

“Malinche”

Night seeps in.

The ayate fibers of my father’s cloak
catch on the stray wires
sprouting from the back screen door.

I blink in time to the mewls of a white-winged warbler,
my grandmother’s name buried in the piercing cries
like the jicama I dig from our garden with bare fingers,
loosened earth settling perfectly under nails bitten raw.

Our ghosts survive in the mouths of the living
they find eternity in words
springing from dry tongues to tendrils of bonfire smoke
or in chants pumped through frigid air
the steam rich with restless spirits and a silent history.

White hearts are now bitter like
the milk thistle tea mother brews
when the front door doesn’t open until late and
the floorboards creak from stumbling feet.

Some days I lie in the sparse grass of our backyard
feeling the two-hundred square feet of weary dirt
collapse into the space of my pinky nail as I breathe in
and flood endlessly into the concrete streets on my exhale.

I like to wonder about how it was

before pale fists pummeled our people and our lands.

It burns my throat when the history books say it was an easy conquering. Cortes said it best:

“We Spaniards know a sickness of the heart
that only gold can cure.”

“Tlingit Farewell; *Glacier Bay, 1966*”

Iceberg

floats, bobbing like our own oversized crystalline buoy.
Red-knots pump their wings, searching
for a place to call home

before this wall of white descends upon us once again.

I stand by the waters and shiver in my deerskin coat
under the harsh tongue of the North lands, staring at the
blurred horizon, whispering gunalcheesh to the father for these
sea-glass skies.

I hear nothing

but the pale strokes of the waves along shadow
stained shore. The woods are silent,
an unwelcome epiphany.

Rocks curled under my bare toes feel
soft after treading over dirt brushed ice for

so long. The silt in the water begins to tremble, like wolf pelt rippling under a tired cobalt sky.

Now, behind me, I hear the glacier roar and gnash, this beast
who has wrenched us from our lands

like the caribou leaf we pluck from the fickle earth, never
satisfied.

kill-dee kill-dee kill-dee kill-deeee
 Killdeer screeches his own name as if he does not want to slip away
 into the fabric of the unforgiving mother. Who would want to be
 forgotten in this place of so many lost?
 His plea echoes across the bay, reminding ancient white faces of the life they hold in their hands
 to keep or to swallow.
 Although we have been pushed from our lands
 the feeling of home never melts.
 In my language
 there is no word for goodbye.

Gunalcheesh is the Tlingit word for "thank you"

"The Road"
 During the Cultural Revolution
 a boy saw his mother shot in front of a firing squad.
 My grandmother wept blood and salt and
 hugged her arms around a swollen stomach
 trying to pull it closer
 hoping to drown out the sound of gunfire
 with the rapid beating of a crooked heart.
 In one month's time they took her baby and
 the heart grew cold
 brittle like petrified wood.
 She wished it would shatter
 wished it would catch fire
 wished it would blacken into ashes and soot.
 But gunpowder and smoke seeped into
 the ceiling of her sky
 until she forgot what stars looked like.
 They killed her brother
 but the death certificate read "suicide."
 She laughed at the funeral
 laughed with no mirth
 as the soldiers marched in and declared the ceremony
 a luxury and a sin.
 She wondered as they dragged her through the bloodied dirt of her village
 how many times she had been to hell and back

Redefining -worthy

"And so my sister lost her baby."

These were the words that I heard flowing calmly from my bunkmate's lips, sounding matter-of-fact enough so that I could tell she had told this story many times, but still so rife with emotion that let me know the ache still ate away at her. While she was the picture of poise, rattling off accounts of terror and oppression like a child would say their times tables, I was a wreck. My eyes swollen, my nose clogged, we sat on her bed talking about our lives. She told me of guards spitting on her books, authorities taking her father away for three months without explanation, her sister's child lost due to a closed checkpoint, and so much more. I never knew I could feel so much of another person's pain. It had been so long, too long, since I had connected with another person on this level.

The name of the bunkmate I bonded with that night was Dana. She was one of the eight other girls in my bunk, all hailing from various places in the Middle East, with one fellow American. Dana was a master hairstylist, an amazing dancer, and a refugee who lived in a United Nations camp in Jerusalem. The only reason I know her story is because of Seeds of Peace.

Seeds of Peace is an organization that hosts a camp every summer bringing together teenagers from different sides of conflict regions. Campers, or Seeds as they are affectionately referred to as, partake in exactly what the mind conjures when "summer camp" is mentioned: swimming, basketball, soccer (or football), water skiing, and so much more. However, the backbone of the camp would be the dialogue sessions in which campers discuss the conflicts at home under the supervision of a highly trained facilitator. Dialogue allows teenagers to meet their so-called enemies and hear their points of view.

During my first dialogue session, I said my name, where I was from, and nodded on as kids my age from Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan (I was in a South Asian dialogue group) recounted tidbits of what their daily lives were like and what struggles had impacted them. After the first few days of listening, it was my turn to speak out about experiences that were dear to me, instances that made me who I am. However,

when the “talking ball” was tossed to me, my mind was blank. Interestingly enough, my thoughts immediately went to Instagram and Facebook. What were some statuses I had made? What were some pictures I had posted? If I had wanted to share these moments with my friends and family, if they were “Insta-worthy” or “Facebook-worthy,” they would at least have some significance, some impact on me, right?

That day, I passed on speaking and the wonder of whether my entire life was built on shallow moments and empty conversations stayed with me for a few days. I was silent in dialogue, grasping at straws for instances I could share that truly mattered to me. Leslie, the camp’s director, had warned us that camp would be hard, in that sharing those heart-wrenching, gut-turning accounts would be difficult and uncomfortable. I felt lost when I was indeed finding camp to be hard, but for the lack of meaningful experiences amassed in my sixteen years.

It was in a dialogue during which the group discussed social media that I finally understood what I had been missing. In that session, we spoke not as kids from enemy nations but as regular teenagers. An agreement was made (a rare occurrence) that social media was relentlessly consuming and subtly warping the ways we led our lives. I spoke up on the topic, recalling those countless times I had spent with friends, taking pictures of us having the times of our lives when in reality, we were simply striving towards an image to prove to others we were having the times of our lives. Hanging out with friends no longer is to meet the goal of enjoying each others’ company. In the world of filters, hashtags, up-votes, and favorites, the intention of being with friends is to snap that one picture to post, garnering enough likes to make ourselves feel like we matter, like we are heard.

Superficial is in. Real conversations about events that change us, affect us, are out. And teenagers are always looking to fit in. Part of why I found it so difficult to relay times in my life that blossomed into

parts of my being was because I just wasn't used to it. Ever since eighth grade, the year I made my first social media account, I'd been striving to present a polished, one-dimensional version of myself.

Teenagers utilize social media platforms to emphasize the way they think they should be, not the way they actually are.

At camp, our phones were taken away on the first day. We did not have access to any electronics. When my delegation leader pried my iPhone away from cramped fingers, I thought I would never make it. I planned to beg my counselor for use of their phone. I was already devising a plan to sneak in to the camp safe box at night and pick the lock. I would find a way to see what my friends were up to. The longing in my fingers stayed with me for the first few days, but then vanished. Perhaps it was the Maine air, or maybe it was my realization that without the constant presence of my phone and all of the expectations of pictures posted and statuses updated that came with it, I was free. Talking with newfound friends came easily with no pressures of posting that perfect photo as evidence of enjoyment, no nagging feeling of pretending to have more fun than I was.

An epiphany struck and I discovered sometime during those three social-media free weeks: the best moments and the most painful, impactful moments of my life were those not available for everyone to see. Only through deep conversation and unending empathy can one learn about those moments in somebody else. After I began to understand this deceptively simple concept, I opened up in dialogue. I shared my little sister's seizure, my mother's battle with cancer, the looming shadow of my older brother, and all the other little things that one would never know about me by clicking the "About" button on my profile page.

During my first day of camp, I thought that the upcoming three weeks would be a fun experience that would soon fade just like every other summer program I had been to. I was dead wrong. I heard stories

that made me cry, laugh, scream. And every moment felt so real. There was no putting on a show for people I didn't even care about. Every action I carried out was one that I truly wanted to, not a strategic move that would lead to the best picture, the most online recognition. Dana and I connected so well because I truly listened to her, truly felt what she felt. I looked past any one-dimensional preconceptions I might have had of her, the ones that I probably would have gleaned had I only glanced at her internet profile, and let myself go. After living with everything recorded over the internet, every picture able to be scrutinized, it took me long enough to realize that we are not the sum of our likes on Facebook.

As the sun set and Dana and I began wrapping up our conversation, I looked at her and thought of what a strong person she was. The cabin's light at that moment was hitting her eyes perfectly, the red of her hijab matching the little roses that dotted her nightgown. I archived that image in my mind, catching myself thinking that if taken, a picture of her would be "Insta-worthy." However, I knew then that didn't need one-hundred favorites to tell me that second's worth, I already knew the moment was priceless.

It was cold in the silence of the alley. One might have thought that June, with its rosy promises of sunshine and flower buds, would bring flooding warmth. Alas it was not so in the recesses of Highland Park, Michigan. The year was 1982. Gordon Johncock had just won the Indianapolis 500 by 0.16 seconds. The World's Fair in Tennessee had already drawn 2 million people to its extravagance. And Vincent Chin, the only child of Chinese immigrants, was in an alleyway, lying in a pool of crimson. Splinters of a wooden bat scattered around his head, his mouth formed three last words: It's not fair.



I never felt an obligation to be Chinese, to defend my background. That pulling feeling at the pit of my stomach urging me to defend my ethnicity was, for me, nonexistent. I knew my parents were Chinese. It was apparent in the way they held themselves, woven into the occasional mispronounced word. But I was different. I was American. I listened to Miley Cyrus and country music; I went to barbecues with my white friends; I cheered and whooped like the rest of my classmates at local football games. My friends consistently referred to me as “basically white.” And I wore that label with pride, wishing it would someday seep into my genes, tell my skin that it was mistaken. I didn’t so much reject my heritage as I ignored it. Why would I carry the weight of a thousand years of history on already heaving shoulders, especially if it was not mine?



When he was five years old, Vincent Chin dreamed of a box. It filled his empty afternoons in the Guangdong orphanage, becoming lost in thought of a magical box that would answer all his questions. Like who his parents were. Why they left him. Who would take him in now. A year later, at six years old in 1961, one of his questions was answered. Bing-Hing and Lily Chin adopted Vincent after two miscarriages and countless years of trying for a baby. Vincent and his new family moved to Highland Park, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit. As Vincent grew older, he learned that his fantasy of a magic box was a reality. Captivated by computers, magical cubes of untold secrets, Vincent found his passion. Pursuing it, Vincent went on from high school graduation to study at the Control Data Institute. Employed by Efficient Engineering as an industrial draftsman, in 1982, Vincent was living the American dream.



Perhaps my indifference stemmed from the lack of a pride of my roots. On St. Patrick’s Day, all my Irish friends would wear bold shirts, brazenly stating, “Kiss me, I’m Irish.” During Oktoberfest, my peers of German descent wolfed down sausages and wore black, red, and gold flags in boisterous parades. There is no

Chinese day. There is no day where all those with yellow skin come together and say, “We are here, and we are proud.” Maybe that’s why I grew up with shame sprinkled in my ties to China. Without pride’s rosy petals, bitter fruits grow. It wasn’t until some Saturday in mid-November I came to open my eyes to the tapestry of China that was woven into my veins. It was the day my father took me to the Museum Of Chinese in America: MOCA. When I first opened the doors to the nondescript building nestled in the heart of New York’s Chinatown, I was indifferent. This museum was telling the story of a people I had no connection to. However, as I walked through the exhibits, my mind lapped at the pool of history presented to me. I devoured words on walls detailing the Chinese Exclusion Act, the undocumented hate crimes, the anti-Asian propaganda, the horrors of Angel Island, the stereotypes, the everything. And then I realized. This was not just any story splashed across these walls, this was my story. This was second grade, when my lunch table swore my food reeked. This was the time I had friends over and said my grandmother was just a housekeeper. This was the “yellow fever” all the white boys who liked me must have had, any admiration I received brushed aside as a product of passing fascination. This was the cold sneer on the subway, the glaring eyes in the street. This was me, all of me, unapologetically.



Lily Chin always thought Woodward Avenue was fine. Not perfect, not horrifying, Woodward Avenue was just fine for her one story house with a pocket square lawn. Until her husband, Bing-Hing, was mugged while traveling to work. It was a Tuesday morning and it had happened in a swift kick to the side and muttered racial slurs. When Bing-Hing returned, clutching his ribs and wheezing Chinese profanity, Lily declared that they were moving to a different neighborhood. Bing-Hing was a thoughtful man, the type to take long pauses in between words when speaking. The moment he took before answering her was long and exaggerated, a cat’s yawn. Still silent, he finally nodded, moving his head slowly and intentionally. The decision was made; the next question was what to tell Vincent. Vincent loved Woodward Avenue. He made friends with the only other Chinese boy in the neighborhood, Eugene, and discovered a burning passion for computer science. His parents were far from surprised when he objected the move. When first presented with the possibility, Vincent immediately shot back, “Why?” His mother explained to him that as people of color in a vastly white street, they were vulnerable to attacks. Vincent didn’t respond for a few beats, his breathing growing deeper, filling up the dimly lit room. Slowly, he said in an even tone: I think we need to stop surrendering. Whatever you call it, I say we stop. I am a Chinese-American. I will not apologize for my

heritage. If we keep running, that only gives permission to these people to chase us out. Let's stay. It is a duty we must fill, an obligation that we hold.

As I left the MOCA that day, something struck me. Within this museum was my heritage, the sweat of my people, the blood of my family. Why was it hidden in a shadowy corner of Chinatown, far from the flash of the camera or the ink of the newspaper? Why was the narrative of Chinese in America being swept under a rug of supposed equality? From these questions blossomed a call to action, a feeling of inevitability concerning what I must do. I had an obligation to spread the word. To defend my heritage, to speak up for my people. To share this twisted yet triumphant story. My duty as a Chinese-American girl was to right the wrongs of yesterday with the promises of a better tomorrow. And I knew exactly how.



My mother always said I was born with a tongue of gold. I was able to talk my way into and out of anything. Most of all, I loved talking to a crowd. Feeling my voice reverberate in a room, bouncing off walls and eager ears, that was my passion. Public speaking developed into my favorite activity. While the announcement of oral presentations usually elicited groans, for me, the chance to have ten minutes of class attention was like stumbling upon a treasure trove. Yet, despite my love of spoken word, sometimes, I felt my words hollow. Public speaking may have been my passion, but there seemed to be no passion behind the words I said. Going to MOCA and realizing who I was, who my ancestors were, breathed new life into my words. Now, when I spoke, I could feel confident in the words tumbling from my mouth, I could feel sure of myself and my purpose. Before, my spoken word had been beautiful, yet flimsy. Now, it was sturdy, strong like the will of my people.



It is a little known fact that Charles Kaufman, the man who presided over Ebens and Nitz's first trial, was a prisoner of war of Japan in World War II. Some say that the conditions in Japanese POW camps were, in short, hell. POWs have been described as little more than skeletons, skin stretched taught over protruding bones. Judge Kaufman had been through these camps and survived, emerging from a war torn Japan a different man. A man who proclaimed Ebens and Nitz as guilty of manslaughter, down from second degree murder. A man who fined the two \$3,000, gave them three years of probation, and sentenced no prison time. Evidence was not lacking. There were eyewitnesses, silent ones at that. Two off-duty police officers saw

the beating, yet provided no support to Vincent. Although Vincent's death predated policies of hate crimes, it was not before the human race could distinguish right from wrong. Vincent's mother, Lily, eventually returned to China, heartbroken and forever mourning for her son. So now, the blaring question is, what can we learn from this? What light can we extract from this seeming black hole? The answer is simple. Speak out. Stand up for your brothers and sisters. Let the world know we are strong and we refuse to accept being fed scraps off of the dinner table of justice anymore. Asian-Americans have worked hard to ascend to the position we hold today and we will not be kicked down any further. Vincent Chin's last words were, "It's not fair." We will not stop until we make it fair.



And with that, I concluded my speech to the half-full community center room, the residue of my voice clinging to the walls. A few claps popped here and there. Despite whatever response I did or did not elicit, I was exuberant. Vincent's story, my story, was released into the world again from my own lips. I utilized my passion of public speaking to fulfill my obligation to accept and project my Chinese roots. Gathering my things, I got ready to leave, a smile brightening my features. However, just before I walked out, a boy stopped me. A stranger. But there was something familiar on his face that I couldn't quite name. The only words he said to me before shuffling away were, "Thank you." Resuming my exit, I walked to my car. Before opening the door I caught my reflection on the window. And there it was. This familiar expression I had just seen on that boy's face was now splashed across my own countenance. Suddenly I knew what it was: passion. Passion for a cause that began as an obligation, a duty streaming through my blood. Passion that ended as a spark, igniting flames in others.