

I am two and one and nothing all at once

I am two and one and nothing all at once. I am a chimera that doesn't fly, who never learned, who hardly walks without a second guess. I reach nothing high and explore nothing deep, walking the lakebed but it never dips, never falters, holds an easy three feet below the surface and grants me breadth. I can see the horizon line, I can see the edges of the sea, except it's just a puddle of experiences and I know nothing, anyway. Dissimilar with the fish, the birds, the Ones Who Walk on Solid Ground, I find no common ground between me, them, just teeth and tongues and miles apart. I walk the lakebed, and the sand is smooth, and it is between my toes and the water might be salty, whether from disposition or tears, I do not care to know. It is almost too much to hope it will give, and the Earth will open, and Mother will swallow me whole and grant a moment of pure clarity in grainy pixels and surround sound. But it is too much to hope that only a fool would. And I am everything.

~

I am three years old. I sit on the carpet of my preschool. My symbol, which I write on every piece of art in lieu of a name, is a butterfly. My favorite color is yellow because it is bright like the sun. There are kids of different sizes and shapes and colors who inhabit my world, but when I think back all I can call to memory are names, experiences, symbols.

Remember when we buried the dump truck in the sandbox and left it until winter?
Remember when the snow froze over it and we came armed with our metal shovels, to try and set it free? I remember the car ride home that day, excitedly recounting our excavation.
Somewhere there exists a page from my journal, detailing the events in simple letters and scrawled pictures.

I don't remember who drove me home that day. It doesn't matter.

I sit on the carpet of my preschool. I say I am going to Home Depot over Christmas Break. (Christmas Break is hardly a concept to me – I can't even conceptualize time. Each day is a massive fraction of my life. I can't read an analog clock. The numbers of a digital clock mean nothing to me.) I say I am going to Home Depot over Christmas Break because it sounds like Puerto Rico and they are both just places. The places exist in my mind, but they are not grounded. They are floating through space. I am floating through space, untethered to time.

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I am half-Chinese and half-Puerto Rican. That's the order I've always said it in, and I don't think I'll ever stop. That's the way it feels right on my tongue, that's the way my brain is programmed.

My brain isn't programmed to speak a language other than English. My brain is programmed to respond to certain words in Cantonese. My brain can recognize scarce words in Spanish. And that breaks into more problems and guilt and things I wish I could correct.

~

My mother emigrated from Hong Kong. She speaks with no trace of an accent. Her first name carries no indication of her ethnicity.

When my mother was in Hong Kong, Hong Kong belonged to Great Britain. Hong Kong, as I learned in first semester college Chinese (Mandarin), is a romanization of Xiāng Gǎng, where the first syllable rises above and the second dips below. Written, it's beautiful: 香港 – fragrant port. I didn't even know that colonization had its claws in the world past 1776. I didn't even know I lived in America the first few years of my life.

My mother grew up in Hawaii, where the racial hierarchy flowed from Chinese to Japanese to Islander (as my mother tells it), and where, when I was one, I was almost swept

away in the waves. My mother didn't let go of my hand as the water came in, and she held on when it went out. I don't recall this event, but sometimes my mind wanders down the path of what-ifs and I feel immensely grateful.

My father grew up in Chicago, South Side, which means something. I don't really understand. Chicago is a place far away with long, flat, straight streets and a lake front where you can wade out for a mile and still keep your head above water.

Sometimes I feel like my entire life has been walking into that lake. I've found breadth of experience but the lakebed never dips more than three feet below the surface. No matter where I go, or what I do, the sand shifts beneath my feet. I'm afraid one day it will give out, but I keep trudging on, and it never does. I almost wish it would.

~

I remember Puerto Rico in vignettes. Room service at the Ritz Carlton. Carrying water from the hot tub in buckets and dumping it into the main pool, in a vain attempt to heat it up. Sitting on the steps of the pool because I couldn't swim. Kayaking with my dad in the ocean when the waves were high, and the taste of saltwater when we flipped over. Lying in bed with my parents at my grandma's and listening to the *coqui*, endlessly asking if the crow of a rooster would awaken us in the morning. Sitting on the steps with my cousin Ismael and petting the kittens, naming them after ourselves and pretending I would be allowed to take one home. Asking to stay just a week longer, because Three Kings Day was after Christmas and my grandma told me I would get more presents if I was good. Three Kings Day sounded an awful lot like Chinese New Year. An extra, special holiday I only had admittance to because my family was different.

Sometimes Grandma slips into Spanish without realizing. She says *mira* yet I cannot see.

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Flushing, New York, or colloquially Popo's House, is clearer. I know every corner of the apartment Popo and Gong-gong shared. I know that is Gong-gong's chair. I know the three DVDs forwards and backwards. I know that when it's time to eat, I must turn off the TV and take my seat to the right of Popo, so she can put char siu and roast pork and fish into my bowl until I giggle "no more!" and she parrots it back "no more-a" and I pick up the yellow spoon to shovel the rice, soaked with leftover grease and full of flavor, into my hungry mouth. I know how to dial my mom's phone number when I am tired of speaking to ears that do not understand. I know how to pass the receiver to Popo when I ask my mom to translate.

I walk, haltingly hand-in-hand, with Gong-gong to Singas Famous Pizza. He can say "pineapple" and I can order "two pizzas, please" and we can both count the dollars and the change while we sit at the booth.

I ask my mother to teach me Cantonese, and she tells me to practice with Popo. But Popo tries just as hard to practice with me, saying "strawberry" instead of *something*, and "bathroom" instead of *something else*, and we never reach a compromise. In my little mind, delirious from hundreds of re-watches of *Dumbo*, I decide that Cantonese is a secret the Grown-Ups know, and when I am Grown Up my ears will settle to the correct frequency and I will finally understand.

When we leave to go home, I hug Popo and Gong-gong tight and say, haltingly, *wo ai ni*, and they laugh and say "okay! bye bye!" and for moment I am satisfied.

~

I leave preschool with nascent ideas of spelling and exactly one nap-time properly utilized, and no appreciation for hot chocolate despite it being a staple of wintertime snack. The

world is blurry and confusing and at my next checkup, my pediatrician who I used to call Santa Claus tells my parents I need to start wearing glasses.

When I get my first pair, I still squint at things that aren't clear. I start crying when I fail to align stickers to manufactured indents on a stupid plastic crown, because I've convinced myself that the lights are too dim, that my eyes must be failing and in two years I'll be blind.

(I spend an extended period of time watching videos of seeing-eye-horses, which are miniature horses that have to wear sneakers over their hooves. Maybe that was in second grade.)

My eyesight has deteriorated significantly since then. I used to be able to leave my glasses in my first-grade desk and navigate to school bus pickup, and find my best friend Javon, like Avon, and read a book after his stop, and all without frames resting on my nose.

I stopped taking the bus when I transferred schools, and I never found Javon again.

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Somewhere, I learn to swim. When Coach has us swim 5000 yards straight one Sunday morning I count the first fifty laps in English, the next hundred in Mandarin, and the final fifty counting backwards in English. I cannot count in Spanish past the *unos dos tres* Dora taught me in the hazy days of my television-watching years.

I learn some Mandarin, with the promise of learning Cantonese after I switch to writing traditional characters. They write in Traditional in Hong Kong, and Dad tells me to switch because all the propaganda is in Simplified. The history is in Traditional.

I learn some Spanish, through tinny speakers and in between silences that stretch into eternity. There are endless verbs of endless conjugations. *That's why it's called a Romance language, because there are so many ways to say I love you*, someone tells me. I just think of

Rome, and how it wasn't built in a day. Yet at the end of the class, at the end of seventeen grueling days, the only thing that sticks in my mind is *te amo*, because it is the same in Latin.

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Gong-gong dies when I am ten years old. My beta fish leaps from his bowl two days later. He lies, twitching, on the bathroom floor for forty minutes until we find him. It's the second time I scoop him up with my bare hands, cradling him with my fingers until I can deposit him into his bowl. He lies there, on his side, gills flapping, until the next morning when he lies perfectly still. I hug my mom's pillow (She is in Flushing. There will be no funeral, just a paper bag of ash that materializes in one of the vases he collected obsessively.) while my dad tells me I can't be more upset over my fish's death than my grandfather's, so I blink back tears and wait until he flushes Zippy down the toilet before I brush my teeth. We keep his bowl there for years following, until someone breaks it.

The next time I visit Popo's apartment, Gong-gong's chair is still there. His corner of the couch is still there. The smell of cigarettes is now only a whisper in the hallway. The vase of ash is the one in the corner of the living room.

I wish I remembered the last words I spoke to him. I wish I could be assured they were of some significance, some meaning mutually understood and not exchanged in broken languages. I wish I could say I knew the mind of my grandfather at all, and hadn't been content to simply observe.

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I keep swimming. Popo watches me swim in Ithaca, and with her aging eyesight can only identify me from the brown of my skin. She asks me – well, she asks my mother – every summer why I am so dark, that I look dirty, that I should scrub harder.

Grandma watches me swim in Puerto Rico. I wear a cap with the one-star flag that people mistake for Texas back home. Coach, who is not truly my coach, paces my laps in Spanish. I learn to celebrate *veintinueve*, to accept *treinta y uno*, to grit my teeth and bare down for anything over *treinta y cinco*. I keep my head down in warm-up like I always do, but it feels a little more like I'm hiding when rolled r's surround me and everything but *take your marks* is spoken in Spanish. Even my name becomes unrecognizable, softer with longer vowels and different accents so that when I swim my first race, I think it's someone else who's won.

Afterwards, Grandma cooks root vegetables and pernil and beans and rice and asks when I will learn Spanish. I promise I will take a class in college, and takes two and a half years for me to stop lying.

~

Sometimes, I find myself sinking, except it's in a pool two feet deep, so it's more of an extended recline until my face and knees form islands in the water. I stare up at the sky and I try to make sense of me, who comes from places nine thousand miles apart but has lived her life decidedly *here* and *nowhere else* and answers "where are you from?" with "New Haven, Connecticut", the pizza capital of the world. It is a polarizing enough statement to draw attention away from the tightrope I am walking, long enough for me to breathe and re-center and prepare for the long, long walk that stretches years and years ahead of me. I am trying to fly, but it is impossible to learn when the clouds are shapes that have only grown blurrier as my eyes worsen. A doctor in Chinatown once told me my optic nerve is oddly shaped, that it seems to be under immense stress and I should have someone monitor it every two years. *Worst case scenario*, she says *it snaps, and you're blind*.

The romantic in me says it's because I am trying to see double. I am trying to plant roots in two worlds at once and it strains my eyes to the verge of breaking. The logic in me says it's because out of all the wonderful things my parents passed onto me wonderful eyesight is not one of them.

As long as I can, I will keep walking. And finally, when the lakebed opens its gaping maw and there is no longer sand between my feet, I will kick up my legs and swim forward.