{ feature }

our younger selves

amber wong

Moving low toward the horizon, the August sun cast long shadows across vines draped heavy with fruit. Dust whirled lazily between carefully cultivated rows.

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As I walked toward the shaded grove where my high school class was celebrating its forty-fifth reunion, my throat felt the familiar parch of the air from my California childhood. I was suddenly unnerved by a stab of adolescent angst. Would I recognize anyone? Would anyone recognize me, the geeky Chinese American girl with waist-long hair?

I needn't have worried. The festive evening in California wine country, well north of our high school stomping grounds in Fremont, had been well planned. Name tags and an icebreaker trivia game. Tablecloths, plastic chairs, room for one

hundred guests. Food and drink. Live music, courtesy of one of our classmates. A speaker. Even the weather cooperated, the cool of the evening a welcome respite after the day's summer heat.

I'd waffled about attending. Flying in from Seattle for an evening with classmates, some of whom I hardly remembered, seemed a stretch. My family was one of the few ethnic Chinese families living in Fremont during the 1960s, and even with deep American roots dating back to 1870, we never fully fit in. But, I reminded myself, our thirtieth reunion had surprised me—among my small group of dinner-mates, I'd felt a sense of inclusion that I'd never felt back in high school. Maybe it was time to see, thank, and more broadly acknowledge these people who had once been part of my life. Adding to the urgency was the sad fact that although our graduating class numbered around seven hundred, attrition had thinned our ranks. Over the years, I'd lost track of my best friend, Robin. When I heard about her recent death, I'd felt a sharp pang of loss.

Last, but not least, I was the speaker.

That too had seemed a stretch. A classmate I'd reconnected with at our thirtieth had contacted me. He'd read one of my essays about my family's history of discrimination and asked whether I could do a reading at our reunion. If there was a speaker's fee, he assured me, I'd get paid.

"What?" I had laughed. "You've got to be kidding! They're a captive audience, right? I'm the one who should be paying them."

After the warm welcome, after the food, after visiting the "In Memoriam" table and touching Robin's name, I stood in front of my graduating class. Nervously, I fingered my papers. When I got to the part of my story about primping for my first high school dance, there was an audible gasp following the punch line, which was something my father had said: "Why do you want to go to a dance?" His tone had been bitter. What he said next had shocked me back then, as it shocked my audience now. "Because no white boy is going to ask you to dance."

When I finished my reading, I bowed dramatically and returned to my table. As classmates swarmed around, I felt self-conscious as some thanked me for sharing such a personal story.

"I never knew!" they said.

Others said that their Jewish, and Italian, and Irish families had similar stories. Some apologized for being completely unaware of the discrimination I had described. But my big takeaway came from two comments which, together, made me think differently—not just about conversations about race, but about my own reactions to conversations about race.

First there was a chorus of, "We never thought of you as Chinese."

And then this comment, an aside, for my ears only, "Thank you for speaking up for people of color."

Afterwards, back home in Seattle, I felt strangely conflicted about that all-too-familiar comment, "We never thought of you as Chinese." These days, I automatically bristle when I hear it. What do people think

of when they think "Chinese?" Stereotypes leap to mind—passive, bespectacled, good at math, bad at grammar. While I admit to myopia and math cred, I resent being pigeonholed into a worn racial stereotype. So while people may think, "We never thought of you as Chinese," is a compliment, it's not. At best, it's a clumsy way to say, "I see you as a person, not as a race." At worst, it's simply absurd.

But I ached to give my high school cohort the benefit of the doubt. When they surrounded me and told me that my personal story had hit home, that they had learned something valuable from my experience, they seemed sincere. Some of those white guys had half-jokingly said, "I would've danced with you!" and though I had found their words strangely embarrassing, and not to the point, I had felt oddly comforted, too. I wished to believe that they all simply wanted to tell me, "You're one of us," and to that I wanted to simply say, "Thank you." Swatting back, in that context, would have been counterproductive, I thought, and rude.

Context is everything. That woman who thanked me for speaking up for people of color? Right after she whispered in my ear, my mind did a double-take. What I remembered of her in high school, always from a distance, was that she had a bold sense of humor, was unafraid to speak her mind, and that she was always surrounded by friends. I had admired her. I doubted she even knew me back then. I never saw her as Chinese, or Hispanic, or Filipino, or white. But now I see her, very clearly, as a woman of color.

Back then, even *I* hadn't seen her for who she is. So perhaps I can let my old friends off the hook for saying they didn't see me as Chinese?

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Recently, I discussed this dilemma with my twenty-something Asian Australian niece. We were on vacation in Maui. As I dramatized my reunion experience, she nodded knowingly. Leah's the founding editor of *Liminal*, an Australian magazine that's garnered national acclaim by giving Asian Australian artists a place of visibility, of community. Already, she's a huge presence in Australia, a sought-after moderator for public discussions on race and identity. The role suits her. Even as a preschooler she was vocal—and strident—about her opinions.

We sipped iced tea on the lanai—palm fronds swaying in the background—deaf to the gleeful shouts from the swimming pool below us. She tapped a finger to her lips, brows knit into her signature scowl. When I finished my story, she tossed back her long dark hair and gave me a half smile, a look of amusement that stopped short of patronizing.

"I know what you mean, Aunty. Sometimes we don't know any better. Not that that's always a good excuse," she hastened to add, "but just for this once, I'd let it go." To my ear, her Australian accent added weight to her pronouncement.

Expecting at least a mild rebuke, if not an outright tongue lashing, I teased, "*Wait,*

just like that? I don't have to feel guilty for not calling them out?" A tiny smirk curled my lips. "That's not like you."

"Well ..." her brow furrowed and she leaned forward, shaking her finger at me in faux reprimand. Laughing, I raised both hands in self-defense.

"Okay, okay, I'll take it!" I said.

I wanted to wrap myself in her absolution, but somehow, giving me a pass seemed way too easy. Shouldn't my outrage be consistent? Shouldn't I use every teachable moment to confront, and not yield to, white fragility? Am I still too afraid to stand up for myself? But from somewhere deep inside, I sensed a faint protest. Why are you judging yourself so harshly? We're talking politics. Verbal sparring. Semantics. What's really at stake here?

I watched a drop of sweat bead up on the outside of my glass. Within moments the droplet gained enough heft to slide with a rush to the base of the glass. There it pooled into a growing puddle on the table. A simple truth became apparent—time changes things. The phase of water, the arc of language. Even while we sit unaware, here on my lanai, moisture in the air will transform to water on the table. I don't need to comprehend the physics of condensation to observe the resultant change.

In my lifetime, the struggle for civil rights and women's rights changed the rules of language forever. More recently, progressive politics has added new vocabulary for other marginalized communities. Like ash embedded in tree rings, my personal predicament needs to be placed in the right historical context.

My 2020-self pits my lifelong desire for acceptance—the currency of my American life—against my nascent need to be fully seen. Some of this disconnect is my own fault. Rooted in my 1960s psyche were echoes from my third-generation parents—*assimilate, assimilate*—because they believed that only by denying that we were different could we fully embrace our Americanness. It had worked for them; it should work for me. Throughout my teens and far into adulthood, I'd appreciated people who pretended to ignore my race, as I did.

Now, after thirty years in the overlapping worlds of work, community, and parenting, I think back, and see how naïve I was. To reach my original goal—assimilation—I'd tuned out a lifetime of gnawing unease. Did I really fool anyone? Reflected in a mirror, my features are unmistakable. Epicanthic eye folds. Black hair. A cast to my skin that screams, "Don't wear orange!" So, when someone insists that they're colorblind, I grit my teeth.

"Colorblind" feels false—shorthand for, "I see you as white." Sometimes I find myself angry, on the defensive, challenged to explain why certain phrases are offensive, challenged to explain how I could possibly be discriminated against. It's this very insistence that encapsulates America's ambivalence toward people who look like me.

Am I asking too much? Am I asking

people to treat me the same, but different? Am I asking white people to see me, assess where I am on the "wokeness scale," and tailor their words accordingly? What breathless affirmation could they offer that tiptoes along that edge of cultural correctness? What does it take for a marginalized person to feel seen?

I don't know. In today's political climate it feels oddly paranoid, yet perfectly rational, to be on constant guard against potentially xenophobic language. But do circumstances influence whether that language is alienating or not, and whether I'm aggrieved or not? Since my reunion speech had focused on my need for acceptance, shouldn't I applaud my high school cohort for their warm response?

Can I trust myself and my feelings to do what's right?

I watched my niece fiddle with her hair, wrapping it up in a bun, then letting it cascade around her shoulders. Her voice of authority smoothed into one of acceptance. As I'd recognized earlier, there's a time and a place for militancy—this wasn't one of them. "We're just so dumb sometimes," she said, stretching her arms above her head, rolling her eyes at herself, at me, at everyone else who's ever made a naïve mistake. "But here's the thing—we can always learn."

Wait. Did that "we" also include her? At some moment in the not-so-distant past, was she also culturally unaware? Was she implying that it's normal for our thinking to evolve over a span of years? That language constantly struggles to keep up with social change? That we can moderate our leaps to judgment, quell our barks of indignation toward others ... and ourselves?

With a longing glance toward the beach, Leah sighed before heading inside to finalize another *Liminal* interview. Both young and wise, she cast life's ambiguity in a new light.

"We have to stop beating ourselves up over things that happened long ago," she said. Draping her arm across my shoulders, she touched her head to mine. "It's okay, Aunty. Sometimes we just have to stop, look back, and forgive our younger selves."

Amber Wong is an environmental engineer in Seattle who writes about culture, identity, and riveting minutiae about water treatment, although not all in the same essay. Recent work has been published in *Craft*, *Pangyrus*, and *Creative Nonfiction*, among others. New essays will appear in *Fourteen Hills* and *The Pandemic Midlife Crisis*, an anthology. Amber earned an MFA from Lesley University and her bachelor's and master's degrees from Stanford University. She is working on a memoir. (Photo: Leah Jing McIntosh)