

Onomastics

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Ma, it's been a while since we've talked, really talked.

I'm not sure of the last time we had a conversation that we both wanted to be in, of the last time that I heard your voice and didn't feel my guts shield themselves, ready for an onslaught. There must have been those times, before you trained me otherwise.

There was a conversation we had when I was very young. Do you remember? You crouched beside me in front of a school not yet mine; the sun was hot on our matching hair, matching hands, matching faces. I told you that I wanted to be called my White Name. It would be easier for the other kids, I reasoned. You tucked my hair behind my ear and said, okay. I didn't know then that I made a choice that you gave me on purpose, because you had been forced to make it for yourself.

We used to read together. You were the one who introduced me to that particular love which comes with savoring words that you know not to take for granted. I'm grateful to you for that, for the hours you spent with me on the floor with stacks of library books, and the ones spent pinning up new words on the peeling bathroom wallpaper. I remember fondly the pride in your eyes when I used a new word, like "palindrome" when talking about my White Name, or "carcinogen," though you were less pleased about how I told off Patou. (I suppose you thought it bode poorly for filial piety that I would disrespect your father, but he quit smoking either way.) We read everything—picture books, encyclopedia entries, whodunits, fairy tales—until the we became I, and I left you behind.

Once during recess when I was in first grade, your students made a circle around me. It was on the same stretch of concrete where I had first drawn that line between myself and the world for the sake of others' comfort. The sun was just as hot, and our hair, our hands, our faces still matched. I was

almost as tall as some of those fourth-graders by then, but it felt like they towered over me. They asked me your name. I didn't hesitate, but taught them to say it, syllable by syllable. Those girls must have marched back in after recess crowing the song they had made up about it—a song I still remember—bastardizing the secret you had kept to protect yourself. After school that day, your back asked me why I would share such a thing. I didn't understand your quiet then.

When you named me, did you know you were lying?

Vieng: capital, central hub; a gift parceled out and passed down from your mother.

I saw your face when I first came home without eighteen inches of the hair I had left with. If I hadn't known how strongly you pride yourself on not swearing, I would have read that expression as "Oh fuck, I guess my daughter's serious about this dyke shit." But you would never do me the honor of recognizing me that way. You still don't look my partner in the eyes. My friend, you call her, hoping your family won't ever find out the truth. You say they won't understand, but they always compliment me on my short hair, my men's pants, my strong hands—while you tell me to lose weight for when I date boys again.

I don't know if you realize that the distance came long before the queerness; my sister's white roommate can speak more of your language than I ever could.

Samay: culture, tradition; the way I was named but not the way I was raised.

The day in fourth grade when I came to you and told you I wanted to be Jewish, you said, *Okay, as long as you research all the available options and decide what's best for you.* (I wish you had responded that way about my gender.) I expected a pushback from my Mennonite mother that never came, but by my age you had probably had the same conversation with your mother: *Ma, I want to be Christian.* I don't know what she would have said; perhaps she was surprised, or maybe you were both conscious that trauma is one of those things that can make a child question their religion. It's no wonder I still am.

I mostly know numbers about your childhood: two tries at third grade, four houses down from Sachiko's, eight shots from your dad's BB gun, four years in a refugee camp. I know you used a banana leaf as an umbrella when you were very young, and I know you left in the middle of the night. And I know you don't like to talk about it. I suppose we never will.

I think of the bruises you've left on my arms, my legs, my neck—bruises that probably mirrored marks you had once—and I wonder if your mother had the same ones. I think of secrets and silence and the way my truth twists to fit your mouth even if by then it's the wrong shape entirely, and I wonder how my children are supposed to know their ancestors if I don't know the stories of mine. I think of those moments in front of the school, and I wonder whether I will give my children white names or Lao names, both speaking to the politics of assimilation long before they will understand what the word *violence*

means.

Did you know, when you named me, that I would not be able to say my name right on the first try, even as an adult? That I would do to my own name every day what I did to yours on the day I taught your students that you were different?

Maybe one day I'll tell you that my name still tastes bitter, not like tears or like bile but like the tang of pickled pigs' ears and vegetables I'll never be able to name, and sweet like sticky rice and stickier pineapple juice, and round like the sound of Patou's laugh.

There's something hiding in my name that undermines the way you raised us, far away from anything that might make you remember.

I like to think that you did it on purpose.



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