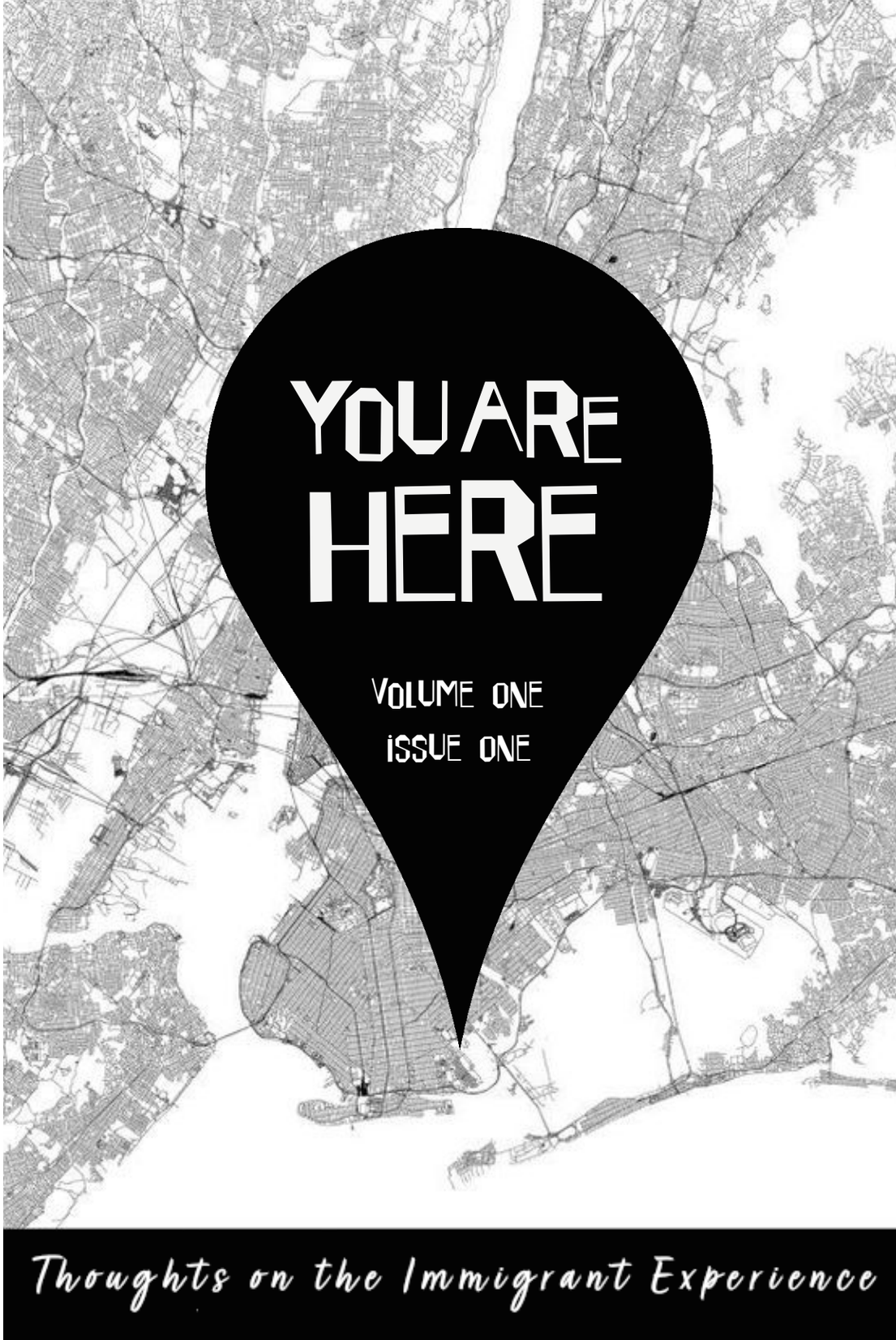
YOU ARE HERE



Thoughts on the Immigrant Experience

VOLUME ONE ISSUE ONE


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Thoughts on the Immigrant Experience



MASTHEAD

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FICTION





THE ENVELOPE TRICK

Adrianne Aron

What are three fingers? "You're lucky," the nurse said, "you still have the opposing thumb." Who you kidding, I thought. But I kept my mouth shut. She was trying to help me out.

Clamping that lucky thumb and the baby finger like a pair of pliers, I've learned to fork up the rice and beans that Sarita serves for supper. Good thing we're not Chinese, I think. Chopsticks.

With a delicacy that makes me embarrassed, I'm able to unzip my fly, and even to tuck it in after I'm done peeing. Wiping is a little tricky, but I manage, like I manage with the shaving. When I watch myself in the mirror shaving with my left hand, it looks like my right hand, and for a little moment every morning I'm tricked into believing I'm whole.

"What have you got to complain about, *compañero*?" I ask my reflection as I brush my teeth and feel my tongue rolling over the bottom row. Pedro's tongue they cut out, because he spoke up for what he believed. My eyebrows match—a matched pair, black, over brown eyes with lashes so long my mother used to say I should have been born a girl. Over there, they say things like that.

Yeah, my eyebrows match, but Rafa's don't. One of his, the left one I think, turned white, at the spot where the soldiers attached the electrodes. There's guys at *Guantánamo* right now gone white all over. You've got to remember how everything's relative, Sarita tells me.

I inspect my nose: straight, nice, a painless appendage on a friendly face, a face like a puppy dog, like my old man's. The nose of Dora María, Sarita's sister, flattens to her cheeks and pinches a nerve, convulsing her in pain whenever she sneezes. They shattered the whole cartilage when they smashed their rifle butts into her face.

I look down from the mirror and see that except for the mangled hand, the rest of me is in good shape. I'm alive, I got my family out. My wife still loves me. What's there to complain, about an industrial accident where all you lose is three fingers? Dough machines have been known to snatch up arms all the way to the elbow.

The guys on the job were real pals. Michael drove like crazy to get me to the hospital. Richard ripped off his own shirt to wrap my bloody stumps, and held me tight so I wouldn't do something wild in my writhing and screaming. Without their quick action I might have bled to death; the fingers have a lot of blood vessels. The boss, he was good too. He didn't dock their pay for the time they took to help me out.

"I'M ALIVE, I GOT MY FAMILY OUT."

After the accident I had to miss English class, so I studied at home, looking up words in the dictionary. *Mano*, "hand." In English it's so happy: handsome, handy, handshake, to handle. In Spanish, it hurts. In my country, *Mano Blanca*, White Hand, is the five-fingered print left on the wall by the Death Squad. *Maniobra*, maneuver, is what we call it when the government steps up the repression. *Dedear*, to finger, means to point somebody out for detention. It's because I was *dedeado* that Sarita and I had to grab the children and run north. No good-byes, no preparation, no plans. Like you'd run from an erupting volcano. U.S. foreign policy sponsors marathons for millions.

"We will send you to Rehabilitation," the nurse told me, "and having that lucky opposing thumb, you'll be surprised at how many things you'll be able to do with just two fingers. You'll learn to write, too, with your other hand." She was right. I learned quick. Before a month was up I sent a left-handed letter to my mother back home. I told her how I got lucky.

They fill out a lot of forms at the Rehabilitation, and ask a lot of questions. They teach you to trust in the future, to see the lucky side. At first I thought they were missing something,- because, you know, they don't teach you how to caress your wife left-handed, how to make love. And they don't explain to you what to do when your three year old daughter starts to cry because she touches your knuckles. So, they can't cover everything, I said to myself. Look how they showed you about the shoestrings, and the trick for opening envelopes.

"THEY TEACH YOU TO TRUST IN THE FUTURE."

When the letter came from the Homeland, I opened it using the trick they taught me at Rehabilitation, and it started to sink in, this business about luck and learning. What did they teach you, *pendejo*? I said to myself. Did they teach you how to plant your corn or feed your animals with seven fingers? Did they show you how to repair a fence, or patch a roof, or run a water line with nothing but a clumsy paw and a fleshy pair of pliers? Or what to do if a white print of five fingers shows up on the wall of your house? They make sure you learn the envelope trick, don't they? That way, when they send you the official notice that they're deporting you to your country because you used their super-lucky medical system, you'll be able to open up your mail.



MIGRATION

Geecy Levins

We waited on the westernmost *mes*a, looking out past the guard rail down to a wide valley.

"For those who haven't been to Yellowstone National Park," continued our guide, a ranger—this was her third year at the migration after having come from Yellowstone. She kept bringing up Yellowstone—"first, you need to go. It's a beautiful, amazing place. I was there once taking a picture and when I turned there's a bison walking toward me, maybe twenty feet away, air blowing out of its nose into the cold air. I'll never forget it."

A girl child tugged at her mom, whispered up to her.

"My daughter has a question."

"Yes."

"What's a bison?"

"Do you know what a buffalo is?"

"Sure."

"Same thing, just different. See, they're not really buffalo, they're actually bison. Buffalo are totally different beasts in other lands. Okay?"

The girl nodded. Her eyes suggested that the answer warranted more words.

"Continuing, they have a geyser called Old Faithful. This geyser erupts about every 76 minutes, almost as if it's on a man-made timer."

A woman, half of a couple, raised a hand and didn't wait to be called on, only for the guide to take a breath. "I've been there, too. I recommend going as well."

"Yes, and for those who go, you really need to see the whole park."

"What more is there?" the same woman asked.

Our guide stared at the woman for an uncomfortable amount of time. Finally, "There's lots. Folks, my point about the geyser is that it is predictable. You can expect it. It's that reliable." She looked at her watch. "It's a natural marvel, much like today. This southward migration happens every year. Now nobody say a word."

She turned toward the valley and our group slid forward, many placing hands on the railing, some double and triple checking their cameras or waking up their phones.

"If you don't breathe, you'll feel them before you hear or see them."

The vibrations started first on the rail. And then the earth trembled. Imagine silence suddenly giving way to oceans of water crashing onto the earth. Imagine the silence before the gulls, crabs, everything, screeching as if the world was ending. Imagine that first there's nothing and then a distant noise charges toward you, engulfing everything in its wake.

"There," the girl said and, with half of us, pointed. The first one became visible, immediately surrounded by ten, then fifty other RVs. Then more. They arrived, uncountable, all shapes and sizes, drawn on hitches behind trucks or complete in themselves, pulling small, standard cars, bikes riding piggyback, an occasional canoe. As they got nearer, we could make out bespectacled male drivers, female passengers, some with maps. There seemed to be no ending to the wave. Closer. We watched a female look up and see us. She looked to the driver and we were afraid there'd be panic. They both looked up and smiled. She waved. A quick moment and we waved back. "Snowbirds," yelled the girl, just audible over the rumble. "They're beautiful."

Cameras clicked. A couple pointed at particular RVs while the man talked. "There's a '56 Airstream. I'd bet it's an original. You just don't see that anymore."

The girl waved like an awestruck child queen in her own parade. Here and there a passenger waved back. "I wished the Parkinson's could've made it," said one man to his wife. "Pictures won't do. They just won't do."

The parade continued for hours. We had lunch, sandwiches, chips and soda or water, provided by the park service. The girl napped on her mom's blanket.

"I saw that one on TV," the man who knew his RVs said. He seemed in awe. He ate standing up, watching, not missing anything. "It's got two full baths. And you can fit a car inside it. Imagine."

"YOU CAN EXPECT IT. IT'S THAT RELIABLE."

After six hours, the width tapered like a lizard's tail and, before the sun set, we could see the end of the main body. Beyond them were stragglers. "There always are," the ranger explained, "for as many reasons as there are vehicles. Those who study the phenomenon say that some appear to just not be in a rush. Others are loners or sight seers, or maybe they came from Canada."

We watched a solo RV a mile from the body. Its color was faded. It seemed to struggle to keep up.

"Will it make it?" the girl asked.

"Oh, it'll be fine," the ranger replied. "They all will. For another six weeks more'll be trickling through." She turned away from the lone RV, and like dutiful students, we moved to stand before her. "As many of you know, from here they'll go to various parts of the southern United States, settling in for the winter, hiding from cold and snow in little sanctuaries that

people have set up for them. Then, almost like they have an internal calendar that comes with an imperceptible warmth in the weather, they'll make the long trip north to the homes they came from. Some to the exact spot where they were born. The migration north isn't so dramatic, no one movement quite so massive." She sighed, looked at the girl who had her hand raised. "Yes."

"We have a place near where we live that they come to. Mom says I can't go there."

"Your mom's a smart woman. It's best to just watch them, maybe wave but not to get to close. We don't want to scare them."

"Oh."

She turned back to the valley. "For now, though, it's a wonderful thing to witness."

The evening air chilled. We started to leave without the ranger. She lingered. We'd seen why in her eyes. She also wanted to make that trek south across our nation. Maybe one day. She'd have to make it past Yellowstone and shooting hot water and bison. But then, yes, she too could find her own warm spot in the sun.





CAROLINE'S WEDDING

Edwidge Danticat

Today walking down the street, I see my mother. She is strolling with a happy gait, her body thrust toward the Don't Walk sign and the yellow taxicabs that make forty-five-degree turns on the corner of Madison and Fifty-seventh Street.

I have never seen her in this kind of neighborhood, peering into Chanel and Tiffany's and gawking at the jewels glowing in Bulgari Windows. My mother never shops outside of Brooklyn. She has never seen the advertising office where I work. She is afraid to take the subway, where you may meet those young black militant street preachers who curse black women for straightening their hair.

Yet, here she is, my mother, who I left at home that morning in her bathrobe, with pieces of newspapers twisted like rollers in her hair. My mother who accuses me of random offenses as I dash out of the house.

Would you get up and give an old lady like me your subway seat? In this state of mind, I bet you don't even give up your seat to a pregnant lady.

My mother who is often right about that. Sometimes I get up and give my seat. Other times, I don't. It all depends on how pregnant the woman is and whether or not she is with her boyfriend or husband and whether or not he is sitting down.

As my mother stands in front of Carnegie Hall, one taxi driver yells to another, "What do you think this is, a dance floor?"

My mother waits patiently for this dispute to be settled before crossing the Street.



In Haiti when you get hit by a car, the owner of the car gets out and kicks you for getting blood on the bumper.



My mother who laughs when she says this and shows a large gap in her mouth where she lost three more molars to the dentist last week. My mother, who at fifty-nine, says dentures are okay.



You can take them out when they bother you. I'll like them. I'll like them fine.



Will it feel empty when Papa kisses you?



Oh no, he doesn't kiss me that way anymore.



My mother, who watches the lottery drawing every night on Channel 11 without ever playing the numbers.



A third of that money is all I would need. We would pay the mortgage and your father could stop driving that taxi-cab all over Brooklyn.



I follow my mother, mesmerized by the many possibilities of her journey. Even in a flowered dress, she is lost in a sea of pinstripes and gray suits, high heels and elegant short skirts, Reebok sneakers, dashing from building to building.

My mother, who won't go out to dinner with anyone.



If they want to eat with me, let them come to my house, even if I boil water and give it to them.



My mother, who talks to herself when she peels the skin off poultry.



Fat, you know, and cholesterol. Fat and cholesterol killed your aunt Hermine.



My mother who makes jam with dried grapefruit peel and then puts in cinnamon bark that I always think is cockroaches in the jam. My mother whom I have always bought household appliances for, on her birthday. A nice, rice cooker, a blender.

I trail the red orchids in her dress and the heavy faux leather bag on her shoulders. Realizing the ferocious pace of my pursuit, I stop against a wall to rest. My mother keeps on walking as though she owns the sidewalk under her feet.

As she heads towards the Plaza Hotel, a bicycle messenger swings so close to her that I want to dash forward and

rescue her, but she stands dead in her tracks and lets him ride around her and then goes on.

My mother stops at a corner hot-dog stand and asks for something. The vendor hands her a can of soda that she slips into her bag. She stops by another vendor selling sundresses for seven dollars each. I can tell that she is looking at an African print dress, contemplating my size. I think to myself, Please Ma, don't buy it. It would be just another thing that I would bury in the garage or give to Goodwill.



Why should we give to Goodwill when there are so many people back home who need clothes? We save our clothes for the relatives in Haiti.



Twenty years we have been saving all kinds of things for the relatives in Haiti. I need the place in the garage for the exercise bike.



You are pretty enough to be a stewardess. Only dogs like bones.



The mother of mine, she stops at another hot-dog vendor's and buys a frankfurthers. With her blood pressure, she shouldn't eat anything with sodium. She has to be careful with her heart, this day woman.



I cannot just swallow salt. Salt is heavier than a hundred bags of shame.



She is slowing her pace, and now I am too close. If she turns around, she might see me. I let her walk into the park before I start to follow again.

My mother walks towards the sandbox in the middle of the park. There a woman is waiting with a child. The woman is wearing a leotard with biker's shorts and has small weights in her hands. The woman kisses the child good-bye and surrenders him to my mother, then she bolts off, running on the cemented stretches in the park.

The child given to my mother has frizzy blond hair. His hand slips into her easily like he's known her for a long time. When he raises his face to look at my mother, it is as though he is looking at the sky.

My mother gave this child the soda that she bought from the vendor on the street corner. The child's face lights up as she puts in a straw in the can for him. This seems to be a conspiracy just between the two of them.

My mother and the child sit and watch the other children play in the sandbox. The child pulls out a comic book from a knapsack with Big Bird on the back. My mother peers into his comic books. My mother, who taught herself to read as a little girl in Haiti from the books that her brothers brought home from school.

My mother, who has lost six of her seven sisters in Ville Rose and she has never had the strength to return for their funerals.



Many graves to kiss when I go back. Many graves to kiss.



She throws away the empty soda can when the child is done with it. I wait and watch from a corner until the woman in the leotard and biker's shorts return, sweaty and breathless, an hour later. My mother gives the woman back her child

and strolls farther into the park.

I turn around and start to walk out of the park before my mother can see me. My lunch house is long since gone. I have to hurry back to work. I walk through a cluster of joggers, then race to a Sweden Tours bus. I stand behind the bus and take a peek at my mother in a group of women who are taking other people's children on an afternoon outing. They look like a Third World Parent Teacher Association Meeting.

I quickly jump into a cab heading back to the office. Would Ma have said hello had she been the one to see me first?

As the cab races away from the park, it occurs to me that perhaps one day I would chase an old woman down a street by mistake and that old woman would be somebody else's mother who I would have mistaken for mine.



Day women come out when nobody expects them.



Tonight on the subway, I will get up and give my seat to a pregnant woman or a lady about my Ma's age.

My mother who stuffs thimbles in her mouth and then blows up her cheeks like Dizzy Gillspie while sewing yet another Raggedy Ann doll that she names Suzette after me.



I will have all these little Suzettes in case you never have any babies, which looks more and more like it is going to happen.



My mother who had me when she was thirty-three— *I'dge du Christ*— at the age that Christ died on the cross.



There's a blessing, believe you me, even if American doctors say by that time you can make retarded babies.



My mother who sews lace collars on my company softball T-shirts when she does my laundry.



Why, you can't you look like a lady playing softball?



My mother who never went to any of my Parent Teacher Association meetings when I was in school.



Your're so good anyway. What are they going to tell me? I don't want to make you ashamed of this day woman. Shame is heavier than a hundred bags of salt.



NON-FICTION



EXPERIENCE AS THE FIRST GENERATION

Sonny Lee

Fresh Off the Boat" first hit the screens in the beginning of 2015. I liked the teaser on Facebook and told all my friends about it. I was thrilled. Before this, I had never seen so many Asian faces in an American TV show. But from the first episode, I could tell that Eddie, the main character, was just like me. My parents immigrated from East Asia 30 years ago, specifically from Hong Kong and Tianjin, just like Eddie Huang's parents. My mom and dad opened up their own restaurant in hopes of achieving the "American Dream," just like Eddie's parents. Eddie and his Taiwanese family were outsiders in an all-white suburb, while my family and I live in the quiet neighborhood of Bridgeport with a lot of white people populating it, close enough. Lastly, Eddie was ridiculed and made fun of in school for his Chinese lunches, just like I was. The story was boring, nothing I hadn't seen before. So I stopped watching replays of my life on TV and continued actually living it.

Fast forward about a year and I wanted to watch the show again, except this time I wanted to see what my parents thought of it. As the show began to roll its canned laughter and gag jokes, my parents laughed along and watched like they would any other show. But then, Eddie complains to his mother that all she ever cares about is money. The mother, played by Constance Wu, responds, "Go find a homeless man and ask him whether he thinks money matters or not, and see what he says." My father pointed out that this line was true in many ways. He has always told me, "Go to school, get into a good college and make money," I've heard this line played over and over again like a broken record. I hated when my parents used to tell me this, but with time, I understood that it was something I needed to remember.

"Money isn't everything," my father explained, "but without money, you can't get anything."

For years my father embedded an important line in me.

"Never be like me," he said.

He doesn't want me opening a restaurant business like his own,



running around at his age all day and night making food deliveries for a couple bucks. I wasn't thinking of it anyways. I witness and live some of the pains that come along with running a restaurant. Achy legs after a day of running back and forth answering phones, packing food, and filling up rice warmers. Hands that smell like different Chinese dishes from packing them into their comfortable brown paper bags all day.

I never really liked the idea of my parents owning a restaurant, mainly because it meant seeing them in a work setting and not seeing them enough in the family setting. The only skills that I've honed in my years of being raised in restaurants are the ability to sweep a floor clean, calming impatient customers, closing take-out boxes like a pro and most importantly, being able to pack and bag five orders at a time without any mistakes.

Though 11 year-old me and 11 year-old Eddie share many similarities through our background stories, there are some big differences that I've discovered over the course of a year. Sure, I threw away my Chinese lunches a couple times when I was 11 so that the other kids wouldn't look at me differently. I made my parents buy hot pockets, so I'd have a "white people" lunch, just like Eddie did. And at the age of 11, I always thought that my parents couldn't understand what was going through my mind. I always distanced myself from my parents, just like Eddie.

However, now I've matured enough to understand that conforming to these "American" lunches was boring, and separating myself from my own culture put distance between me and my family, which is not what I wanted. My parents didn't work this hard so that I would lose sight of my own heritage. And sure, my skills in packing food are a cut above the average Joe, but I've learned more than that. My focus, work ethic, and attention to detail can only be attributed to the dinner rush hours between 6 and 9.

Characters like Eddie Huang are important for young TV audiences and especially anybody who has ever felt like an outsider. They're more than a representation of a foreigner, more than an underdog, they're a symbol that things are going to get better. They prove that being yourself is more important than sacrificing character to fit into a cutout.

Although Eddie and I may be different in our own ways than the status quo, we both eventually found our groups and fit into our own cutouts and standards. So in that sense, we really aren't that fresh off the boat.





THE COST OF THE DREAM

Alexa Patrick-Rodriguez

Sigfredo Rodriguez, my grandfather, was born in Puerto Rico where he was one of 8 children. He moved to the United States when he was eight years-old and has since made a life for himself in Northwest Indiana.

When I was little in Puerto Rico my sister and I would run around barefooted, shorts, no shirt, by the river. We would put our hands under the rocks and look for crayfish, which we would put in a can and take 'em home. Later, we would boil and eat 'em. One day my mother saw a crawfish hauling a little turd by its mouth and after that we didn't eat them anymore. I was 8 years old when we moved here. I had no idea what a big change it was. I remember people saying, "Oh so you're going to the United States," but I had no idea what that meant. My father came over first to be a migrant worker and he ultimately ended up in East Chicago, Indiana. He sent home letters telling us about how beautiful it was in America, but now I don't understand how anybody could call the east side beautiful compared to Puerto Rico. He would send us money until one day we wound up on a propeller driven plane. It took me from my warm society to one so cold. The first morning we were here my parents woke us up. It was the first time we ever saw snow, we yelled, "Oh look at that!" We lived in an apartment that had 2 bedrooms.

We had something like 4 siblings. It was crowded. In the living room was like a big coal stove to heat up the apartment. At times the heat was just in the center of the apartment. Sometimes when it got really really cold, everybody would just bring their bedding in the living room and that's where we slept sometimes when it was freezing. We were happy, not very rich, but not that poor.

We didn't know any English because the teacher in Puerto Rico tried to teach it to us, but they didn't even speak it themselves so they pronounced everything wrong. I was sent to an English school where they gave us a little test to see what grade to put us in. I was put in the second grade, which I didn't like. I was assigned to another student who was supposed to teach me the language, but we just went up to a small library to rascal. I didn't speak for the longest time; I was not confident. In fourth grade they taught us how to use a dictionary. I didn't know the alphabet so I had no concept of how people were finding the words and I was too afraid to ask. It didn't go well for me that year so they held me back. That was a very humiliating experience. I made up for it the next year in summer school and opened my mouth to participate.

"IT TOOK ME FROM MY WARM SOCIETY TO ONE SO COLD."

By the time high school came around I was a pretty smart kid and I knew that. I was placed in the 6A1 group, which was the highest level. It was fun until eighth grade when I had to transfer to a new school because of President Johnson's Urban Renewal Project. There weren't too many other Latino people at this school. The other students were way better off financially than myself. At that point, I was one of seven children in my family. I would put on my best clothes on Monday and wear the same outfit all week: same socks, same shoes. I had holes in my socks. The better-dressed kids would point out the holes in my socks, I felt so excluded. The day after I graduated high school I went to work at the Steel Mills. They put me on the night shift and by morning I had blisters all over my hands, I think they did that on purpose. High school didn't prepare me for anything. The same day I started working I received a letter saying I had been drafted for the military.

"I HAD NO IDEA WHAT A BIG CHANGE IT WAS."

After a couple months of training I was sent to Pleiku, Vietnam, which is in the highlands, in the middle of monsoon season. As we got off the plane, there was another single file line walking on to it. They would yell "Short!" which referred to the fact that we had to stay for twelve months while they were only there for four. There was a constant smell of burning manure. The ground was damp and wet so everybody was slipping. A lot of people were walking around with broken legs; it was an initiation.

When I got back to Chicago, I went back to work at the Steel Mills. After a while I was fed up with the manual labor. One day I just wasn't myself. Somehow the crane lowered its hook and hit me on the head. I had a helmet on but I was furious. I walked off the job and went over to Calumet College where I sat by the door. I was intimidated; I thought I needed more algebra or advanced mathematics. I backed off and went home. It was a bad decision and now I know better.

I saw an ad for a community college in Chicago so I went and got an associate degree in business administration. I took a test. I must've done fine because I got a call from the Social Security Administration for an interview. I bought a new suit. I shaved. They offered me a job. I never had enough time, it was continuous work. If you didn't put that input in today, it meant the individual would be calling you up wondering where their check was that they needed to live off

of. We still had a lot of fun, a lot of young people. Time went so fast. That's where I met my wife.

I've been back to Puerto Rico. All the people I knew as a child are doing well. I wonder how my life would be different if my father would've said no to the American Dream. My mother was a beautiful woman, very vivacious, but she packed up her belongings and left the island. For her, the American Dream was a nightmare. She was stuck in a two bedroom apartment in a cold, grey city. She cared most about family. She had the opportunity to go back, but her whole family was here. My parents never really understood society. Our neighborhood was in the shadow of a lead factory. Our old house had old paint and old plaster. We weren't aware of all these little traps. This cost my parents their lives. The American Dream killed them. If you were to draw a line on a sheet of paper and label the good and the bad, I don't think the good would win. I don't know if the American Dream was the right decision. I don't think it was actually.



HOW I BECAME A SOUTHERN-FRIED NIGERIAN

Israel Daramola

I am Moses and Victoria's first child-their only boy-born in the winter of 1989 at George Washington Hospital in Washington, D.C.

The question "Where are you from?" feels straightforward enough, an excuse to talk about your city or country of origin with some mixture of pride and dismissiveness. But the real answer is that you come from your mother; she just happened to be wherever it is that you were born. The place to which you so often ascribe your personality, your mannerisms, your slang, and your outlook is, frankly, a matter of happenstance.

If my mother had had me a few years earlier, it might have been in London, where she lived while my father tried to make something of himself in America, a country he didn't know, where he had no immediate family. Even earlier and she might have had me in Nigeria, where her mother had her, and where my father's mother had him. But as it stands, I was welcomed to the world via Washington, D.C. Six months later, my parents began the transition to a warmer (and "less active") life in Tallahassee, Florida.

My parents came to America from Nigeria for the same reason most foreigners do: the belief in the Brand of America. "The American dream," the kind of dream you see in commercials for Publishers Clearing House, promises that opportunity and success are just a knock on the door away. Neither my father nor my mother have changed the world or achieved any great measure of wealth, but they worked toward a feat that was almost impossible "back home": stability in a quiet suburb. In exchange for this, they found themselves with the unexpected task of raising four American children.

I was born to Yoruba parents, but the first time I went to Lagos as a young child, I was a visitor. It could never truly be my home— and I was reminded of this when I was at home, too. As a teenager, I attended a Nigerian Independence Day party at the local Elk's Lodge in town. When I referred to myself as Nigerian in a conversation, the woman with whom I'd been speaking promptly responded, "Were you born there?" I replied that I wasn't. She gave me a dismissive side-eye and a condescending smile before gently telling me, "You're not really Nigerian, then."



My only response was a quiet embarrassment. For all the pride and tradition instilled in me by my relatives, I could never feel like a member of this exclusive club—just an honorary guest. Being a first-generation child is like calling myself an '80s baby because I was born in 1989: I have no firm grasp of associations I'm expected to understand, but I'm tied to the label anyway. My parents and my cousins' parents and the parents of other first-generation Nigerian kids I knew did their best to immerse us in their culture. Afrobeat music played in houses and in cars, men and boys wore agbadas to weddings and parties, while women and girls wore a gele around their heads. Everyone's house smelled like pepper soup, leather, and a musk so specific that it defies the pallid medium of language— you'd have to go to a Nigerian household to understand.

"THERE WAS NEVER A POINT WHERE I DIDN'T THINK OF MYSELF AS BLACK."

Beyond those sensory signals, though, there's not much tying us to the country. We could speak the native tongue and eat the food and wear the traditional clothes every day, but ultimately we are being asked to embrace a place and a culture that we ourselves had no direct connection to, that could never truly live within us.

When I see Florida on TV or in movies, it is as unfamiliar to me as Nigeria. Tallahassee doesn't feel like Florida, or at least the beaches-and-Disney-World idea of it that people have in their minds. North Florda is its own strange planet, like the child Florida and Georgia had before they divorced. Tallahassee is the first city you hit when you enter from Georgia. The city hides inside a jungle; the further you stray from downtown, the darker, quieter and more rugged its landscape gets.

Camouflage is a fashion statement here, and people drive big trucks. Whether rich or poor, we're all "country." It feels, in many ways, like the stereotypical Deep South: full of y'alls, tobacco chewing, deer hunting, and grilling in empty parking lots on Saturday afternoons. To get to my house you pass by shopping complexes, car museums, schools, dirt roads, tiny sweatbox churches, plantations, lots of trees, strange sounds, and very few lights. At night, it can be a terrifying journey, but the stars have never looked brighter anywhere else. Tallahassee may not have the name-brand appeal of Atlanta or Houston, and its backwoods can't compare to places in Mississippi or Louisiana. But life here—Southern life—was the only one I'd ever felt I knew, intrinsically, like the back of my hand.

I knew, growing up, that I wanted to be associated with "Americanness," that vanishing horizon I could never fully grasp, instead of being seen as African. In high school, I began reading the words of Zora Neale Hurston, Malcolm X, and James Baldwin. I devoured literature that taught me what it meant to be Black and American, yet felt disloyal for not putting that same effort into Nigerian history. I knew all the popular Southern artists; I listened obsessively to Trick Daddy, Trina, No Limit Records, and Cash Money Millionaires. My attitude toward Afrobeat and the music of my parents, on the other hand, was ambivalent at best and dismissive at worst. Separating yourself from your parents as much as possible is a standard part of adolescence, but it felt wrong as I did it—like a rejection of my culture, of a part of myself.

"WHERE ARE YOU FROM?"

There was never a point where I didn't think of myself as black.

Savage caricature and starving kid jokes at the expense of my being African were abundant in elementary and middle school, ranging from the easy to ignore to unnecessarily cruel. I knew I was different because of my background,

but I always thought of myself as just as much American as Nigerian-and there was never a point where I didn't think of myself as black. Hell, Kanye once rapped: "I told her I was Niggerian/ that's straight-up nigga."

What could be blacker than being from a black country? I grew up in the black church; I ate the same food my classmates ate at their dinner tables. I talked like them, and I walked around with an unequivocally American arrogance, entitlement, and constant dissatisfaction with everything. I wanted the same life as my peers, but felt this foreign aspect of me cause a separation between us that I could not rectify.

I couldn't figure out how to calibrate the balance of my identities until I started college. Though I stayed in my hometown for school, college felt like a new world to me. Here there were entire spectrums of Blackness: Nigerians from London, Afro-Latinos from South Carolina, Haitians from Miami, military kids who'd lived in various states and continents. They all reflected kinds of blackness that were foreign to me, that I'd never considered could exist, and they taught me to wear my Nigerian heritage with an honor I hadn't thought to before.

"SEEING THIS MADE ME LESS AFRAID TO BE MYSELF."

I made friends with African students from various parts of the world through campus organizations and events. When I spoke to other Nigerian kids and heard their stories, I felt visible, even if we didn't have the same experiences. They carried themselves beautifully; they walked with a self-assuredness I'd never known. One had the most unmistakable English accent and another talked like a valley girl, yet we shared this common ancestry. Their different cultures and environments that they came from melded together to make unique people. Seeing this made me less afraid to be myself, to instead let my every action reflect all of me. They showed me I had something that made me stand out at a time when I was finally understanding the importance of feeling rare.

We would try to outdo each other with our Naija references (usually relating to food, music, or the infamously corrupt government). If I knew that they spoke Yoruba, I went out of my way to casually drop phrases in conversation-making sure to properly pronounce and enunciate the words. I found myself making trips back to my parents' house, looking for clothing I was once embarrassed to wear out and asking them to help me with my Yoruba vocabulary. My parents thought I was maturing and growing into my identity, but I knew it was less about finding an identity than finally being identified.

"IT WAS LESS ABOUT FINDING AN IDENTITY THAN FINALLY BEING IDENTIFIED."

My black American classmates and friends were just as vital to making me feel that being Southern was a privilege, too; that it was an honor to say "y'all" and rap "slip-n-slide get loose, more punch than a bowl of juice" with teary-eyed pride, as if it were the national anthem. But I felt the full weight of their influence when I finally moved to D.C. after school. I'd come full circle and returned to my birthplace, only to realize that despite my protestations, from my slang to my perceptions to my demeanor, I was truly a Tallahassee native.

I never expected to miss my real church home of Publix, or the comforting twang of a Southern accent.

It never dawned on me that I would miss the tropical, sped-up irreverence of Florida dance music—that I'd go to a club and be wistful about not hearing four Boosie songs

in a row. I never expected to miss my real church home of Publix, or the comforting twang of a Southern accent. When I got to D.C., I clung tighter to my Nigerian identity, since my Southern one felt harder to access. I became part of more Nigerian communities and affirmed my heritage in a way I never could've anticipated when I was in high school. I love this culture and the fact that I now live in an area with so many Africans from all over the continent, yet I still yearn for my Southern side to be fed.

Despite my best efforts as a young punk obsessed with who I should decide to be, I truly am just a Nigerian kid raised in the South—a product of both birthright and birthplace. I once worked hard to pick a side, but there is no real me without both. I am jollof rice as well as fried gator; I am the rhythm from a dundun and the vibration from the bass out of the trunk of a tricked-out car. Where do I come from? I come from my Nigerian mother and father, who raised me in Tallahassee, Florida, where they happened to be at the time.



POETRY





AMÉRICA

Richard Blanco

I.

Although Tía Miriam boasted she discovered
at least half a dozen uses for peanut butter—
topping for guava shells in syrup,
butter substitute for Cuban toast,
hair conditioner and relaxer—
Mamá never knew what to make
of the monthly five-pound jars
handed out by the immigration department
until my friend, Jeff, mentioned jelly.

II.

There was always pork though,
for every birthday and wedding,
whole ones on Christmas and New Year's Eve,
even on Thanksgiving day—pork,
fried, broiled, or crispy skin roasted—
as well as cauldrons of black beans,
fried plantain chips, and yuca con mojito.
These items required a special visit
to Antonio's Mercado on the corner of Eighth Street
where men in guayaberas stood in senate
blaming Kennedy for everything—"Ese hijo de puta!"
the bile of Cuban coffee and cigar residue
filling the creases of their wrinkled lips;
clinging to one another's lies of lost wealth,
ashamed and empty as hollow trees.

III.

By seven I had grown suspicious—we were still here.
Overheard conversations about returning
had grown wistful and less frequent.
I spoke English; my parents didn't.
We didn't live in a two-story house
with a maid or a wood-panel station wagon
nor vacation camping in Colorado.
None of the girls had hair of gold;
none of my brothers or cousins
were named Greg, Peter, or Marcia;
we were not the Brady Bunch.
None of the black and white characters
on Donna Reed or on the Dick Van Dyke Show
were named Guadalupe, Lázaro, or Mercedes.
Patty Duke's family wasn't like us either—
they didn't have pork on Thanksgiving,
they ate turkey with cranberry sauce;
they didn't have yuca, they had yams
like the dittos of Pilgrims I colored in class.

IV.

A week before Thanksgiving
I explained to my abuelita
about the Indians and the Mayflower,
how Lincoln set the slaves free;
I explained to my parents about
the purple mountain's majesty,
"one if by land, two if by sea,"
the cherry tree, the tea party,
the amber waves of grain,
the "masses yearning to be free,"
liberty and justice for all, until
finally they agreed:
this Thanksgiving we would have turkey,
as well as pork.

V.

Abuelita prepared the poor fowl
as if committing an act of treason,
faking her enthusiasm for my sake.
Mamá set a frozen pumpkin pie in the oven
and prepared candied yams following instructions
I translated from the marshmallow bag.
The table was arrayed with gladiolas,
the plattered turkey loomed at the center
on plastic silver from Woolworth's.
Everyone sat in green velvet chairs
we had upholstered with clear vinyl,
except Tío Carlos and Toti, seated
in the folding chairs from the Salvation Army.
I uttered a bilingual blessing
and the turkey was passed around
like a game of Russian Roulette.
"DRY," Tío Berto complained, and proceeded
to drown the lean slices with pork fat drippings
and cranberry jelly—"esa mierda roja," he called it.
Faces fell when Mamá presented her ochre pie—
pumpkin was a home remedy for ulcers, not a dessert.
Tía María made three rounds of Cuban coffee
then Abuelo and Pepe cleared the living room furniture,
put on a Celia Cruz LP and the entire family
began to merengue over the linoleum of our apartment,
sweating rum and coffee until they remembered—
it was 1970 and 46 degrees—
in América.
After repositioning the furniture,
an appropriate darkness filled the room.
Tio Berto was the last to leave.



IMMIGRANT PICNIC

Gregorhy Djanikian

It's the Fourth of July, the flags
are painting the town,
the plastic forks and knives
are laid out like a parade.

And I'm grilling, I've got my apron,
I've got potato salad, macaroni, relish,
I've got a hat shaped
like the state of Pennsylvania.

I ask my father what's his pleasure
and he says, "Hot dog, medium rare,"
and then, "Hamburger, sure,
what's the big difference,"
as if he's really asking.

I put on hamburgers and hot dogs,
slice up the sour pickles and Bermudas,
uncap the condiments. The paper napkins
are fluttering away like lost messages.

"You're running around," my mother says,
"like a chicken with its head loose."

"Ma," I say, "you mean cut off,
loose and cut off being as far apart
as, say, son and daughter."

She gives me a quizzical look as though
I've been caught in some impropriety.
"I love you and your sister just the same," she says,
"Sure," my grandmother pipes in,
"you're both our children, so why worry?"

That's not the point I begin telling them,
and I'm comparing words to fish now,
like the ones in the sea at Port Said,
or like birds among the date palms by the Nile,
unrepentantly elusive, wild.

"Sonia," my father says to my mother,
"what the hell is he talking about?"
"He's on a ball," my mother says.

"That's roll!" I say, throwing up my hands,
"as in hot dog, hamburger, dinner roll...."

"And what about roll out the barrels?" my mother asks,
and my father claps his hands, "Why sure," he says,
"let's have some fun," and launches
into a polka, twirling my mother
around and around like the happiest top,

and my uncle is shaking his head, saying
"You could grow nuts listening to us,"

and I'm thinking of pistachios in the Sinai
burgeoning without end,
pecans in the South, the jumbled
flavor of them suddenly in my mouth,
wordless, confusing,
crowding out everything else.



THE IMMIGRANT'S SONG

Tishani Doshi

Let us not speak of those days
when coffee beans filled the morning
with hope, when our mothers' headscarves
hung like white flags on washing lines.
Let us not speak of the long arms of sky
that used to cradle us at dusk.
And the baobabs—let us not trace
the shape of their leaves in our dreams,
or yearn for the noise of those nameless birds
that sang and died in the church's eaves.
Let us not speak of men,
stolen from their beds at night.
Let us not say the word

disappeared



Let us not remember the first smell of rain.
Instead, let us speak of our lives now—
the gates and bridges and stores.
And when we break bread
in cafés and at kitchen tables
with our new brothers,
let us not burden them with stories
of war or abandonment.
Let us not name our old friends
who are unravelling like fairy tales
in the forests of the dead.
Naming them will not bring them back.
Let us stay here, and wait for the future
to arrive, for grandchildren to speak
in forked tongues about the country
we once came from.
Tell us about it, they might ask.
And you might consider telling them
of the sky and the coffee beans,
the small white houses and dusty streets.
You might set your memory afloat
like a paper boat down a river.
You might pray that the paper
whispers your story to the water,
that the water sings it to the trees,
that the trees howl and howl
it to the leaves. If you keep still
and do not speak, you might hear
your whole life fill the world
until the wind is the only word.