Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Aidan Lee: Three Poems

Aidan Lee · Wednesday, April 7th, 2021

Author's note: The two "Assignment" poems are from a series written in the persona of an Asian American woman doing homework assignments in an ESL class.

The third poem is in the persona of an Asian American man explaining why he became a police officer. It was inspired by the persona poems of the poet Ai.

Assignment #5: Describe something that scared you.

Pocketbook Strap and My Children's Hands

That Sunday my daughter didn't want to watch TV.
She was three or four. Even then she didn't like to stay home.
I took my son and daughter shopping at Downtown Crossing,
bought something special: one blueberry muffin, one chocolate eclair
from Jordan Marsh bakery in a wax paper bag.

On the Orange Line, I held their hands while
waiting for the subway, then walking home in the dark and rain.
Plastic shopping bags with toilet paper, toothpaste, detergent,
heavy over my wrists.

Two boys ran past, grabbed my pocketbook strap.
They pulled me so hard I almost fell.
Groceries and pastries scattered on wet sidewalk.
They ran away, feet splashing in the rain.

I grabbed my children's hands. Picked up the groceries.
I pulled my boy and girl, almost running, didn't stop
until the door slammed behind us, all the locks locked,
still holding my daughter's hand –
her eyes wide, lips shaking, no words.
Not yet four years old, but she told me,
she was sorry, sorry
she was the one who wanted to go out.

*

Assignment #9: Describe some cultural differences you have experienced in America.

The Cat

One night a rat jumped on my face as I slept.
I woke up and screamed.
A few days later, on my husband's day off, we went to the Golden Wok.
The owner said he had young cats.
We went to look.
One cat lived in the basement to catch mice down there.
The cat was black and white. A boy.
He blinked when we turned on the light bulb in the basement,
then ran away when he saw the box.
He scratched and fought when we caught him.

My husband and I carried the box to our apartment.
The box shook as the cat threw himself against the cardboard.
When we opened it, he jumped out and looked for a place to hide.
The cat had a pink nose and long whiskers.
My son named him after Wonder Woman's pet.
The Chinatown cat lived an *eat-bitter* life too.
He scratched my daughter when she touched his tail, made her bleed.
She still crawled after him to pet him.
The cat did his job and caught the rats.

When we moved to the New House, there were no rats.
We didn't need the cat anymore.
The restaurant owner said to leave him on the street, throw him away.
But I took him to the New House. See how nice I am!
The cat only ate smelly food from a can.
I told my kids, "In America, even cats are spoiled."
He slept during the day, went out at night.

One morning, he didn't come back.
When I came home from work he still wasn't there.
My children went outside, called the cat's name.
I told them: When the cat wants to eat, he will come home.
Two days passed. No cat. The children did not sleep.
My son drew the cat's picture on paper and wrote: *LOST CAT, REWARD!*
"What reward?" I said. "You don't have money."

Finally, my husband found the cat under the porch.
It's dark there. How did the cat crawl in there?
The cat could hardly move, like he couldn't wake up.
My husband put him in a cardboard box with paper towels.
When my kids came home from school, they were happy at first,
then cried when they saw the cat.

They sat next to him, touched his fur and talked to him like a baby.

They begged me to take him to the animal doctor.
I said, “No. We don’t have money.”
My son and daughter cried.
Later that night, the cat closed his eyes.
He didn’t open them again.
My daughter screamed, said it was my fault.
I scolded her: *It’s just a cat.*

*

Why I Became a Cop

After Ai

You know why I became a cop?
I grew up in Chinatown, on Mott Street.
We lived in a sixth-floor walk-up.
My father got jumped
at Canal Street station.
It was late at night.
and he was coming home
from the restaurant uptown.
It happened more than once.
They beat him up bad.
It was the 70s.
Chinatown wasn’t like it is today.
My father didn’t say much.
My mother cried.
If your mother cried, you’d want to do something too.
It wasn’t like today when you tell someone – cops, councilman –
and something happens.
So every night me and my brothers
walked down to Canal Street station
to wait for my father
and bring him home.
I was only eight or nine. We thought:
‘safety in numbers’.
My mother didn’t want us to go.
But no way
we were gonna just sit
and do nothing.

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