Rén

LYSTRA ARANAL

"Be precise," Lao Shi says, "these strokes have direction, must be written a certain way, or it isn't the same." I know what she means, but I just can't help copying, simply imitating what I see on the page and on the blackboard where she writes instructions for the rest of the class while I sit at the back learning what everyone else already knows. I learn how to write and read new characters every day, a new language; although, to me it's like learning how to draw pictures and shapes, a line at a time, but never filling in the spaces. So what does it matter whether I start from the left or the right, or move my pen from down to up or up to down. But Lao Shi always cares, hitting my hand with a metal ruler whenever she notices the wrong stroke, always lacking in fluidity, always unlike the characters I see on the rolls of parchments hung along the classroom walls, drawn—never just harshly written—with brushes dipped in black ink, fluid lines melting into each other. "No, no! Not like that!" I stumble. My lines are crooked, patchy—harsh. She tells me to think of each character as a page in a book. "Each character tells a story, each draws a picture of what you intend to say." Like how the word rén looks like a lone stick figure without its head and arms. That's all I see; and yet she insists I think of that when writing the character on a page. "What is it you want to say? What's the story?" My story is in the faces of those I pass along Orchard Road on Sundays, the

women and men sitting in groups atop picnic mats laid out below stacks of Tupperware—adobo and pansit alongside paper plates—always looking familiar, expectant; yet those who sometimes look at me as if I don't deserve to approach them and say, "Hello, po. Kamusta, po"—those customary greetings between acquaintances—because I am not exactly of them. Still, they are who I picture in place of the character on the blackboard: all persons—or rén. One rén for each. So I think of the stroke, try to remember the way Lao Shi had drawn the character on the board. "One stroke down sloping to the left. Another stroke down sloping to the right." I see it now. A person on my page; but that is not what she wants. So I sleep with the books under my pillow every night, a finger between pages. My parents do not know. I always have pockets, everything in fists; and I tell them I'm fine when they ask "how was school?" with their backs turned, closing doors. That's enough for them—for me—and I go back to trying to remember why I'm here. It all started with letters and postcards, piled on the kitchen table at our house nestled between carinderias and sari-sari stores that remind me a lot of the mama-shops my classmates here once brought me to, those cluttered stores at the bottom of HDB blocks with their snacks wrapped in clear plastic held close by purple staples, and those strings of unmarked candy hanging by the cash register that I was taught to grab and pay twenty cents for. I think of the addresses and the foreign stamps and how my mother would sometimes say: "These people. They write too many letters;" and how she made me reply to each of them, to write "sana okay kayo dyan!"—even when the letter ends with: we're all good here, don't worry, because I know how she wishes to say the same thing. "Now,

say it. Say it after me!" I look up at the characters Lao Shi has just written on the board, now being taught to distinguish a string of words, how they all sound the same to me, just differentiated by their accents, making all the difference. May be equivalent to "kaibigan" and "kaibigan," words taught in grade two, words that made my mother laugh when I ran home from school one day to tell her that I learned something new, that I could distinguish between the two. She had just finished work and with a sweaty hand, combed out the tangles in my hair saying, "marami ka pang matututunan"—that it isn't enough to just know—before locking herself in her room to read through her boxed collection of mail and pictures from relatives and friends overseas, emerging only once she heard my father unlock the steel gate held together by old chains. They'd then have this display of kisses and hugs, always in front of me, my father always promising to soon sweep her away to some foreign land whenever she'd showcase her new collection of letters and pictures, favorites that she'd display on the living room wall with masking tape, how he'd always say, always with a sigh, "konti na lang, aangat rin ang buhay natin,"—a weighing of effort—and how she'd always giggle and say, "ano ka ba, biro lang yun 'noh!"—a need to hide behind a joke—"masaya naman ako kahit dito lang tayo buong buhay natin, basta kasama kita"—what people say when young and newlywed. I think: "all rooted in stories." Those stories Lola used to tell during dinner, like the one of a girl she knew back in elementary school who didn't return to class after Holy Week and how the class had spent the next few days constantly praying that the girl was safe and alright and would come back soon, only to get the news that the girl had moved away, with the girl's tita

coming to class one day to say that the family is now in Philadelphia, that they're safe and happy there. Lola had asked her teacher after class where Philadelphia was, only to hear the reply: "it's in America, a very good place;" and somehow, over the years, "a very good place" became that one place to always reach for, turning our family dinners into that time of day for Lola to say "pagbutihin ninyo ang pagdadasal, ah. Malay ninyo, baka makaalis din tayo"—really, a forced correlation of things. So every night, we'd all kneel by the foot of the bed, taking turns with our assigned prayer lines—how I would always fear that I wasn't praying as hard as everyone else, that it is my fault that it took us this long because I kept forgetting my lines. But now we're here: where I learn to re-learn everything I've been taught as a child, that big red mark across a page during my first spelling test because center should have been spelled centre, a minute difference yet big enough to warrant confusion, for me to stare at that piece of paper and not see where I went wrong but keep quiet nonetheless, to do just as I am told because that is how I've been told to manage, to simply absorb, immerse—soak everything in to reach that end goal of fitting in. "Wo shi Mei Ru"—I am Mei Ru. It's the first thing I was taught in school, the day before I ran out of class with my hands bruised red from the metal ruler. Even now, I still forget to turn when someone shouts "Mei Ru" from across the hall; and when I do, replying with "shén me?"—what?—they laugh. Every day I am corrected, classmates saying "cuò le"—wrong, always wrong—because I should be curling my tongue a different way, to add tones to syllables I am not accustomed to, how everything becomes harder when in this state of refusal. "Magugustuhan mo rin doon"—already being

fashioned to like, to be in agreement—my mother sitting me down to tell me about our big move, pulling me into a hug at the bottom of the stairs in that house made of rickety wood panels along Paco Street in Manila, such a small street, how even as a child I thought it apt to be living there, to be a girl in a house of wood in Paco Street brought up by a father struggling to finish his engineering degree, working in a run-down auto repair shop across the city between classes; and a mother who sewed made-to-order dresses in our living room for the little neighbor girls who lived in remarkably bigger houses, those girls who could afford decidedly frilly dresses for the sash and crown nights hosted in the town square. No. Barangay. Yes. That's the word. 'Town Square'—a word I picked up from my television and Clover Chips nights with Lola a few weeks before we moved here, made to watch a marathon of movies Lolo dubbed 'American Assimilation Movies' even when he knew where we were headed. There is none of that here. "Each character is shaped by its meaning," Lao Shi says, writing—drawing—shapes on the board that I copy onto my notepad covered in rows of square blocks. I am to place one character per square block—too many lines across the page that I struggle to explain to my mother who's always looking over my shoulders whenever I'm doing my homework: of filling in square blocks, memorizing strokes. "Ang galing naman ng anak ko!"—this praise of success that glosses over everything else—notice how my parents ignore those sprawled out along Orchard Road on Sundays, always a tsk-tsk-tsk from my mother as she pulls me to walk faster, to not look back. "Hindi tayo ganyan"—already being taught to differentiate—"nakaupo lang sa tabi tabi"—taught

the things that are apparently appropriate—"wag ka maging ganyan"—told what to become. Even here there is this contest for separation. "Ganito kasi dapat,"—a configuring of what to do—my mother swatting my hands away from her sewing machine atop the worktable by the side of the living room, turning the knobs back into their proper settings, back to the sleek, straight lines that seamlessly hold the hem of dresses, "ito yung gusto nila"—defining the root of definitions—"'yan ang tama"—learnt cues. She then turned away from me and walked towards the closet where she stored dresses ready for pick up, running her fingers through the dresses as if they meant something, much like sitting in Jollibee with my parents, the two of them watching me eat a burger with a small order of fries, how they always looked happy, that it was enough for them to be able to say back then that they had brought me to Jollibee for lunch. "yī, èr, sān, sì, wǔ, liù, qī, bā, jiǔ, shí." I watch Lao Shi write numbers on the board—one to ten—asking the class to read them out loud. It gives me time to pick up the proper intonation. "Nǐ!"—you!—"Over there!" Lao Shi is pointing at me, her arm poised to throw a book in my direction, "are you sleeping?" I am not. I just have my head down, my fingers under the desk counting another way. "Haven't I told you never to sleep in my class?" I quickly flip through the notebook in front of me, looking for the scribbles of phrases I learned my first week there. I find it and mutter "duì bu qǐ"—I'm sorry—but I say it much too soft for anyone to hear; and the next thing I know I am standing at the front corner of the classroom, face towards the wall, listening to my classmates giggle as Lao Shi says "or-bi-good! or-bi-good! or-bi-good!" over and over again. From the corner of my eye, I see her fists

tucked in her armpits in a chicken-wing-flapping stance. I make a mental note to not bother finding out what that means. "Chia lat lah you, always kena such things," a classmate tells me as we walk towards the canteen for recess. I ask her what she means and she just says, "Aiyah, never mind lah. Just now you so slow. Look, the line so long already." She is pointing at the stall where a line has already begun to form. I run after her and order fish ball noodle soup, holding up the line as I go through the coins splayed on my palm, counting to $2.50. Small monetary denominations that I am still getting used to, like that time when my mother sent me out for bread on my own, to that small shop a few blocks away from our HDB apartment in Bukit Batok, the one beside the grassy hill that led to a forested area, that place where the neighborhood police passing by in their bicycles once told my family off, telling us to stop climbing the hill because no one does that here. My mother had handed me a ten-dollar note and I returned with change for a one dollar fifty cent loaf of bread, how it had led to a response of: "Ang mura mura naman!"—a learned phrase—because everything sounds affordable when priced in dollars. The bell rings again and we all file into single lines, walking up to the hall on the second floor where afternoon assemblies are held. We sit on the parquet floor, the girls pulling the hem of their skirts over their legs, the boys taking their rat tail combs out of their back pockets before they sit. The announcements begin with the school nurse reminding girls to dispose of their sanitary pads properly and to practice self-breast exams in the shower. No one blushes or giggles; and I think: "strange." The principal comes on next and I hear "new fence in classrooms" and imagine white picket fences right

outside each classroom with space for a little garden complete with flowers and bushes and ants. There's a murmur through the crowd, patters of students clapping, everyone seems excited—happy—and I think: "a white picket fence would be nice." How I used to watch television in the living room with Lola, the whirr of the electric fan plugged in the corner, a glow from the mosquito lights, how she would reach out and periodically pat my right knee, telling me to look at the images on screen, flashes of big houses with their white picket fences and large perfectly mowed lawns and a paved driveway with an SUV, blonde characters always smiling, speaking in an accent I've been taught to emulate as a child but never mastered. "Pakinggan mo, hija"—told to focus—"para mututo ka"—what should be learned—"importante 'to"—this obsession of what is important, of her hand on my knee, guiding me to reach a place, a standard, everyone always seem to reach for. Generic images. Clinically clean. Elsewhere. But that is not what I see here. "Zhàn qǐ lai!" We are asked to stand and we immediately place our right fists atop our left breast as the national anthem plays, marking the end of the afternoon assembly. I mouth the words, never singing out loud, still tripping over syllables, wary of how Lao Shi seems to notice my every move—my every stumble—more than anyone else, like that time when she pushed my head back with her index finger, saying "nǐ hěn bèn lor!"—you're very stupid lor!"—when I forgot how to write "Mei Ru" during a pop-quiz, tracing instead the lines from one of my notebooks. Five canes on my right hand in front of the class, everyone stifling giggles and gasps when I pulled my face into nothing. Everything in lines and strokes and boxes and periods shaped like full circles…a

routine to be learned, my mother saying: "Huwag mo siyang pansinin"—decision of focus—when I told her about what's been happening at school. "'Yung importante ay matuto ka kung paano maging mas mahusay kaysa sa iba"—this definition of others, or rather, this need to surpass others, to be better. It is understood, I was old enough to understand that conversation, of Lola telling my mother: "Sayang naman 'yung pagpapalaki namin sa'yo"—this apparent waste of parental effort—how she shouldn't have married a man who's not even done with college, how she should have aspired for something better, to be somewhere else, to have a life that definitely didn't require having a child who will never find an occasion to wear the dresses much like those ordered by customers planning and throwing those extravagant events that no one in the street ever gets invited to. "Kailangan mo nang umalis dito,"—a need to be anywhere but there—"Parang awa mo naman sa mga magulang mo"—a phrase of pity tuned to tug, almost activate, this obligation to gratitude, creating this cloud of expectation, this routine of waiting as relatives and friends leave one by one, always saying goodbye with: "Maghintay lang kayo. Soon, your time will come." In class I wait for the fences to be built beyond the hallway windows. I think: "there isn't enough space." Also: "won't it clog up the hallway?" And: "I wonder where the grass will grow from." Last: "won't the fertilizers make the classroom smell?" One more: "who's bringing the soil?" No one else in class seems to be too concerned. I can't wait to head home and ask my mother if I can bring a potted plant to school tomorrow to place by the fence, a way to contribute. "Damn excited for tomorrow! So damn sick of this hot as hell classroom," the same classmate whispers

to me, telling me how she'll be asking her mother to bring her to school earlier tomorrow. I write "kiasu" at the bottom corner of my notebook and she giggles, saying "Wah! You know that word, ah!" A pat on the back. I think: "fence equals garden equals plants equals trees equals shade equals cool breeze." If only everything could be this easy: an equation of things, how it adds up to something which leads to another—what I think of when I am alone in my room after dinner, my parents in the kitchen, could be canoodling of some sort as I suspect, or at least hope, from the way they'd tell me to head to bed even if it may only be 7pm, how I would try not to hear doors slamming shut. They seem to want to be happy here. No. Strike that. They need happiness here, like how my father loves that we no longer receive mail from relatives and friends, my mother deciding to leave her collection of letters behind. "Hindi na natin kailangan 'yan"—those unwanted things—"We're moving forward!" suddenly an accented English and my mother pulling a box of things away from me, how I just stood there and let her throw out those little notes and handmade gifts my classmates had made for me after I had stood in front of the class I've known for years and said: "aalis na po kami, pupunta po sa ibang bansa"—what many aspire to hear—how everyone had rushed to my side saying: "buti ka pa!" and "uy, congrats!" as if I won the lotto or something. I didn't—still don't—feel like I won anything, how I sometimes imagine what I would have been doing if we never left, probably sitting in that same classroom surrounded by the faces of those I played agawan base with, shouting, "huli ka!" ever so often, and ending the day with a cup of sago't gulaman from the sari-sari store just around the corner from our house in Paco Street. "Hái zi men,

qǐng zhù yì!"—Class, please get ready!—back in the classroom Lao Shi immediately heads for the blackboard, drawing a line across the center of the board. We all know to clear our desks while we wait for Lao Shi to hand out our spelling notebooks. She calls out words and everyone around me begins to fill the boxes of their notebooks with controlled strokes. I sit there coloring in the blank spaces within the strokes of "Mei Ru" with a blue color pencil. It looks different shaded in. Lao Shi reads another set. This time, I try to picture the strokes in my head, one after the other, trying to place each in its proper place; but somehow they are all a jumble and by the time I finally decide on the placement of strokes, Lao Shi has moved on to the next. "Nǐ men hǎo le ma?"—is everyone done? The class responds by saying "Hǎo le!" in unison. All done. I close my book and pass it forward. "Kamusta naman kayo diyan?"—a routine of greeting of those left behind—Lolo and Lola surprising my mother with a call, sharing the phone between them, all that sudden attention; and my mother spending the next hour detailing how clean everything is over here and a story about the ten-minute train ride we took as a family last weekend to Marina Bay to have dinner at a place that serves sushi on a round-about conveyor belt, sitting on plush chairs, fancy chopsticks, wasabi and soy sauce in seemingly hand painted ceramic containers…she describes all of that, in detail. I think of that time my mother grazed her knees as she hurried to sew a loose hem from the dress of a mayor's daughter, tripping over a step near the driveway of the mayor's house as he had rushed his family into his SUV for an event in Makati, how my mother had talked about sitting there watching the car peel away as she gathered her spool of thread loose on the ground,

how she had enjoyed the remnants of the air-con expelled by the quickly closed doors. Really, just a month ago and she's—we've—already bent to this expectation of stories. I think: "stereotypes." Also: "cliché." And: "acceptable behavior—with question marks," still trying to understand this as perhaps a need to display gratitude, a repayment of something, a yearning for validation, for someone to say "We are proud of you" or "You did good" or "Pwede na tayo mag pa-fiesta." My father keeps the television turned on during dinner, tuned to Channel 8 and I am made to watch Chinese serial dramas with the subtitles turned off. My mother is packing a small plastic pot with soil and the seeds of a soon-to-be flowery shrub. She keeps asking if I'm sure that there'll be a fence outside my classroom tomorrow, "kasi naman anak, nakakahiya naman dalhin 'to bukas tapos baka mali ka naman pala"—how she always worries about being embarrassed, more so over here—probably attributed to that need to seem like she's always been here. Like that one conversation she had with the neighbor across the hall, the Indian family with kids my age, how my mother had knocked on their door one Saturday just to say hello, telling them how we had moved from Tampines—really just the name of the an MRT station she had read off the train and bus guide my father had bought the week we arrived. She had told the woman who answered the door how much she adored the scarves the woman and her girls were wearing that morning. I noted how quickly my mother had turned and ran back into our apartment, closing the door behind her to tell me, "iba pala 'yung tawag nila sa scarves dito"—a conscious reformatting of knowledge—how she had spent the rest of the day asking if she was pronouncing the word 'sari' correctly even though I barely knew

what she was talking about. “Sure ka talaga, ah?”—always this need to reaffirm—and I tell her I am sure, that I clearly heard the principal say “new fence in classrooms tomorrow,” even did that cross-my-heart-hope-to-die shtick seen in one of the movies in Lolo’s collection. I go to sleep thinking if the fence will be painted white or if the class gets to choose the color, so I quickly look up the color ‘pink’ in the dictionary: ‘táo sè,’ and practice the tone for each word. ‘táo:’ third tone, a dip in tone mixed with a sudden rise. ‘sè:’ fourth tone, a sharp fall to a lower register. Just like singing—what I tell myself. I say “táo sè” over and over again, wanting to get it right just in case Lao Shi asks the class to suggest a color to paint the fence because a white picket fence doesn’t seem appropriate here, so maybe a pink instead, or yellow; but my mother has already turned down the lights in my room, the dictionary placed back in the shelves, closing the door behind her. “Anong gagawin mo doon?”—a way to understand a place never been—a conversation on the foot of my bed with a friend after school, both of us thinking of things I could probably do once I’ve left Paco Street, a way to envision a new routine, leading us to eventually create a list that consisted of only two things—#1: take pictures. #2: write letters. We had both looked at the list and laughed, with my friend saying: “Mas marami ka pang pwede gawin dito,”—a rooting back to what is known—“’Ba’t kasi kailanggan niyong umalis?”—a natural questioning of why that led me to stand up and close the door of the bedroom in a bid to keep ours voices in. “Mei Ru!” Lao Shi is by the blackboard now, chalk in hand, “lai zhè lǐ!”—come here!—I think: “táo sè / táo sè / táo sè / táo sè / táo sè / táo sè…” as I walk up to blackboard. Lao Shi hands me a chalk: a surprise spelling quiz in front of

the class. "Kāi xīn," Lao Shi says, "it's easy. If you don't get this word correct, no recess for you." Strokes—I think of strokes, the story behind the strokes gleaned from the word translated to English; but I've forgotten what 'kāi xīn' means, though familiar, learnt just a few days ago. I feel the rest of the class staring at me, at my hand holding a stunted piece of chalk still unmoving on the board. With my back turned, no one sees or hears me talking to myself, muttering, egging myself on to just start with one stroke; but nothing. So moving onto boxes instead—those small, printed blue boxes in my writing notebook where I am made to write newly learnt words over and over again as homework, a routine for memory. The notebook is somewhere in my school bag, placed by the foot of my seat at the back of the class, probably in between textbooks. I turn around and see Lao Shi sifting through my bag for it. My classmates already have their notebooks out on their desks, opened to the latest batch of words. I forget it is Tuesday. We submit that notebook every Tuesday but I was too busy helping my mother fill that plastic pot with soil, listening to her stories about her beloved plants in the garden of our house in Paco Street, embellishing everything with "gorgeous" and "lush" and "magnificent" and "colorful" and "grand" and "rich." I think: "really not much of a garden, just a land of weeds" but don't say anything, trying to ignore my father who's sitting in front of the television saying: "ayan ka na naman"—a note of an end of accommodation—my mother eventually dropping the bag of soil on the floor. I think: "could have gone another way" and quickly finish filling the pot with soil, knowing how I'd soon be told to head to my room to finish cleaning the soil trapped under my nails. I know 'kāi xīn' is nowhere

in that book, that it is pointless to imagine those small blue boxes—that I will be skipping my recess today. "Excuse me," a knock at the door, my mother is peeking her head into the classroom, looking for Lao Shi who is still standing at the back of the room flipping through my writing notebook. She is holding up the pot of soil, a big smile on her face. "I notice the fence isn't here yet. Do I just place this outside by the hallway?" Finally there's talk about the 'fence.' I prepare to say "táo sè," to even write it on the board, as Lao Shi places my notebook down on my desk and walks to the front of the class. I offer that the woman by the door is my mother, here to bring my contribution for the class fence, her head barely peeking past the door frame—how I must have looked that one time when I came home early from school due to a busted water pipe and walked into my father peeling masking tape off the living room wall, my mother's collection of letters and photographs in a box by his feet, some of them torn. He had turned to me and said "Nasa kwarto 'yung mommy mo"—a shifting of relation—"Huwag ka maingay"—told to filter reaction. I found my mother on the bed with her sewing machine, finishing the hem of a pink tulle dress with a peach bow tied in the middle before placing the dress against my body, like a dress of a paper doll cut-out, and said: "Malapit na, anak"—and all I could think of then was: "I don't like pink," even after my father walked into the room and told my mother to put the dress away. "But the fence is already here," I hear Lao Shi say as she ushers my mother out into the hallway. More conversation outside heard clearly from inside the classroom, a wave of chatter, eavesdropping, from those sitting near the windows facing the hallway. Then, giggles. I am called outside and my mother greets me with:

"Ano ba yan, sabi ni Lao Shi fans! Hindi fence yung sinabi ng principal mo!"—administering translation with an increase in volume. I look into the classroom and see the new ceiling fans that have replaced the old rickety ones previously installed there, the ones that used to sway with every turn exposing wires and crumbling cement. "Nakakahiya naman"—right there, the embarrassment—"pumunta pa ako dito parang tanga!"—a placement of blame. I think of fences, of those white picket fences and flowery shrubs and paved driveways, as my mother says sorry to Lao Shi for disrupting her class, even as I mutter "duì bu qǐ, Lao Shi" over and over again, head hung low watching my mother walk away with the pot of soil. I return to the front of the class, place the chalk against the blackboard, and think "kāi xīn" as Lao Shi tries to quiet the laughter.

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"Rén" was first published in *Kweli Journal,* December 2014. Guest Edited by Danielle Evans. http://www.kwelijournal.org/prose/2014/12/22/rn-by-lystra-aranal.