ESSAY

my mother tongue

by Asya Akimzhanova



"Mother" by Atzin Garcia

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to Apasha

... I needed a different language:
a language that was a place of affection and reflection.
— Antonio Tabucchi

on Friday I had my first Kazakh lesson. it is weird and ambiguous to refer to it as my first one. as if I never studied it before. as if I never spoke it. as if I never knew it.

I did, didn’t I?

was it even me?

I was waiting for the teacher to join me on the zoom meeting. the lesson was supposed to start in a few minutes, and I felt anxiety already beginning to creep through my body.

hey, what's wrong?

what's bothering you so much?

I didn't have an answer yet. frankly, I started this whole story with Kazakh lessons precisely to find out what was bothering me so much — what was the root of my worries; what truth has my anxiety been trying to tell me?

why can't I find my tongue?

why don't I speak the language I first started speaking?

the Kazakhs have an expression: *“??????? ???? ?????.”* this literally translates as “the child’s tongue stuck out,” which means that the child spoke.

????? ????? ??????? ????? — my first language was Kazakh. now it’s almost impossible to imagine — what it was like when my whole world spoke only Kazakh? I didn’t know any

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other languages ??before school; my grandmother Galya, my mother's mother, still loves to recall her attempts to tell me the story of "Little Round Bun" ("Kolobok" — East Slavic fairy-tale) in Russian, and I blinked incredulously and said: *??????? ????? ?????* — speak Kazakh, please.

was it even me?

if so, where is she?

why doesn't she speak?

I think I started all these Kazakh language lessons in the hope of finding her — and seeing her, and touching her, and reaching her out. would she like to talk to me? it seems to me that she is deeply offended and that she is suffering.

the teacher asked me to tell about myself and my learning goals, why I want to learn Kazakh. I was struck by the wording "learn Kazakh" — part of me wanted to correct it and say: I know Kazakh, but the other part retorted: then what are you doing here?

I am 24, I speak four languages, but my voice trembles when there is a need to say something in Kazakh – usually, to answer a question. my voice trembles traitorously when I explain directions to taxi drivers and hear: "*??????? ??????? ????? ??????? ??*" – what is your nationality? are you not Kazakh? I often get this question, but I still haven't figured out if my explosive mixture of blood can be recognized by my "non-Kazakh" appearance or by this tremor in my voice — my lack of confidence in my mother tongue.

I want my Kazakh to sound without trembling under my skin — could it be my learning goal?

our Kazakh lesson immediately began in Russian. I thought to myself: why didn't the teacher even try to start a conversation in Kazakh? did she assume that I wouldn't understand her?

I would understand —

however, why is it important for me that she understands that I understand her?

I understand, although I can't answer you in our language yet.

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at the age of six I went to school. as far as I remember, my parents never once wondered what school I would go to — they chose the best one in the city, and the best one was Russian. my memories of elementary school are very blurry, but I remember how I shone in Kazakh language lessons and how I could not get rid of the habit of inserting Kazakh phrases between words in Russian lessons, not realizing that they were different languages.

did I feel stressed by this language transition? was it difficult for me?

I barely remember. I can't help but feel that these are not just early life events that have naturally sunk into oblivion — these are rather intense sentiments that were stuck and untouched for a long time. I have no other explanation except that some part of my mind is suppressing my memories because they contain feelings too strong. and I can't just bring them back without being torn apart.

I simply said that I had not practiced the language for a long time, and I would like to know it better — after all, part of my ethnicity is Kazakh.

the teacher nodded kindly and said that then we would start with the basics — she asked me to read the alphabet. I felt the color rush to my cheeks — that same Kazakh blood.

that very first tongue of mine, standing in a lump in my throat. I knew that if I started to unravel this lump, it would crumble into furious Kazakh phrases: maybe I forgot them, maybe I forgot myself, but I'm still able to read my first alphabet.

I read the letters and thought about what Apasha *(gentle form of Kazakh «???» — Grandmother)* would think of me now? Apasha was my dad's mother, my beloved grandmother, my second mother. I couldn't help but think about her, because in my mind Kazakh is first and foremost her language; she gave me the language, she read books to me, she taught me words and poems, she read my first texts in Kazakh, and she was the first person I wrote about.

what would she think about my worries?

about me being afraid that my great tender love for the Russian turned out to be my betrayal of the Kazakh — because the first supplanted the second; about how, being the first, it ceased to be the main one — how it almost ceased to occupy a place in my space; how painful it is for me to admit this out loud and how I need the refuge of another language to

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make this recognition and try to grope towards my boundaries — and that’s why I’m writing about them now in English.

is it even me now?

do I need to choose?

I used to know, but I am not sure now.

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