

Name Your World

In San Francisco, you learn a new expression: “You’re special” and it sounds like a good thing, until every teacher in each class stops in the middle of a roll call, squints their eyes, re-adjusts their eyeglasses, and stumbles on the sounds of your name, when you hear it creeping up in alphabetical order, your insides curl, you peek up expectantly, your throat dries, and finally, your teacher’s lips burble something that could be your name, you quickly raise your hand, then fold yourself real small while half of the class’s curious eyes search around for who you might be; when you’re sick of hearing your name chewed up into spittle sounds that don’t exist in your mother tongue, when you dream that one day you’ll choose your own name, abandon the one your parents gave you at birth, ignore your father’s disappointed frown because you rejected the unique name he gave you at birth, discard your mother’s explanation of your name that translate to “Color of Sunrise” because it sounds so tacky in English yet rolls out like rhymes in a poem from your mother’s lips, and still one day, you’ll pick a not-so-special name, and you’ll proudly tell the Immigration officer, Mr. Gomez, that now your name is Melanie with an “M” and ends with “e”, and you might feel a sense of relief because then, none of the teachers would hesitate when calling your name, none of your classmates would even care who you are, busy chit-chatting with their friends even when you have none because you’re too ashamed of having to repeat your name to them when they ask “What? How you say that again?” you don’t understand their jokes, or what a “date” is, you’ve never been to a prom, and then worse, when they stare at you with curiosity and ask, “Where are you from?” and now you’re the one who stumbles because you don’t even know where to begin, and how to end, because everyone else is from some place, Cleveland in Ohio, Eureka in California, but you really have no country, no city you could hail home, born in Hong Kong, transplanted across the continent to Africa where you wouldn’t even know how to say Antananarivo in English because which syllable would you put the accent on, and then people have more questions, like “Is that in Indonesia?” and then you’ll have to disappoint them, but they’re confused because your face features your mother’s eyes, your father’s nose, but your skin tanned coffee brown under the African sun disavows you as Chinese even to your own Mandarin-speaking colleagues who shun you from eating at their table because you don’t even speak Mandarin, only broken Cantonese with your mother, you’ve never

lived in China—and Hong Kong is not China—never learned how to pen characters, but you’re not African or Malagasy to be precise even though you grew up on the Red Island, learned the language of their colonizer, played with a ring-tailed lemur, once saw *Famadihana*, image of bones in your head made you throw up the chow fun your mother made for supper, and now that you live in New England, you think back of the years spent in that island, you lust after fresh mango juice and *masatika*, *achard* sandwich, and *mofo gasy*, once craving for McDonald’s fish burger and warm apple tart wrapped smartly in a tiny cardboard box because you thought it so exotic, now years later, you still don’t understand how to be “American” even if you want to, you’ve spent most of your life trying to mimic their accent, feel their essence in your flesh, in your head, in your heart, yet you still don’t get why Americans like so much ice in their coffee at 8 am in the morning, no ice tea for you, you’re always so cold because the AC in the office is blasting air from Antarctica while the summer sun is scorching roofs and streets outside, why American football is not football as you knew it and how crazed they are about their Super Bowl even though the rest of the world isn’t aware of it, and what all this means is that you’re indeed “special,” you are the specimen, encased in a glass cube for all to stare but none to hear you, or you to hear them in their sonic waves, yours clashing theirs into infinite amplitude, you standing on shifting tectonic plates about to break apart, volcanoes erupting, tsunami engulfing cities, and no place to call home.

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Mother, Daughter

There was a time your eyes glowed red with anger, your mouth spitting spiteful shouts at me, your body burning with rancor, your arms unloving, pushing me away.

You were a bulldog that wouldn't let go of its bite, you pulled and pulled until cloth tore, flesh mangled, teeth scarlet.

You shoved and jabbed and hurt.

You were a hawk, your eyes sharp and cold, your beak strong and unforgiving. You dove from above, never missed your prey. Me.

There was a time I wondered, why me, why you.

My skin scarred, my soul bruised. And yet, we're tied by blood.

Only later and too late did I understand you cared but only learned the art of caring by attacking and burning.

I didn't know what tormented you, until you grew old and weak, your fire dimmed. The doctor shook his head, threw his hands in the air.

I had to know. You can't die on me like this, I said to you, me hating you, you hating me. The fire in your belly continued to smolder, your eyes turned cloudy.

I took a kitchen knife, plunged into your entrails, and found all the pain in the world leaking into your organs, your nodes, running in your veins, seeping into your bones. The tumor you carried hidden in the cave of your soul, the metastasis of old wounds, sacrifice and grief encrypted into generational genes, inherited mutations hidden from you and me. You let your past hurt and fester into the demon you couldn't expunge from the hollow of your throat even when you screamed incendiary insults. You couldn't excise that beast in you, or you'd have lost all the story of your life and all of you and me with you.

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We Were Once Combustible

You roamed in like a chuckling bear into my house of beakers, graduated cylinders, round bottom flasks, you asked to borrow an Erlenmeyer, here you go, I said, thought you were just a clumsy animal, afraid you'd break something of mine, pushed you out of the lab and you came back bearing M&M's in a petri dish, half of them a mess of Blue No. 2, I shook my head but had to smile, thought you had a big heart, we shared laughter and confidence over seafood pasta and glasses of Chenin Blanc after work, you clasped my hand so I didn't trip on the sidewalk when I bumped into you in Central Square, told me how your wife would rather sleep in your children's bed rather than in your arms, made me a pretend friend with empathic ears, our lunch breaks our secret solace, how I stood on your side, how I raged against your wife, said she was a permafrost of dry ice, made her into a witch casting slow doses of cyanide, we flashed like activated carbon with air, we dissolved in blurs of endorphins, our bodies, molecules of shivery bonds transcended into vapors of bliss until we condensed into cold reality, your wife like me like you the same composition of heart, flesh, carbon, oxygen, nitrogen, collarbone, calcium, phosphorus, femur, sulfur, humerus and scapula, mind and soul, electrons circling nuclei, laws of gravitational physics neither you nor I could break, like water like oil must separate.

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https://www.hobartpulp.com/web_features/we-were-once-combustible

Questions I Collected from My Father.

What color is the sky today? What time is it? Did you boil water for the milk? Did you measure three tablespoons of Nestlé concentrated milk? I can't hear the water boil; did you turn on the stove? What's this noise? Are you sure you filled the kettle with the right amount of water? Is there any baguette left? Do you have money to buy bread at the boulangerie? Are you done eating already? Is this a cough or are you choking? You were eating and talking at the same time, didn't you? Did you cover your mouth with a napkin? What are you doing now? Are you reading, what are you reading? If you're not reading, what are you doing? Are you writing, what are you writing? Is it sunny today? Is there enough light for you? Sit upright, don't hunch, don't let your head droop over your books! Make sure you don't strain your eyes, take breaks, and look from time to time to the horizon, look at something green, listen to what I'm telling you, listen to your mother. Don't become like me, you don't want to know what it's like.

To live in a colorless world. To move between shadows of grays.

To hear the first drops of rain, a sudden downpour in the hot rainy season, drops splattering against the windowpane. Cannot imagine how the tiled roofs across our street are distorted in waves like trees undulating under wind. To smell the fragrance of Madagascar jasmine, feel the glossy oval leaves. Cannot fathom how the delicate clusters of white petals had burst open overnight.

To hear the first cry of your baby daughter. To hold her in your arms. To feel the softness of the hair, the contour of the nose, the warmth of the breath. To not know what she looks like. To not see how her face transforms from baby to little girl who answers her father's questions, who tells him the sky is blue, the sun is out, it is time to dry the laundry, who holds the basket of clothespins by his side, hands each pin to him while he laid kitchen towels, shirts, and pillow cases on the clothesline, a little girl who didn't want to play with other children because she wanted to stay by his side, be his eyes, be his extra hands, watch his steps before he trips on the steps between the veranda and the living room. To feel the passage of time in his bones. To not

see how the little girl evolves into a rebellious teenager who replies halfheartedly to his questioning, who's too busy chatting with boys, who doesn't help him find his lost radio, who turns into a young adult who shouts back at him, who leaves home, who moves to America, who never returned home, who missed the call, who wasn't at her father's side when he suffered the second and last stroke, who didn't know what heartbreak is until it is too late.

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<http://www.gordonsquarereview.org/chen.html>