

2000

A Language No One Understands

Chris Million
Denison University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Million, Chris (2000) "A Language No One Understands," *Exile*: Vol. 47 : No. 2 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol47/iss2/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Exile by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.

A Language No One Understands

In a language no one there could understand, the man said, "I'm home!" Only the ugly baby and his wife's great-aunt Mamie were at home, as the shadows of pines fell further across her trailer. The man found consolation in the fact that he could say whatever he wanted. Still, at the end of the day, there wasn't much worth saying.

A note his wife left indicated that she was out getting chicken and spices for one of the dishes he had loved in their homeland. He kicked off his shoes and slid his tired feet into his slippers. The man set his lunchbox and newspaper down next to the sink and walked down the narrow hall to throw his work coat over the bed. The air was still and slightly damp in the old trailer. Mamie had lived there since her husband died seven years before, and if there ever was any lingering presence of the departed soul, it was gone now. The trailer groaned like her at night, hugged squat and suspicious to the ground in the day, and smelled, as did she, perpetually of vinegar. In the other dimly lit room, the ugly baby slept next to the old woman, who coughed and rolled slowly under the comforter like a breaking wave. The baby had been a curse, like Mamie, who had come to America following her dream of wealth, or freedom, or some foolishness, cars perhaps, and found only this whirlpool of unhappiness in the Smoky Mountains of North Carolina. When her husband was alive, it had been different, but not much. And now she had sucked the man and his bride into it as well.

Satisfied with their sleep, the man headed for the kitchen, where he always read the newspaper in a folding chair. Or pretended to. It was a habit from his distant home, which he had painstakingly preserved for the five months he and his wife had been in this country. As he sat glancing over the recognizable white faces that filled the pages, he envisioned the breeze coming in off the water at his childhood home. He had eaten fruit and sweets for breakfast as his father had read the paper, the breeze smelling fertile and promising. Here there was no gentle wind, only horrible gusts followed by stillness. Stillness followed by horrible gusts. Here there were enormous hills for walking up and down, or around. Here he and his family were at risk, but they were fulfilling their duty.

His wife entered carrying a small plastic bag with her purchases from the grocery store. "Hello," she said to her husband with a furtive grin. "How was work, my darling?"

He watched her set down the groceries with deft movements. She always moved her trim body precisely, in a way that made him feel gawky or callous by comparison. "Hard work today," he said, rubbing his short dark hair just above the temple. "We are finishing up the old house in town, and we carried rubble all day." He considered dwelling on the image for his wife's benefit, some talk of rebuilding from nothing, but he found it depressing. As hard as he had it, at least he ventured out into the world. He wondered how she could bear days alone in this trailer, tending to their child and feeding and cleaning her great-aunt as she floated farther from this world and nearer the next.

The woman leaned forward to listen for a catch in her husband's voice, some clue as to his emotional life, that thing which had gone silent since leaving their homeland. If only there were some way his mother could write to them, she thought. If he could hear her words, he would surely talk to the woman about the real things. Once, while having a drink after their first long month of watching the old woman's health

deteriorate, her husband had said those rock-breaking pigs at work didn't know their own asses from a donkey's face.

She prepared the meal after peeking in on her sleeping child. Her husband and his mother had called the baby ugly in her presence once, to her great chagrin. She knew that it was a joke between the two of them, and her dignity as a mother was hurt. How dare he insult their baby girl? She knew he wanted boys, boys who could learn to fish and to build things as he had his whole life. She would still give him boys yet, once this arduous duty was fulfilled. She imagined little hands, broad and chubby, handing her vegetables as they prepared her husband's favorite chicken dish. She turned on the lamp as the sun settled in the dark timbers of distant hills. There was a window over the sink, thank God, for the stark trailer distressed her and the land was beautiful, if foreign. The woman saw her own reflection in the window as she washed her hands. She had few of the lines that marked her great-aunt's face. She could also see her husband sitting in the folding chair, gazing intently across the pages of words he couldn't possibly recognize, turning the pages as though chasing a mystery to its heart-stopping conclusion.

The man flipped page after page, trying to absorb some meaning, some sense of the world into which he'd been placed, but his mind wandered. He thought of his friend who had arranged the boat trip to sneak them into the country. "Why hadn't you just applied for the visa?" his friend had asked. "When there is no time, there is no visa," he had said. He knew his wife felt an obligation to be with Mamie when she died, to care for her, as she had no one left. Time was of essence, as the letter had read simply, "I am dying. I love you. -Mamie." Furthermore, this, he hoped, would make up for his disappointment in their ugly daughter. He had suspected it would be easy to get into the US, and it had been. He found a man who paid in cash by the day, and though he understood little of what his workmates said or did, he felt productive. Still, every week he sent his mother letters he showed no one, faithfully telling her everything of this new, painful land of red mud and falling rocks. He sent these all without return address, as there was none to write.

The oven emanated the juicy smell of chicken and his stomach rumbled in anticipation. He loved his wife very much, and he watched her look out the dingy window over the sink with a certain reverence. She deserved better than this, and she would have it when they returned. He smiled as he pictured a day when they would recount their tales of America to the grandchildren in the home his sons would have built for their mother. Thick rugs would lie across the wood floors of large rooms with portraits of the family on the walls. He had turned to the back of the newspaper when he heard the infant cry out.

The woman turned, startled by the sudden noise. Her husband stood, and said he would calm their daughter. She considered him a responsible, honorable man, and his callused hands could stroke their daughter's soft scalp surprisingly tenderly. He walked down the narrow hall and the woman took a hot cloth to wipe off the countertop where they ate. Her little girl continued to cry, and she said under her breath, "Why in God's name are we still here? Will Mamie ever let go of our throats?" She wiped the countertop clean once more, and folded the cloth neatly beside the sink. The chicken would be ready in five more minutes.

Her husband came back into the kitchen holding the screaming baby. His shirt

was untucked, and his eyes were awake and bright again. The baby squirmed halfway out of his tanned hands as the woman took the baby into her arms. "She rolled up against her, but not on top," he said. The woman nodded, and felt a twinge of guilt for having left the baby in bed with Mamie in the first place. Mamie passed easily from alertness and normal functioning to a ridiculous invalid with no more ability than the girl who slept beside her. She would stammer phrases in her mother tongue, interspersed with television English and bits of knock-knock jokes. Other times she couldn't remember where she was or who was caring for her, just moaned in pain and fright.

The baby pounded the woman as she cooed in its ear and swayed back and forth quickly. "She feels hot to me, darling," she said.

"Are you quite sure?" he asked.

"I don't know," she conceded. "I just don't know why she would start crying so suddenly."

"Maybe she soiled herself," said her husband.

"No, it's not that."

"Mamie did roll up next to her. Maybe it's the old woman's heat."

The woman did not answer, but continued swaying, even as the infant squealed more vigorously. She wished her mother was there for advice. She tried rubbing her little girl's belly, to no avail. She tried lifting her up and down, a game they played most days. She turned from her husband and undid the top four buttons of her blouse to see if the baby was hungry. She wasn't. Frustrated beyond tolerance, the woman handed the baby back to her husband and stormed down the hallway.

"Darling," he called, "what are you doing?" The baby jerked in his arms like some hideous reptile snapping at his shoulder. He spoke nonsense words in English, the words he knew, to calm the baby and himself. *Sledgehammer*, he whispered, *shucks*, *mister*, *cheese pizza*, *free*. He spoke the words reverently, as though invoking a spell to quiet the child. "Darling," he called again, "what's going on?" She didn't answer.

The man padded down the hallway in his slippers. In the side room, his wife was slowly shaking Mamie, who lay there like road kill, vast and unpreventable. Tears were dropping from his wife's eyes to her great-aunt's face. "Why?" his wife growled at the dying woman. "Why? Why? What are we doing here? Why did you bring us here?" She cried softly and Mamie rolled away from her, shielding her face with her hands. His wife struck her back lightly with her thin fists and Mamie made a low sound in her throat. His wife pushed her hair out of her face, straightening up, wiping her eyes. She had not seen him in the doorway.

When she had calmed herself, she walked back out to the kitchen. Halfway there, she realized the chicken was burning. Smoke was slowly wafting from the oven in a thin curl like her daughter's hair. Her husband was nowhere to be seen. She cursed, and pulled the burnt dish out. It was beyond any hope. "No!" she groaned. She could still hear the baby's cries down the hall. She headed for their bedroom, where the child lay thrashing and crying in the middle of the bed. Why hadn't she stayed home with the infant while her husband came to tend to the old hag, she wondered. She knew the answer. More than the danger of his arrest or the pressure of his mother, she had come because she never felt so alone as when her husband was away. It would have been as though he were dead. To the left of their bed, her husband sat on the floor, writing in the

margins of a newspaper. He was oblivious to her approach, and she made out the words, "Mother, I have failed her" in his tight, angular script. He stood up, startled, and dropped the newspaper behind him, on the flea-infested couch Mamie had owned too long to throw it out with the other trash they found cluttering the trailer when they arrived.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I live here," she laughed.

He shook his head. "No, I mean, what are you doing? Can you calm the baby? I can't. And she's hot now, but I think it's from bawling."

"Dinner's burnt," she said. "I'm sorry."

He touched her cheek. "It's all right. I'll fix us something." The baby wailed, kicking tiny feet. Her face was red. "It's going to be all right."

"No," she said. "I think the baby is sick. We should go to the doctor."

"You know that's impossible."

"Don't let your pride hurt a child," she scolded.

"Do you want to see me arrested?" he asked, puffing out his chest.

"Do you want to see the young and old alike die here, in this country?" The woman was crowding him into the couch.

"You don't know a thing," he said, as his face flushed.

There was a knock at the door. The man and woman looked at each other in disbelief. In five months there had not been a visitor to the isolated trailer far off the road, without so much as a gravel driveway. Another knock, this time with more insistence. "I'll get it," said the man, stepping around his wife with newspaper in hand.

Hi y'all, said the ruddy-faced kid in English as the man opened the screen door. *My name's Jim. I was just hunting downriver and my truck broke down. I wondered if I can please use your telephone.* Jim fidgeted with his ball cap. This guy looked like he wasn't from this neck of the woods, and Jim had walked a distance already. The sun was down and a chill was coming down the mountains. He couldn't afford to be turned away.

I speak little English, said the man, who was the color of a buckeye's light center. A child was screaming somewhere in the shoddy trailer, and Jim wondered if the guy was embarrassed, blowing him off.

Y'all don't understand, he said. *Telephone. Phone call. I need some help here.*

I speak only little English, said the man. *Sorry.*

Jim stepped forward on the porch towards the door and saw an attractive young woman holding the screaming baby to her chest. *Your wife?* he gestured. It smelled of grease fire and peppers as the air began to stir. Jim shivered, and pulled his orange jacket close around his narrow shoulders.

Sorry, said the man, closing the door. Jim stepped forward, and touched the man's arm. He pulled back from the doorway, and Jim walked in.

I don't mean any harm, he said. *I just need to call somebody, okay?* The man said something intelligible only to his wife. The hushed words sounded like crickets chirping, or frogs calling to each other over a great distance. *I just need to call somebody*, he repeated, looking for the phone. The sole adornments on the walls were a mirror whose frame was chipped and faded to a shade of yellow the color of the original wood, and a small black and white photograph of an old woman in foreign dress, thin fabrics thrown over her shoulder. He spoke more loudly and slowly over the baby's wails, *Where*

is your phone? When no one spoke, he yelled, throwing his hands up, *Where in God's name is the phone?* Silence fell momentarily on the trailer. All eyes turned to the baby, who had hushed in fright at the stranger. A low moan came from the back room, a long low moan that chilled them all more than any wind. It was the sound of crackling leaves, then the groan of a house shifting, and then like a dirge in a dead language. It thinned to a hoarse whisper. Jim took in the rest of the room in the ensuing silence. The thin tan rugs, the folding chair tucked neatly in the corner, the blackened meat in a pot steaming by the sink, the spotless counters and walls: only the poorest people took such good care of what they had. There would be no phone. Jim would have to walk back to the road and try to eventually flag someone down. He tugged his ball cap down over his ears, looked at his sneakers, and turned, leaving the trailer in silence.

The baby was still, quieter than breath. Her mother stood perfectly still, trying to preserve whatever had finally worked. Her father didn't move either. The baby's face was losing that violent scarlet hue, and the screen door slapped shut behind the boy, but the man didn't even glance in that direction. He thought of his letter to his mother, and composed more of it in his head as he stood there looking at his wife and child far from home.

The fire is out, Mother. The fire is out and the smoke is cleared away. The baby's cries have been answered, or it has given up. I ache for your voice, and who I am to you. We are starving for words here, and for time to return. We get older here, but Mamie doesn't change. She grew so close to death in our first few weeks here, and now she stays there, close enough the heat chars her, not so close the flames consume. An American came into our home today, Mother, and he yelled and yammered and finally left without a word. Today we are like Mamie in this other world.

—Chris Million '02