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You Bring Out the Laos in the House

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You Bring Out the Laos in the House

by
Catzie Vilayphonh

You bring out the Laos in the House.

Not the Southeast Asia, not the French Indochina,

Not the La-Os or the LA-oss,

But the Laos in the House.

You bring out my best features, keep my hair dark and my skin tan. You bring out my taste for lemongrass and ginger, my affinity for elephants like the one tattooed on the back of my neck.

You bring out my quest to find vintage stamps and iron-on patches of the flag of Laos so that I could almost literally wear my heart on my sleeve. You bring out a dislike of my long fingers that just turned into a discovery that when I fon, they say it's better than yours, I mean I could teach you but I have to charge.

You bring out the part of me that says I don't like rice – but how can I be Asian and not like rice? It's not so much that I don't like rice, I just don't like *your rice*. Because what we have, kow niew, sticky rice, is the sweet kind that we ball into our hands to eat while sitting on floors enjoying each other's company. Our food meant for sharing, that's why they call it family style.

You bring out the spiciness in me, only for you to find out that my version of heat is quite different from yours, and I love testing limits, especially when you watch me finish what you couldn't. Or like that one time when you let me cook dinner for your family and we were suddenly surprised by your sister's screams of "How come the mashed potatoes are burning my mouth!?!?"

You bring out the interpreter in me. Well, when or if there's someone to interpret for. In finding a reason just to say anything, I sometimes eavesdrop on the next best thing – Thai People – just to claim I understand what they're saying, I just can't talk back. And that in turn brings out

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the bi-linguist in me, the part that asks you to teach me Spanish, not because I prefer it to my own language but because it gives me a sense of belonging, knowing I share something with someone who is around and I know that I am special because I hear your little brother tell your mother: “Catzie’s not China. Stop calling her China, She’s from Laos.”

And I wish I could teach you to speak like me, but it always ends up going something like this:

The difference between salty and Needle is Kim and Khem... Kim and Khem

Ok let’s just do a phrase. This is how you say “Where are you going?” “Bi Si”

That first word, Bi is more a cross between a B and a P. Bi.

No, no, more B... No, more P – Aaaaand that’s why we’re sticking to Spanish.

In feeling bad, you send jpegs and images of Laos and links to YouTube of dudes rapping in my language. You’ve made me laugh, so I guess we’re even.

You bring out the stink test, the one where I make you smell the essence of nam baa and badaak, otherwise known as fish sauce and dirty fish sauce, so dirty dirty that you can only find them in unmarked jars hidden underneath kitchen sinks – yes, that’s how bad it stinks. I haven’t even gotten to the dried shrimp and crab paste yet.

There’s an age-old saying that if it stinks, then it tastes good, but if you can stand salty fermented seafood product, then I’m saying you are a good friend.

You bring out the weird food references but still make me feel comfortable enough to talk about liking ant eggs soup, fried grasshoppers, beef in blood sauce and my favorite, fertilized chicken eggs. In Laos we call it khai luk, in the Philippines they call it balut, but on TV they call it ‘that episode on Fear Factor.’

You bring out the comparisons that bring out the difference because if someone has never heard then there will always be an interest.

You bring out the exclusive factor, the part that makes me ‘limited edition’ or should I say ‘exotic’? Because up until now you’ve never known about Laos, which in turn brings out the ignorance in you, as well as a series of questions that always strangely follows this order:

“Filipino?”

“Hawaii?”

“Thai?”

“Well, what the fuck are you then?”

You bring out the authority in me, asking you why my identity has to be concluded in three guesses, and my answer to you is: “First of all, it’s Hawaiian not Hawaii. And second of all, I am from Laos, Land of a Million Elephants. If you can’t find that on the map, then you probably can’t say my last name nor can you make assumptions if my people and no, I don’t wanna hear a story about some random Asian person, place or thing that might be where I’m from, and by the way, take your shoes off when you step into my house.”

You bring out the impatience in me because I will not take Cathy, Cassie or Cassidy as a substitute. It’s *Catzie*. And so what if it was a mispronounced byproduct of my mother’s native tongue dancing with an American dream?

She gave up half her life, traveled halfway around the world for it so, yeah, I do mind standing here for half a minute just so you get my name right.

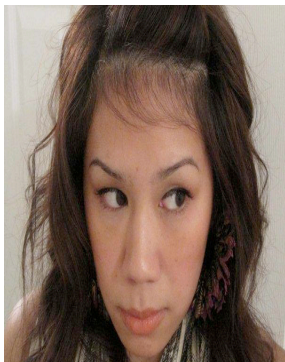
You bring out the Laos in the House, and although it took so long to come out,

You see, by forgetting or just not thinking about me, you force me to remind you.

But by referencing or just questioning me, you force me to remember myself.

This poem is just as much about you as it is about me. Thank you.

About the Author



Catzie Vilayphonh is a Lao American writer and performer. A child of refugees, she was born prematurely on the way to America, and considers herself part of the ".5 Generation". A member of the spoken word duo Yellow Rage, Catzie appeared on Russell Simmons' Def Poetry Jam in 2001 and performs at various venues across the country. She has performed with Ursula Rucker, Sarah Jones, Danny Hoch, Beau Sia and I Was Born with Two Tongues. Vilayphonh was the Fashion Director for two.one.five magazine in Philadelphia, where she also wrote her weekly column *Catz Out The Bag* interviewing everyone from designers to directors and artists to actors. She was also the Transmit Editor for *Theme Magazine*, a contemporary Asian American culture publication based out of New York. In 2010, she was an organizer of the National Lao American Writers Summit in Minnesota. Visit her at www.yellowrage.com



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