

Glass Cages

Still waters and an azure sky are captured in Grandpa's iris. Blonde hair framed full cheeks and crystal eyes that granted him survival during the Holocaust. For someone considered a dirty Jew by blood, he looked more like the Hitler Youth, minus the yarmulke of course, than that of his own father with dark, offset pupils atop a wiry beard. That long beard was ripped from the chin of his uncle by Gestapo, the butt of a rifle tipping his chin to the heavens. While both their eyes were blue, the Nazis' eyes were the sapphire of snakes, sneering ice without ever having seen the golden glow of Shabbos candles. Their irises reflected only the viscid warmth of fresh blood on dirt road.

Warm and muddy are the cornea of Ojiichan, who grew up on remote shores and island soil. His eyes mirrored the orange citrus of his family tangerine farm and were rubbed often due to the stinging of salted mist that coexisted amongst people in the coastal village. These were the same eyes that struggled to meet the unwavering glare of the Japanese Imperial Naval authorities during a roll call salute, the same eyes that gaped upon the destruction of Hiroshima just days after the atomic bombing, the same eyes that allowed him to carefully maneuver his leather boots over and around gnarled metal and human limbs.

Blue and brown. Sky and earth. Ocean and mud. Above and under and sometimes, somewhere in-between.

Field trips were supposed to be fun. The oo-aa's accompanying the albino alligator exhibit at the Shedd Aquarium and the excited yelps that echoed across the Adler Planetarium sky theater were a distant memory for us fourth graders as we stared out the bus window

longingly, glazing over seas of Chicago suburbia as we headed to the Holocaust World War II Museum. Before we were ushered off the bus, the boys were sternly reminded to place *kippot* atop their heads — our Jewish elementary school’s cardinal rule for entering sacred spaces. As we tiptoed through dimly lit exhibits, it felt as though we were encroaching on a haunted house. Except decaying wood panels and cursed spiders were replaced by glass cases that enclosed tattered yellow stars and fading life-size prints of gaunt faces in striped uniforms. They stared back at us with hollow eyes.

Wartime postcards meant only for the eyes of a lover and fraying scraps of burnt prayer shawls engulfed the walls. All around me, souls were up for display. Among these people, which was Grandpa’s father who sold the best tailored suits in Nasielsk? Which was his mother who took great pride in the steamy loaf of challah she made each week, his younger brother who was still learning his Hebrew letters at the brink of the war, his older brother known across the *shtetl* for his deft fingers on the violin? I looked down at my feet; my neon velcro sneakers and patterned leggings felt universes away from the people in those black and white stills, people whom I could have shared an embrace with in another reality. Guilt and shame and discomfort tugged my head lower, gravity threatening to pull tears pooling in my eyes down my cheeks to the ground.

Around me, classmates plastered their foreheads onto display cases as they attempted to read small placards that accompanied lost relics, their fingerprints leaving opaque streaks, like invisible souls struggling to escape their glass cage. Two girls sat on a bench reserved for elderly visitors, doodling in a museum brochure with colorful gel pens, softly giggling. Others looked off into the distance and yawned.

I turned away from the portraits trapped in time. Their omnipresent stares pierced my back as I followed my teacher guiding us through the maze of exhibits. The distance between people and portraits, us and them, grew. I knew they were mad at me, for I could so swiftly walk away from their pain. A sticky blood seemed to trail my every footstep, seeping, sinking, settling deep into the carpeted floor concealed from view, but staining nonetheless.

As we rounded a corner, students spilled into an exhibit on the atrocities that Imperial Japan inflicted upon other Asian countries during the war. Penciled sketches of Korean ‘comfort women’ — forced prostitutes to Japanese soldiers — lined the walls, their eyes heavy with the weight of horrors I would never see nor understand. Some of the Korean women in the portraits were the same age as I when they were violated, perhaps by soldiers similar to those whom Ojiichan trained with in the Imperial Navy. The same heaviness drew down the eyelids of the faces in the previous exhibit, muted tones of grey behind glass somehow screaming deafeningly.

“She looks like you,” laughed my teacher, pointing a crooked finger to the portrait of an elderly Korean woman whose face was lined with worry and hurt, eyes framed with the same horn-rimmed glasses Ojiichan wore. The teacher’s icy gaze sliced into my blurred field of vision, ripping me from the surreal world of historical narrative into which I had wandered.

Everything in the room dissolved except me and the teacher and that portrait with its muted scream. A cross necklace sat off-centered next to the teacher’s collarbone, glinting blindingly through locks of her blonde hair. Her extended arm commanded my vision towards that portrait I could no longer bear to see, casting a disturbing familiarity. The Aryan salute stamped onto propaganda posters from the previous exhibit seemed to come to life.

It wasn’t like her ridiculing was anything new. I was often the butt of her jokes, forced to sit on the sidelines at recess when I did the same things as the white boys in my class, yet I was

the only one labeled “too loud.” Why she continued mispronouncing the name of a Japanese character for weeks on end even after I corrected her will remain a mystery. At parent teacher conferences, she confessed to my parents, “I wish I could get Alana to cry,” for I didn’t take her comments “seriously enough” when I instead responded with laughter and a shrug. I felt pride hearing that, because both she and I knew that she hadn’t defeated me, at least not in front of her. What I did behind the closed doors of my bedroom, streaked face deep into my pillow, was beside the point.

But in the midst of this frozen room — my teacher and classmates staring at me expectantly, waiting for some nonchalant comeback as per usual — nothing felt the same. She was smirking, lips curled into the slightest of a snarl. Had she finally won?

“She looks like my grandma,” I stutter.

Throughout elementary school, I wished for blue eyes. I anxiously waited for the day I could have the autonomy to finally get surgery to laser purge my eyes of their dirt. When foreign Israeli students visited our school, they traced my lids with their fingers, uninvited. Novelty and awe were no longer reserved for just museum attractions. Yet with novelty comes oddity comes disgust. Comments bounced across the school halls like the off-beat of the elementary jazz band. “My eyes are so small in this picture that I look Asian.” “How do you people see?” “I need to stop eating this Chinese food or my eyes will shrink!”

I also hated my wide nose with its low bridge, characteristic of my maternal family but unlike anyone at my Jewish school. I made sure to sleep with a hairclip pinching my nostrils once a week in the hopes of shrinking them to something smaller, more invisible. Wishing upon a star didn’t work either.

I knew myself to be ugly.

In the summers growing up, my mother went to Japan to do her professorial work and brought me and my sister along, enrolling us in the same local public school she had attended as a child, as both cultural immersion and free babysitting. Pleated navy-blue skirts and stiff white shirts clung to our sweaty bodies in boiling classrooms. To my fortune, I went unnoticed by many students, but my English-tinged accent made me feel as though I was a mustard stain on a satin napkin. Japanese syllables weighed my tongue down in the midst of *Kansai*-dialect chatter that flowed melodically through the corridors.

The bathroom sinks where I splashed my face were my only solace and escape during those immeasurable summer days, both from the heat and the school upon which I had intruded. I would spend an inordinate amount of time hiding between classes in those bathrooms to the extent that others probably thought I had a bowel disease. Sitting in solitude in a stall, I always felt less alone there than in the stifling classroom stuffed wall to desk to wall with forty students. Exiting the stall necessitated bodily dissolution into shadow. I would wait to depart until only the drip-drop of a broken faucet echoed across linoleum tiles, a self-proclaimed condition necessary to evade public embarrassment.

On one occasion, the chimes for the coming period rang their second bell, and two girls were *still* laughing at the sinks. The shame of being yelled at in front of the classroom surpassed my desire for secrecy as I gingerly attempted to slide past the girls, covering my face. Yet, my brown hair gave me away as the visiting student. One of them tugged at my shirt, forcing me to turn around.

Her eyes slowly traced the crevices of my own. “You’re so lucky to be *hafu*,” she said, as her cocked face neared mine, “you get to have double eyelids.”

Beside her, the other girl’s head tilted at an unnatural angle as she applied glue to her own lids. Confusion washed over me. All along I despised the muddiness of my eyes, how they pinched off prematurely at the corners, parroted by American classmates who stretched their eyes back like fresh mochi in mouth. Did a fold exist above my eyes and not theirs? It was a thought that had never crossed my mind. Flustered, I looked at the floor and shook my head no. I rushed back to class without having muttered a word.

I recently moved into my apartment in Cambridge, and my friend came to pick up some granola I made for her. Having not seen each other for months, we chatted on the steps of my complex, when a man suddenly interrupted us from the sidewalk. He pointed at us with a crooked finger. “Korean? No, Chinese? China? Ni hao!” he chuckled. He waved and departed as if such an interlude in his stroll never occurred. We too laughed and shrugged it off, for it was all too comical, odd, familiar.

Not having been mistaken for being Korean since the fourth grade, that afternoon in the museum resurfaced like discovering a forgotten scar on the back of one’s neck — perhaps hard to see, but always viscerally felt.

That afternoon, I felt a strong urge to email that teacher. *Why were you such a bitch?* I looked through my elementary school’s online directory to find her email. Her profile spread across my laptop screen as I pressed enter on the search bar with her last name sheepishly spelled, for it was all I could remember. Pursed lips and pale skin as empty as her ashen gaze

looked back at me from my screen. Next to her portrait was her name. I had forgotten that she was Karen.

Suddenly, I burst out laughing. All along, she was just one Karen among an army of Karens. Karens who call the police at a moment's notice. Karens who demand to speak with the manager. Karens who exist as living, breathing American caricatures of overreaction and insensitivity. It felt good to laugh at a teacher who had laughed at me. Here and here alone, there was no guilt. Validation gained from an internet meme allowed me to win my last mental battle against her.

But what is a victory when I still wince at my own eyes?

Skin-deep thoughts about my own body constantly slash my consciousness, but so plentiful those cuts are, calluses torn and picked bloody.

We are told that our desire to change how we look is silly, childish, sheepishly superficial, but how can I help it? When the occasional but omnipresent curiosity of a friend, teacher, stranger stares silently asking *what* I am, is it innocent interest that pulls their gaze to my body? Or does that gaze carry calculation, analysis in fractions — too much of one, not enough of the other? *What part of the genetic lottery did she win, what part did she lose?*

Who determines what counts as victory?

On lucky days, I see flitting beauty. It is the comforting stamp of Ojiiichan in the Mount Fuji silhouette of my lip, Mama in the plum-roundness of my cheeks, Papa in the cosy bump on the bridge of my nose, Grandpa in the crinkle of my lids when I smile. Flecks of imaginary blue weave softly with brown. Other times — oftentimes — I must turn away from my tired eyes that groan back at me in the mirror and my face that no wish upon a star could mend.