

—: The first few years of my life exist only in Chinese. There is no English version, no badly dubbed over VCR tape or fan-made subtitles. These are the years that do not care whether or not you understand them.

But I don't think "English" and "Chinese" are the right labels to use. I spoke the language of my mother's warm chest, of the technicolor display on the TV in my grandma's room. I didn't need words back then: all I had to do was soak in the world and spit it back out.

TWO: The first day of preschool, I don't know a lick of English. But I learn. At four years old, I am hungry and not much more. I swallow dreams, words, spoonfuls of saturated fruit-mush. One year later, I already know enough to fight with my classmates over pencils and name the capital of California. I learn that I exist inside an idea known sometimes as "America" and other times only as "USA."

So when I am assigned to make my flag for my elementary school's multicultural parade, I color in the stars and stripes I see every morning during the pledge of allegiance, when I stumble through a paragraph of words, half of which I'd never even learned before.

"Hang on, you're supposed to be coloring *this* flag," my teacher says. She hands me a piece of paper with the outline of five stars in the corner. "This is the Chinese flag," she explains.

China existed in my mind as the place where my parents were born, and the place I visited when I was three, although I remembered nothing of the trip. In my five-year-old hierarchy of places, it was second only to America, the place where I was born, so I didn't mind being made to switch to a different flag.

I color in the Chinese flag and wave it proudly during the multicultural parade.

三: “Your accent is so cute,” my relatives coo when I try to speak to them. At that time, I was in sixth grade. I had been in the American schooling system long enough for my first language to peel away in thin layers, leaving me with only a pockmarked mess to carve my sentences from, my family members’ faces crinkling in amusement as I struggled. One of my uncles uses a proverb he knows I wouldn’t understand just so he can see my reaction.

One night, my family and I are invited to eat dinner with my relatives at an upscale restaurant. When the meal is close to finished, my relatives ask me to pour beer for the entire table, calling me a “guest of honor.” The moment I tilt the glass toward my mom’s cup, they erupt into laughter.

Apparently, I was supposed to serve every other guest before my own family. For the rest of the night, my hands tremble with anger. Of course I didn’t know this custom. Why were these adults, who had lived in China for all of their lives, making fun of me? I never chose my parents’ immigration to America, and instead of practicing Chinese, I spoke the language I needed to get by.

A few months later, I am back in America and it is the Lunar New Year. My mom takes me to our city’s community center, which is hosting a festival for the occasion.

When I open the door, a whirlwind of color and sound explodes in my face. Festive music blares from the speakers. On one side, there is a dumpling folding stand. On the other, there is a calligraphy booth. There is so much red and gold that everything starts blurring together as I wander around, too nervous to interact with any of the booths.

I look at the dumpling folding booth and realize that I can’t understand any of the characters written on its banner. My heartbeat starts to quicken, and I feel like that frame of the movie I

watched with my friends last weekend, where the main character enters a restricted area and turns around to find himself staring into the pupil of a flashlight.

I wonder if somebody would find out that I was trespassing. I imagine a stranger coming up and asking me, “What are you doing here, if you can’t even understand what the signs are trying to say?”

FOUR: “Look, we outsmarted the Asian!” a boy jeers, holding up his completed worksheet while mine remains half-finished. He wears a stained football jersey and ripped jeans. It was only the second day of high school, but I would grow to hate his curly perm, his perpetual smirk which makes me feel ridiculed with just a glance in my direction.

The other students at his table laugh too loudly, hiding their discomfort. I curl into myself like a startled fern, feeling a burning in my cheeks, the tips of my ears, the back of my neck. All I did was give his group a wrong answer at the beginning of biology class. I didn’t deserve this.

I try to say something back, to try and articulate my turmoil in a few, snappy words, but nothing comes out. I am too scared to rock the boat on the second day of school and unable to turn the tangled angst and memories inside me into something smooth enough to speak.

Without my noticing, one of these memories rises to the surface.

“You know what a native language is, right?” I remembered my dad asking at one point. “For example, Chinese is my native language. English is your native language.”

“But wasn’t Chinese the language I learned first?” I respond. “Like, even if I’m not that good at it, I only knew Chinese when I was a toddler.”

But really, what did it matter? I was told that I had a Chinese accent while speaking English and an American accent while speaking Chinese. I would not belong in whatever world I tried to occupy. In China, I was turned into a joke for being inept in a language I was never trained to use. In America, I was stereotyped for my monolids and off-white skin.

If I were to answer this question now, I would describe myself as having no native language. A perpetual outsider, a thief of words.

五: I beg my mom to send me back to Chinese school. I figure that if I can't change an appearance that others see as foreign, I might as well try my best to learn Chinese so I could someday assimilate in the other direction, slipping under the skin of a different country.

Every Saturday, I would sit in front of a Zoom screen and wade through long texts I could barely comprehend. On the weekdays, I would review vocab cards and work through online learning sequences. I studied the final level of my local Chinese school's curriculum, which was called "AP Chinese Prep." It struck me as odd, how the end goal was never connecting with Chinese culture, but rather getting a high score on an AP exam.

Eventually, I quit. I hated the way I had to reckon with my lack of skill, constantly being reminded of the way I felt at that Lunar New Year festival in middle school.

I thought about what would happen next.

If I were to forget this language, if I were to open my mouth and watch every character scatter across the floor, would this culture still belong to me? Would I still belong to this culture?

If not for language, what would tether me to Chinese culture? My parents, which is to say, my ancestry alone? My celebrations of holidays I know nothing about? Eating Chinese dishes I

never learned to cook? Or would it be the color of my skin and the shape of my eyes alone, something I never decided on and can't control?

SIX: In freshman year of high school, I discover poetry. There's something addicting about it, the way you can cleave meaning with commas, turn sentences into apertures of wind and light.

There's nothing better than the feeling of sound leaping off my tongue, or when words domino into each other until a tapestry of meaning hangs in their place.

I become obsessed with words. I scour the internet for publications and workshops and carry a notebook around with me to catch any pretty word that flies by. As I sharpen my English like a knife, I feel my grip on Chinese loosen, even as I exert more and more force. I know that all the characters and phrases I used to know were slipping away without my knowledge. This is the thing about forgetting: how the things most precious to you leave without a farewell, an embrace, a thank you note at the door.

I would always think that there was something I could do to recover what I was losing. Maybe I could self-study from videos online. Or I could painstakingly translate Chinese novels, word by word.

Or perhaps this—this cruel tradeoff—was inevitable. Perhaps there is only so much language that can fit inside my small body.

七: I am sobbing and sobbing in the courtyard of a college residence hall with a Solo cup of Pepsi in my hand. I try to bend over in a way so that none of the passersby walking through the courtyard can see me cry.

It takes everything in me not to stand up and sprint toward the end of the sidewalk, where I watched my mother's back recede into the distance.

As I start college, unmoored from my family and my childhood home, I am afraid of forgetting Chinese forever. I know that I will spend the next four years studying and making friends and chasing internships and working odd jobs and staying up far past midnight. But I don't know where I will be at the end of it all, if I will be without a language to take shelter in.

There is nothing I miss more than the small days of my infancy, when Chinese words escaped my lips without a second thought.

Okay. I admit that I was lying in the beginning. I *did* need words back then. There was 对不起 when I knocked over a glass of water, 谢谢 when a family friend gifted us a box of mooncakes, 你好 when my dad came back from work. But they never felt like words, not like they did now. They weren't elements of poetry to be kneaded or a test of how Chinese I truly was. I babbled without fear of failure, speaking only to communicate.

My earliest memory was of my mom teaching me how to curl a ribbon with a pair of scissors. Scared for my safety, she wrapped her hands around mine and pulled my fingers through the motion. It was more of her doing the work for me than teaching me. I fill in the gaps in my memory however I want. In the kitchen, my grandma is cooking tofu and there is a rocking chair in the corner next to the couches. In some versions of the memory, I am speaking a mixture of Chinese and gibberish, and in others, I am completely silent, awed at how my mom makes magic with her hands. I do not think of what language I am speaking or what culture I belong in. All I know is that I am home.

Translations:

一 (yī): one

三 (sān): three

五 (wǔ): five

七 (qī): seven

对不起 (duì bù qǐ): sorry

谢谢 (xiè xiè): thank you

你好 (nǐ hǎo): hello