

MASSACHUSETTS LETTERS ABOUT LITERATURE 2023

HONORS LEVEL III

Dear Michelle Zauner,

Last week, my mother wanted to restock on sinigang and palabok mix, so I accompanied her to the Asian grocery store. I looked around at the shelves of a mix of familiar and unfamiliar frozen foods, exotic fruits, ingredients, and candies, and I settled on grabbing a pack of Yakult, a can of Milo chocolate powder, and one bag of chicharon, all snacks and drinks I hold fondly in my heart with my childhood.

I was born and grew up in suburban Massachusetts. And like all first-generation children, I became a *mélange* of two cultures, two spheres of life, becoming almost like a split persona. I wanted so desperately to fit into both worlds. I used to bring a spoon and fork to school because that is the traditional way to eat in the Philippines, but someone once said that it was like I was shoveling the food into my mouth. In elementary school, there were words that I just didn't know in English like 'hair tie' or 'tank top' or 'sauce,' and that was the most embarrassing thing. As I grew older, though, I've felt the need to prove that I can fit in at home too. After my brother went to college, it was just my parents and I, and I found that I couldn't understand everything they were saying anymore, not as easily as I did when I was little. And I was embarrassed about that too.

When I read your book, *Crying in H-Mart*, I was deeply moved by your non-stop care for your mother, and the underlying love throughout it all, despite the disagreements and arguments. Reading about your mother's battle with cancer was heartbreaking, and I could only think of what my mother had to go through when taking care of her dad who passed away from the same cause. I have so much admiration for you and her and everyone who has had to go through losing a family member. To write a whole memoir about it must have been like reliving it all over again, so thank you for that sacrifice.

I loved the way your cooking represented not only that reconnection with your Korean heritage, but also gratitude to your mother, manifested in the recreation of the very meals she used to make you. That reversal of roles reminds us of the fragility of life, and you captured so beautifully the pain of this sentiment being realized in real time.

Learning about your parents' culture isn't a given. It isn't automatic. And the older I get, the more it feels like a never-ending journey towards some far-off home, but I'm not going to feel any less Philipina just because I can't cook mechado or speak perfect tagalog. Thank you for helping me realize this. Most importantly, though, thank you for reminding me that our time with loved ones isn't infinite. All roads in my life have to lead back to family.

Last week at the Asian grocery store, my mom maneuvered her way through aisles she knows well, and I followed close behind pushing her cart.

Sincerely,

Elyza