’ve gotten good at telling people that I love language—love learning languages—learning a language is like loving someone after all. All the sleepovers I’ve spent braiding someone else’s blonde hair, baking boxed things that scream with sweetness, shouting lyrics to songs I shouldn’t sing in front of you but that you wouldn’t understand anyways so it doesn’t really matter—they’ve all made me a polyglot. Amma, I’ve learned a thousand love languages, a thousand ways to love, or rather, a thousand ways we don’t love.

The other day, my French teacher spoke to me after class. She told me I was doing well, so well. She asked me, do I speak any other languages, but what she was really asking was how I knew what *une langue maternelle* meant, if I had a mother tongue. I was running late, minutes slipping through my fingers like your graying hair. I said yes.

Outside a boy with golden hair asked me whether I spoke Indian. I told him that’s not a language.

Okay. I lied. You hate lies. And this is a confession because nobody teaches brown girls what to do when they end up loving boys with sapphires for eyes, boys with gilded hair and gilded tongues. And I’m sorry Amma, I was your *bangarthali*² until I asked you not to call me that anymore because golden boys love girls made of gold, not girls made of *bangaram*³ and other whispers.

I tell you he doesn’t love me. You are speaking with a mother’s tongue and today I want to understand what I told my French teacher I understood: mothers and mother tongues and mothers’ tongues but how can I when I mother dust on my own tongue, when the first language I learned to forget was you(rs). And so here I am: a brown-girl poet, curled like a baby at your feet, trying to translate your touch into an alphabet with only twenty-six letters.

¹ The Telugu word for “mother”

² Literally translates to “golden daughter.” This is a term of endearment frequently used by a mother while playfully pleading with a child

³ Literally means “gold” and refers to the precious metal. However, this is also a term of endearment. Refer to second footnote.