So with *YELL-Oh Girls!* let us learn to testify. Let us learn to listen. And for Asian American women, let's work on making our voices and dreams big and impactful. The result will be nothing less than a powerful kind of sisterhood we've been wanting for a very long time.

—Phoebe Eng

Introduction

Like most of the gals I grew up with back in Rochester, New York, I had a sticker collection. I bartered and stole until I had finally amassed the entire puffy glitter scratch-'n'-sniff series, and that was it. I lost interest. My next obsession was stuffed animals, but this craze petered out as soon as my precious poly-fills had paired off and had their own "kids." The family was complete.

Then I turned nine. And with the help of my older sister, who was thirteen, I became addicted to teen magazines. Throughout my growing-up years, I discovered that collecting 'zines was the only hobby that could keep up with me.

Until recently, I had forgotten all about my old magazine collection. My mother was cleaning out her shed when she came across a mountain of musty old boxes, covered in dust and spiders, the ones I'd packed the old glossies in before moving away to college. She quickly made a cross-country call: "If you don't mind, I'm going to throw your old magazines out," my mother huffed into the receiver.

I grew silent. Those boxes were filled with at least ten years' worth of history. I insisted that she leave the boxes alone until I came to visit. Then I could decide what I wanted to keep and have shipped, even though I knew there wasn't enough space in my Los Angeles apartment for a 200-pound pile of magazines. My mother was annoyed that I was even thinking about holding on to the stinky, lopsided boxes.

of the popular crowd, were leading totally "normal" lives, too; they were dating, going to parties, eating hamburgers and maybe Brussels sprouts (if they were unlucky) for dinner. My parents, on the other hand, were nothing like everyone else's parents. Every night, mine turned into human metronomes, keeping time as I practiced violin, but only after stuffing me with rice, spicy stews with fish eggs, and vegetables that my friends said smelled "gross." My family was getting on my nerves, and I was growing frustrated with myself in the process of trying to blend into the world outside.

Any one of those magazines was the closest thing I had to a journal. I collected every issue, marked important pages, and kept track of the names of recurring faces that appeared in consecutive issues. There were holes where I'd cut out certain blurbs or images, and those pages were wrinkled and torn, but all of the marks were still there, including my answers to the featured quizzes, "Are You Jealous?" "Are You Too Insecure?" "Are You Boy Crazy?" Looking at the scoring columns, I noticed that I always fell somewhere in the middle. If the scale was 1 to 3, I was a 2. If it was A through C, I was a B. That was me—too stable, too levelheaded, *too boring*. And of course these quizzes fed my magazine addiction. I waited for my character analysis, and my life, to change.

Then one day I found something of myself represented in the magazine, but not in the way I'd ever expected. Niki Taylor, whose big break came when Revlon made her a superspokesmodel, was debuting in *Seventeen*, showing off a fall wardrobe in a big fashion spread. Niki's makeup artist had committed black eyeliner abuse, drawing her eyes out to mimic Asian eyes. She wore saris, silk pants, and all sorts of decadent "Oriental" bangles and garments. The text described the "spices" of the Far East, the mystery, the exotic appeal of the Orient.

I sent a letter to the editor of the magazine. It was never published, but this was major. It was the first time I challenged a medium, which I perceived to be the authority not only on reflecting fashion trends, but on reflecting society. It was also the first time I questioned the depiction of Asianness in the mainstream media. I wrote, "If you were going to portray Asian clothes, why didn't you at least use Asian models in

the fashion spread?" At that point, it didn't occur to me that the language used in the editorial was equally if not more problematic than the photographs. I was just pissed off that girls who looked like me never appeared in the magazine and, as far as I was concerned, we were invisible to the rest of the American population.

This critical observation was a turning point for me, and I would never again be a passive receptacle of the written word. My eyes probed the text and pictures for errors, and I was cognizant of the fact that the media wasn't speaking to me. Although this realization could have crushed my girlhood fantasy of becoming an editor of some swanky New York fashion magazine, my list of grievances led me to visualize a revolution. I formed a habit of checking the mastheads in all of my favorite publications, hoping that I'd recognize names that sounded like they belonged to women and minorities. Suddenly, it all seemed to make sense. With so few Asian American staff members involved in the production process, no wonder there was a lack of representation in the editorial content. Thinking about my own future, I knew that having zero contacts in the industry would mean that getting my foot in the door would be difficult.

At Wellesley, I majored in history and women's studies with a concentration on the representation of Asian Americans in the media. The college didn't offer a journalism degree, so I found summer internships that gave me experience in the field. During this time, my parents tried to dissuade me from making a "huge mistake" by choosing a career that wasn't proven to be an industry where people like me would flourish. I tuned their comments out, fearful that their anxiety would erode my own self-esteem, and insisted that I was determined to give this goal my best shot, with or without their support.

While I began to feel more confident about the direction in which my professional future was headed, my inner self was caught in never-ending conflict, and I was wrestling with questions that plagued me as a girl. Pieces of my past were slowly congealing to form what I thought was a more definitive ethnic and gender identity. The term papers I generated for class along with the presentations I gave in senior semi-

sensation of being "the token Asian Girl," something I thought was a thing of the past, wriggled back into my consciousness every time the assistant clique passed my workstation. Three assistants, in particular, would stand in front of my desk after returning from their lunch break. They giggled, gossiped, cracked inside jokes. And they pretended I was dead. The fact that this high school scenario bothered me suggested that, at age twenty-two, I still hadn't completely worked through my identity crisis, having grown up Asian American in a conservative, predominantly white town. At the magazine, everything that happened in college was dreamlike; it was as if the self-knowledge and confidence I'd gained through academic rehabilitation were vapor.

During awkward moments with the other assistants, I would try to look busy, fixating on my reflection amid the millions of glowing white dots on my computer screen. I realized then that my journey was far from over. In the company of my college sisters, I knew exactly who I was and where I belonged, but in the midst of these strangers, who didn't show any interest in getting to know me, I was thirteen, invisible again, and trying to look normal, whatever *that* was.

I hadn't felt as close to that girl as I did then, or so keenly aware of once gaping wounds that now slept under a canopy of scar tissue. What was going on? Would I ever stop tripping over girlhood "traumaramas," which seemed so silly on second thought, as a postcollege, professional, young woman?

There I was, stuck sitting near the assistant who most resembled the archetypal Popular Girl. On more than one occasion, I caught myself staring at the back of her head as she thumbed through her trusty thesaurus. I looked for dandruff on her little black sweater, a zit on her forehead, a misplaced strand in her otherwise perfectly curled coif. And then, out of nowhere, I was revisited by memories of Scotch tape, the hair dye, and Niki Taylor wearing "Oriental" eyes.

One evening, back in the fall of 1998, I had a revelation. Well, it was more like a critical kick in the ass. Right before packing up my things at the end of a long workday, I received an e-mail from my college professor. The message read:

...companies needed proof that there was a pressing ...hology, this was it. Liz, seventeen, of Monterey Park, ..."This book means so much to me. I can already hear ...ing, and I realize I'm not alone anymore. I've never ..., so ready to hear people talk as I am now." My heart ...n, of Chicago, Illinois, wrote: "You have no idea how ...iting for a book like *YELL-Oh Girls!* to be dreamed up!" ...finally becoming a reality, and other notable Asian ...were stepping up to bat for the book as well. When ...instantly took me under her wing, taught me her ...told everyone she knew, "*YELL-Oh Girls!* will ...America needs to hear—Asian American girls ...themselves, with power, attitude, and inspiring

...rolled in, forming a heap on the floor of my cramped ...my roommate Hera marveled every time she walked ...to her bedroom. I sat on our hardwood floor, writing ...girls, who sent in stories and poems, which unveiled inti- ...of their lives.

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...ponding with girls throughout North America, we were ...Every day we alternated roles, back and forth, from ...student to the role of mentor. Being Asian American girls ...we espoused similar perspectives. How could we? The

"Don't be ridiculous, why do you want to keep those junks, anyway?" she inquired, half knowing the answer to her own question.

And how couldn't she? My mother knew "those junks" were symbolic mementos of my childhood. On lazy Saturday afternoons, I would sit on my bed for hours, picking through the pages of *Seventeen* or *YM* (then *Young Miss*). Sometimes she'd walk into my room to find me sketching pictures of the girls I saw on the pages. Other times she'd see my sister and me partaking in odd beauty rituals. Like when we took turns applying strips of tape across each other's eyelids, so that when we opened our eyes, we would have the pretty folds that made white girls' eyes big and round. And when my mother caught us with our hair flipped over the gigantic metal tub, which she used to season kim chee, to catch the excess Sun-in lightening solution that dripped off our dried, fried split ends.

During prom season, I would spend days leafing through the magazines because the March issues were the fattest. I fantasized about going to the prom when I was fifteen—my date would look like Jordan Knight from New Kids on the Block, and my dress would be white with black polka dots and a black bodice that had red bows trailing down the back. By the time my first formal dance rolled around, my mother made sure I got the dress of my dreams; she spent two whole days pedaling her old sewing machine, and the dress swished exactly as I imagined it would when I twirled. My date, however, was no Ken. I liked and resented Charlie, one of the only Asian kids in my town. I couldn't deny that I thought he was cute, but the fact that he was Korean and that my peers teased us every time they saw us together ("You look *so right* together—you guys'll get married someday!") left a bitter taste in my mouth about the entire fanfare.

The Ken guys were taken. Most of them went for the popular white girls at school who looked like the models in my teen magazines. How I yearned for the carefree way in which they talked, laughed, and moved around! Seeing them gallivanting in delicious clothes, flirting with cute guys, and coming back sun-kissed from their tropical vacations reminded me of the whimsical fashion spreads that I scrutinized on the weekends. My close friends, who were white but weren't part

"invisible, yet conspicuous"

nars were helping me understand "that token Asian Girl," who was still trying to make sense of the contradictions of being Asian, American, and a girl. I had grown up feeling invisible, yet conspicuous, at the same time and all the time.

My magazine archive at home became a warehouse of academic artillery. I churned out dozens of term papers citing articles, images, and advertisements to bolster my argument that Asian American women were dismantling stereotypes, and defining themselves as strong, *not weak*. Proactive, *not passive*. Bold, expressive, and self-aware. Before graduating, I told my professor, Elena, that someday I would edit an anthology by and for Asian American girls. This book, I said, would bring our academic dialogue back to where it began—when we were teen girls on the journey toward finding our place in society.

I left college in a whirlwind, ready to go out and change the world. But I didn't know that my own journey toward self-discovery was far from over. It was while I was working at one of the top national teen magazines that I started to rethink my adolescent experiences.

Nothing could have prepared me for the fast-paced corporate publishing industry. As a magazine staff member, the mystique of behind-the-scenes moments of superstardom quickly faded to reveal the not-so-glamorous routine of handling administrative tasks. It was no different from being an entry-level assistant at any other successful company that manufactured popular consumer products. The only distinction was that magazine clients are a bit unusual; on any given day at work I might encounter one of the Backstreet Boys, a cast member of *Dawson's Creek*, or an A-list designer like Todd Oldham. But, believe it or not, even they seemed to blend into the background of the editorial office after the first few weeks.

When I started, I felt sorely out of place. The look and feel of the office contrasted with the college atmosphere I'd grown accustomed to. At school, at least 50 percent of the faces in my classes or in my dorm were nonwhite. Here, I was the lone woman of color. To make things worse, I didn't feel as if I and the other assistants, who were also recent college grads, had any interests in common. The

sensation of being "the token Asian Girl," something I thought was a thing of the past, wriggled back into my consciousness every time the assistant clique passed my workstation. Three assistants, in particular, would stand in front of my desk after returning from their lunch break. They giggled, gossiped, cracked inside jokes. And they pretended I was dead. The fact that this high school scenario bothered me suggested that, at age twenty-two, I still hadn't completely worked through my identity crisis, having grown up Asian American in a conservative, predominantly white town. At the magazine, everything that happened in college was dreamlike; it was as if the self-knowledge and confidence I'd gained through academic rehabilitation were vapor.

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Dearest Vickie, How are things at the magazine? I think it's the perfect time for you to go forward with your teen anthology project. A book about growing-up experiences among Asian American teens would be a success!
Love, Elena

It was fate that Elena sent me that note, right then, and in a voice that bore such conviction. Elena reminded me of my dream: to collaborate with Asian American teen girls on a book that, for once, would privilege their voices and perspectives on issues that might otherwise never be discussed at length in any mainstream teen-oriented TV shows, books, or magazines. Something that had more to do with my reality than Jennifer Love Hewitt's radiant, carefree grin.

My dog-eared copy of *Making Waves*, a groundbreaking anthology of writings by Asian American women, looked lonely sitting on my shelf. The book I envisioned would serve many purposes, in addition to being a resource for teen girls. It would fill the void that existed on Asian American girls' reading list; it would address issues that wouldn't be discussed in an anthology for mainstream, Euro-American girls. And it would be an Asian American book from the standpoint of girls who were growing up in contemporary society—something I wish I had during those years in Rochester. I wouldn't have stayed awake at night, wondering if I was alone in facing these challenges.

The anthology would build on the lessons I was still learning at the magazine about the multiple transitions we experience as individuals who are always evolving, and always growing up. It would blur the boundaries between the different generations by suggesting that all of us—girls, young women, and mature women alike—have legitimate questions to ask and insight to offer one another.

Turning my pie-in-the-sky idea into reality would require some quick thinking. I was overwhelmed by the size of the project, but as I saw it, my only choice was to move forward. The first task on my agenda was finding other girls who were interested in taking this journey with me. When I envisioned my travel companions, they were girls who were sick of stockpiling their untold stories, and who wanted to

speak out about obstacles, self-reaffirming victories, or anything else that helped them gain a fuller understanding of who they are and how they see the world. *This book was going to happen.* That evening, before going to bed, I called my sister and my mom. They listened to me brainstorm an elaborate plan to launch the first-ever teen anthology by Asian American girls, mumbling something on the lines of "You go, girl!" and "You should go to bed, it's late."

The title of the anthology came to me after a long, restless night. When I opened my eyes in the morning, the first thing I saw was two words: yellow girls. The sleepy fog that engulfed me retreated, and these words slowly diverged to form three: yell-oh girls. Thus *YELL-Oh Girls!*—the title of the anthology—was born.

It is the radical act of reclaiming and redefining the word *yellow* that thrills me. In the context of our anthology, "yellow" takes on a new meaning. Old newspapers, magazines, and travelogues reveal phrases like "yellow peril," "yellowface," and "yellowskins," which remind us of the ways in which "yellow" has historically been linked to negative stereotypes of Asians. Society has reinforced these images, pushing Asian Americans to the periphery in all areas of our culture. "Yellow" has been used to define skin color (even though Asian skin comes in a wide range of colors and hues), and carries with it other racist assumptions. On our terms, however, the hyphenated "yell-oh" does not define or create barriers between Asian Americans. Simply put, the term "*YELL*-Oh" is a call to action.

During the next couple of weeks, I funneled my creative energy into getting the word out about the anthology. I revised the submission guidelines over and over. I concentrated on the first line of the message: *There is no single, prescribed way of growing up an Asian American girl.* SEND. With fingers crossed, I waited for replies.

The wires linking girls and women on the Web were on fire. The news spread between cities, states, and countries. I rented a P.O. box to handle the influx of mail I was receiving. Soon I had gotten over 500 poems, essays, and illustrations—the work came to me on torn journal paper, fluorescent stickies, and pretty stationery embellished with Sanrio paraphernalia and all sorts of wild, supportive testimonials.

If the publishing companies needed proof that there was a pressing need for the anthology, this was it. Liz, seventeen, of Monterey Park, California, wrote: "This book means so much to me. I can already hear my sisters speaking, and I realize I'm not alone anymore. I've never been so attentive, so ready to hear people talk as I am now." My heart sang! Kira, sixteen, of Chicago, Illinois, wrote: "You have no idea how long I've been waiting for a book like *YELL-Oh Girls!* to be dreamed up!" Our dream was finally becoming a reality, and other notable Asian American women were stepping up to bat for the book as well. When I met Phoebe Eng, she instantly took me under her wing, taught me her "Warrior Lessons," and told everyone she knew, "*YELL-Oh Girls!* will give us a message that America needs to hear—Asian American girls can and will speak for themselves, with power, attitude, and inspiring artistry."

Submissions rolled in, forming a heap on the floor of my cramped apartment, and my roommate Hera marveled every time she walked around it to get to her bedroom. I sat on our hardwood floor, writing postcards to girls, who sent in stories and poems, which unveiled intimate aspects of their lives.

Each piece struck a familiar chord. For example, we talked about the first time we heard the word *chink*. And the first time we saw our parents being harassed because they were immigrants or because they couldn't speak English. Grace Song, twenty, submitted an unsent letter she wrote to her father, and the tears streamed. We identified with Grace, who didn't know how to express affection and love toward her ailing father. It always came time to lighten the mood, though, so I tried to end each sitting on an uplifting note—perhaps with a story about triumph. I played some funky tunes from a CD that a girl named Mia from the Midwest sent to me. She was a badass Korean American drummer of an all-girl rock band, who was out to show audiences that Asian girls could crank out some mean lyrics and jam with the best of 'em.

By corresponding with girls throughout North America, we were forming alliances. Every day we alternated roles, back and forth, from the role of student to the role of mentor. Being Asian American girls didn't mean that we espoused similar perspectives. How could we? The

fact is, we're growing up in vastly diverse settings—our parents aren't the same, we have different family histories and socioeconomic backgrounds. And yet, in some ways, we are like every other young person in America. To say that our stories don't reveal threads of shared experiences, however, would be inaccurate. We empathized with each other's joys and frustrations.

While each girl's perspective is unique, common themes echo throughout, evoking the group's subtle yet distinctive collective consciousness. Early on, I refused to categorize the selections according to rigidly defined chapters. It was plainly obvious that there were intersections between them, so the challenge was to create a structure for the anthology that would create space for themes and pieces to interact and overlap. The issues we address in *YELL-Oh Girls!* are markedly distinct and, arguably, more complex than those discussed in other mainstream books on adolescence. Our stories appear "typical" only from the surface, but, because our writings reflect the consciousness of girls who are of Asian descent, our realities spin on a completely different axis.

In the first chapter, we come closer to mapping our locations. Girls explore the meaning of Asian America, and they articulate the feelings of being lost, then found, and searching for home. You'll notice that throughout the anthology, we offer a loose interpretation of Asian America, as many of our contributors have lived in various parts of North America during their growing-up years. In "Family Ties" we examine complex relationships with siblings, parents, and grandparents. "Dolly Rage" is comprised of poignant, brutally honest, nostalgic stories about adolescence. Here we discuss issues that many girls deal with, not only Asian American girls—everything from body image to peer pressure to racial prejudice in school. In "Finding My Voice," girls discover the power of the pen, using language to shape their own identities. They pass the torch in the next few pages to sisters who are fed up, are tired of staying put, and are setting out to change the rules. Girls riding the activist tide speak out in the last chapter, entitled "Girlwind: Emerging Voices for Change." We've organized the selections so that readers can take the journey along with us, experiencing every ebb and flow of our lives.

Throughout history we've witnessed countless Asian American women who have overcome adversity and celebrated personal triumphs. The best way to recognize our many triumphs as Asian American women is by paying homage to the women who spearheaded the Asian American literary movement, filling the empty space in the "American" consciousness with our stories, visions, and dreams. To celebrate their work, we have peppered our pan-Asian collection with their cherished girlhood stories, which many of us have stashed in our hope chests—magazine clippings and book excerpts that we will refer to frequently, reread, and pass on to our sisters, girlfriends, mothers, and daughters.

The women mentors whose work is featured at the end of each chapter have, in some way, demonstrated a strong commitment toward nurturing young women and infusing our imagination with colorful possibilities. Their bricks-and-mortar stories reflect patience, honesty, and compassion and create a solid foundation upon which meaningful dialogues can occur.

On the verge of a new millennium, we are thriving in a rich, contemporary landscape. And *YELL-Oh Girls!* is long overdue. Our collective mission is to increase cultural awareness, to teach each other the importance of self-love, and to promote self-expression. This anthology will be a lasting resource claiming a spot on our bookshelves that will serve as a reminder that we are not invisible, and we are not alone. Together, we can find our way home safely and successfully. My dream is that these writings will inspire girls everywhere to speak out or—if they want—to *YELL like hell.*

"Your mother is worried sick about you two," he said. "She's taking a taxi from the next stop to Tainan. Just wait over there with the rest of the passengers and she'll be coming shortly." My brother exhaled a long, relieved sigh.

"Thank you," I said, feeling proud of my ability to remain calm and communicate in a foreign country. "We're from America, you see, so we don't really know what we're doing."

"Oh, really?" The other uniformed men stared quizzically at us. "You're from America? What state?"

I didn't know how to say California, so I stuttered my way through. "We're from near San Francisco," which literally translates to "Old Golden Mountain" in Chinese.

They started laughing. I wondered if I had drool leaking out of the side of my mouth, or if I had just called my dead ancestors something obscene without knowing it.

"You don't know how to say *California* in Mandarin?" one finally asked.

My pride sank. "No, I don't."

More laughter. Allen, who had since calmed down upon realizing that we were going to be recovered, walked over to the passenger area while my cheeks burned with embarrassment. I was reminded of my male cousin, who had laughed at my inability to read the Chinese newspaper outside of a few words like *you* and *China*.

As I played with the unraveling thread on my skirt, I also recalled an incident in Seattle a few months earlier, during which my father and I had visited the Lake Washington botanical gardens. He had asked an elderly male to please take a picture of us beneath a large white tree.

"Oh, sure," he said with a charitable smile. Picking up the camera, he asked, "So, are you visiting the country?" I almost cried.

It was there in the train station in Tainan that I realized that I was a foreigner everywhere I went, no matter how fluent I was in English or how un-American my facial features were. I could be mistaken for an Asian tourist as certainly as I could be laughed at

for being an ill-spoken A.B.C. (American-Born Chinese) out of place in her parents' homeland. When my mother finally came to the station, her eyes red from frantic crying, she told us that we were really going to Shinying, not Tainan, and that we were at the wrong place at the wrong time.

I couldn't help but agree.

> "There's a very Western view in which somehow you need to resolve the tension between any two things, to want things to come to a kind of conclusion . . . whereas I've been wondering where this whole idea of fluidity comes from, and I think it's because I grew up with an [Eastern] idea of yin/yang, sweet/sour. Opposites don't fight each other, but belong together and can intensify each other, and are simply in the nature of the world."
>
> —Author Gish Jen, in an article that appeared in *AsianWeek* (September 27, 1996)

jennifer sa-rlang**kim**20

Glen Mills, Pennsylvania

I was born in Lima, Pennsylvania, to Kim Chon Tae and Kim Sun Hui. Failing to be true to the sheer superficiality of my suburbanite background, I found refuge in bitter and sarcastic conversations with myself. Apart from this blatant confession of "weirdness," I have come to treasure the written and the spoken word. It is only inside those blue and pink lines that I'm laughing and crying, mesmerized by the silent sound of sincerity.

Where Are You From?

Where are You From?
a sweet
elderly

German-Polish
woman
inquires
Glen Mills.
oh,
but
Where are you
Really
from?
Glen Mills.
No,
You must be
mistaken
I mean originally.
Where are You
Originally from,
I
inquire.
New York.
No, I mean Where are you Really from?
Fluster, fluster, fluster.
Two women unable, refusing to answer a simple question of
Origin.
I suppose you mean
Originally?
Yes.
Germany and Poland.
Well, then I guess I'd have to say
Korea
America.

sarah**chang** 17

Douglaston, New York

A seventeen-year-old senior at Hunter College High School, I am listening to Simon and Garfunkel's "The 59th Street Bridge Song (Feelin' Groovy)" as I write this bio. I am the product of two people whose families originate from North Korea—and, the product of my own self-reflection. In this story, I rode a Greyhound bus from Seattle to Ellensburg, Washington, with this Coke can to keep me company. I experienced a modern version of the American western movement, except that I wasn't a pioneer battling Mother Nature and the harsh laws of the land. I was a teenage girl wondering why the open land was appealing to the American heart, and why we as a society consume so much Coke. I sank into my seat, exhausted, wishing that something or someone would break the flat horizon.

Watching America with a Coke

I scratched a line into the sun-baked gravel that looked too clean to be public. The line I just made, it looked like the West Coast. Gray stones gave way to a dirt brown palette as I continued to dig with my toe. This activity certainly wasn't working. I could still see the monstrous bus with its monotonous sighs and grunts just 10 feet from where I stood. That bus was too stuffy, too silent, and too empty for me to reenter eagerly.

I was on my way to Ellensburg/Washington/U.S.A. It's a great place, really it is, this America we speak of. But traveling America was not my primary concern. My primary concern was the stink of dusty bus seats, painfully decorated with primary colors in a background of dark gray that failed to achieve sophistication. No, I take that back. My primary concern was the empty soda can in the back of the bus that refused to be picked up and continued to roll, roll, roll, and roll some more. Hell, I just didn't want to be indoors with people who twisted themselves into positions I thought never pos-

sible in order to fit on two bus seats they would have liked to call "bed," or "home," or "creative freedom."

I woke up two hours later, twisted. Great, I thought. I've become one of them.

The bus rolled on past flat ground whose only comfort seemed to be intrusive telephone poles that told no tale, so randomly placed that dogs wouldn't even piss on them. The can was still rolling, the seats still stank of miles of concrete, and America continued to roll past my window of monochrome.

The man with the tight jeans and balding arms sitting across the twelve-inch aisle from me said, "Arigato go jai mas." I thought, for what? I should've said smartly, "You're welcome" and shut him up. But I didn't. So he didn't shut up. Hearing no response he said, "Ah! Nee-hao mah." This time, I didn't even bother turning my head. I said, "No English." I hate this country.

I closed my eyes, swearing that I'd go pick up that can at the next service stop.

I woke up an hour later. My ass was asleep and the image outside my window had come to a halt. It was a service stop. Great, I could use some Coke.

The small mom-and-pop store had the TV mounted on a makeshift shelf that looked two days old. And as I wrinkled various plastic packages looking for those stupid Twinkies, the people of Seattle/Washington/U.S.A. threw out the first ball of the last game to take place at the Kingdome. Pity—another all-American moment.

I got back on the bus last and walked past the greasy bus driver, the tight jeans man, and numerous other shapeless lumps. The smell had just gotten worse. The rubber flooring squeaked under my sneakers in fifty different pitches and then I remembered the can. It was a Coke can smiling a cheerful fire-engine red, bubbling with American commercialism gone child-friendly.

I picked it up with two fingers and only two fingers. I tossed it into an empty seat, making sure it had a view with a window. I wanted it to watch America go by with the rest of us.

gloria**ng**21
Davis, California

I come from Nine Dragons, Fragrant Harbor, in my birth year of the Horse. I first tapped into my feminist-of-color consciousness in college away from the still limited U.S. K–12 public school education system. As a queer feminist of color, I find natural alliance with various activisms and oral histories. Perhaps others' politicization will, in the future, take less than the two decades it took me. I still see my mainland Chinese and Hong Kong-nese parents in San Francisco and my relatives abroad.

Distance, Time, and Wingspan

What comes to mind when you hear the word *angel*? Many of us may easily conjure images of guardian angels or angel-like characters we've seen on TV sitcoms, but for others—especially for Asians who grow up in San Francisco—the word *angel* carries a more significant meaning. It's more than a reference to a spiritual protector in flight. When I hear the word, I think of a neighboring mass of rock, dirt, tree, and gravel jutting into the surface of pacific waters. As a young, Chinese American, immigrant woman, the legacy of Angel Island is highly significant to me at the turn of the century.

I came to the United States with my mother and father in 1979, when I was one y-squared (one year young). We settled in Saam Fann See, where a significant amount of Chinese people resided. My parents didn't know how to speak English, and for the first six months in the States, they remained unemployed. Due to immigration laws in the late 1970s, only my nuclear family was allowed to immigrate.

They came in a wave of Southeast Asians who were immigrating to the U.S. They believed they could start afresh in the "land of opportunity." In the late 1970s, my extended family was still barred from immigrating to this country with my father. According

lei-ann**lawi** then 15

Honolulu, Hawaii

Born and raised in Honolulu, Hawaii, I have fond memories of hot summers of shaved ice and days at the beach. But these memories are so much sweeter when shared with family and friends. It is hard to forget the times when my brothers and I would sleep over at my grandparents' house and just do what kids do best—laugh, play, and have fun. I have better appreciated my grandparents' love for me and will forever cherish those "Monopoly Nights."

Monopoly Nights

I would look forward to Monopoly nights
with swirls of cocoa wisps
that almost burned my tongue
and salty crackers dunked so much
that there was a mush surprise at the bottom of the cup.
We'd fight for Boardwalk until we were too tired
to laugh anymore or until our eyes hurt
from trying to watch TV at the same time.
We'd end the game (just for the night, we'd always promise)
and then stay awake making forts and tunnels
out of our fuzz blankets and cloud pillows.
Then Grandma would hush us to sleep
and we'd snuggle into slumber within our walls of
protection.

We would wake to the smell of waffles luring us in
and destroy our pillow castle in a frenzy
to claim the best seat for morning cartoons.
We always poured too much syrup in the crispy open grids
Grandma would say, "Aiya!" but smile.

I miss those Monopoly nights
filled with cocoa and laughter.
Somehow we grew out of our blanket towers
and realized they would never be strong enough to hold our
dreams.

mai-linh**hong**21

Annandale, Virginia

My family left Vietnam as refugees when I was ten months old and resettled in the Washington, D.C., area. I just graduated from Yale University, where I studied literature and led the Asian American Women's Group. At twenty-one, I am realizing how much the women in my life, of all ages and backgrounds, have inspired and shaped me with their creativity, intelligence, and nerve. "Burnt Rice with Fish Sauce" is a reflection on how far my family and I have come in our lives, literally and figuratively; it's about the gains and losses of achieving the "American Dream."

Burnt Rice with Fish Sauce

Long before my family found the suburbs, before the little rambler by the church, before even the peeling duplex where I played one season between a wooden and a wire fence, there was a crowded third-floor apartment on Randolph Street, in south Arlington. During steamy summer mornings I watched my mother cook. She alternately stirred, sweat, sliced, and gazed tiredly out a window. A damp washcloth clung to one hand, and my baby brother perched on the opposite hip. My uncles slept, sprawled across the living room. Playing alone, I wound about them, listening for my father's footsteps on the stairs. I waited, too, for the happy smell of burnt rice. It came up in leathery strips, sometimes long, always brown or black. My mother scraped the burnt rice carefully from the alu-

minum pot once the "eating rice"—the fluffy, white rice—had been removed. Vegetable scraps lay scattered on the counter, orange, green, and dripping. From above, a small jar of brown fish sauce emerged. The heavy scent quickly filled the damp, hot air. Soup simmered slowly to a boil, and meanwhile, my brother was tucked away to a nap. In that slow and savory pocket of time, between the bustle of morning and the long haul of afternoon, my mother and I rested our elbows on the yellow, plastic-covered table. We ate, with our fingers, burnt rice dipped in fish sauce.

If my father came home then, haggard and sleepless, I could be charming, he receptive. He made faces at our snack when I waggled my wet and odorous fingers his way. The sight of his solemn, young wife seated at the flimsy table, far from home and tired already with the difficult years that lay ahead must have quieted his usual grumbles.

Sometimes he sat with us. Other times he ran one hand over my thin hair before peeling off his stained factory clothes and leaving to shower the sawdust from his face.

Years later, while I packed for college in our quiet suburban house, my mother—a little more stout now, and graying—came to me with a smile. She pulled me into our large, white kitchen, where the familiar smell of burnt rice hung in the air.

With her pleated sleeves rolled up, she teased, "An di."

I laughed, and shook my head, "No."

The smell of fish sauce didn't please me anymore. My mother, too, turned on the kitchen fan while she cooked.

"The steamer is broken," she explained. "I had to make rice like old times on the stove. Too bad about the burnt parts."

I fingered the plate of burnt rice and tasted a grain. It was cold, plain, but the sweet and slightly bitter scent was disconcerting. It made me think suddenly of the days of summer, soon to shorten, and of the slow, satisfied way a clothesline sways when strung haphazardly above a city street. I heard the comforting creak of an old, scratched, wooden floor, and across it, a tiny dark child walked, singing to herself.

> "I was real fortunate to grow up in a wonderful family, where I don't know if I would call it dreams, but I would call it expectations and hopes that I could meet my parents' demands, which were to do my best."
>
> —Avon CEO/President Andrea Jung, in an article on CBS.com

belinda**wong**17

San Francisco, California

As a seventeen-year-old living with both parents and a sister in the eclectic city of San Francisco, I aspire to find my voice. "Who is that reflection looking at you from the mirror? What could you possibly have in common with Chinese immigrant parents from Vietnam?" my mind frequently inquires. "Tainted" allows me to delve into myself and to seek the answers to the questions the "real" Belinda poses.

Tainted

"Your daughter is so perfect."

This is the phrase most favorable to the awaiting ears of my mother and father. For the last sixteen years, they have molded me into their own piece of pottery, exquisite and pure. I am my parents' masterpiece: a daughter who leads a flawless, carefree life because I've been sculpted with the ideals of propriety, intelligence, and felicity. That is the external me. Internally, I contemplate whether or not I should adhere to my parents' ideals because the image of "perfection" I have achieved is so tainted.

The perfection I possess begins with my smile. It is not the camera-type that fades after the photograph is taken. My smile is constant, always stretching across my face, making my eyes squint, even when I am downcast. It's no wonder that each time I attempt to have an effusive talk with someone about my conundrums, I never get beyond: "I am having problems." Even my friends doubt my sincerity because of my smile, which convinces them that the concept of me having concerns is an oxymoron.

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kim**vigilia**19

Rego Park, New York

Currently I'm a first-year, biochemistry major at Boston University. Both my parents were born and raised in the Philippines. Writing started out as medium for emotional and artistic venting. Over the years, I've found myself inspired by people who make me see things in different lights or people who make me want to spit out all the emotions that they shake up inside of me. I'm very much for Asian awareness and I think this is a good opportunity to speak out as an Asian American girl who believes there's a common bond between all of us.

Daughter

Perhaps it is my overindulgence of my personal dramatics
That holds me back from trying
To be obedient enough to will energy in performing daily chores.
For to be a loving daughter is to be an obedient one
As one parent might explain to his child

Maybe it is simply the liberal environment in which I was brought up
That discouraged such meekness to anyone
So that I have, more than once, forgotten not to raise my voice
When I speak to her.
Such disrespect displayed in a daughter's attitude
Has clearly reflected her parents' own faults.
There is no love proved there, a warning to us all.

When I think of all this and realize how contrary a daughter I really am
I am pushed into accusing myself that somewhere,
I fell into the category of not being good enough.

In some way, I try to explain my fault with horrible explanations to her
When her eyes are closed in sleep
Many times in this situation I suddenly crouch next to her bed and squint critically
At her face and abdomen,
Checking to see that she is still breathing.
I hold my own until I see that she has inhaled and exhaled
And then re-collect myself
Right before realizing I had been crying.

gena s.**hamamoto**21

Irvine, California

My family immigrated to America from Japan four generations ago. Over time, my family has lost the Japanese language and many cultural traditions. Throughout my twenty years in Orange County, I have constantly questioned my own validity as a Japanese American, fearing that I was a "banana"—yellow on the outside and white on the inside. Recently, I compiled a five-generation family history, and I have come to realize my ethnic identity in more fluid, less static terms. "Cultural Karma" is a reflection of this understanding of culture as it evolves through retention, inclusion, and loss.

Cultural Karma

This hand
Placed over mouth
As graceful giggles slip through narrow lips

Holds no fan to cover blackened teeth
Has not burned with pain forming sticky cakes
Never poked by vines that grow tomorrow's meal
Does not brush beautiful calligraphy

Has held the hand of those who have
And still lingers
When I laugh.

julie**lu** then 14

San Diego, California

I was born on September 7, 1985, in Oklahoma. I now live in San Diego, California. Both of my parents came to the United States from Vietnam. "The Answer" is a tribute to my grandma, whose unforgettable stories, songs, and riddles fascinated me so much when I was younger.

The Answer

"Tell me a riddle, Grandma. Please. A new one this time," I said.

"Oh, all right," she said.

She was quiet for a few seconds thinking thoughtfully to herself for a new riddle to tell me.

"The two of them sleep in separate rooms," my grandma explained. "In the morning they open their doors to the outside, at night they shut their doors."

"A table? People? Horses?"

At the time I didn't have the slightest clue what the answer was, or even what the riddle meant. But I was determined not to give up.

"No, none of those." My grandma laughed. I laughed too.

"Don't tell me the answer, Grandma, I'll figure it out." I was determined.

She smiled and waited patiently as I rattled off all of my ridiculous answers.

When I spent time with my grandma, I loved it when she told me riddles. My grandma was never annoyed or too tired to tell them to me. Although she couldn't make use of her arms or legs while she was telling me stories, her voice was so animated when

she spoke. Her bed looked like a hospital bed. Climbing up the side of it, I'd sit right next to her head and ask her to tell me another one, another Vietnamese riddle. I loved hearing them because they had a flowing rhythm and they were so clever. When I was small, I used to think that my grandma's riddles were her secrets, and I felt so special that she would let me hear them and know about them too. I was always afraid that one day she might run out of new ones to tell me, and every time I asked, she would amaze me. Those were the best times I had with my grandma.

As I got older, I spent less and less time in her room. I soon forgot about the riddles altogether. I wanted something more to do than just play with my grandma. Other things started to interest me, like reading or playing with my friends. Occasionally I would stick my head into her room and see her lying in bed, staring up at the ceiling, and I could tell that she was sad and lonely. I felt sorry for her, but I would never go to her, because I didn't know what made her happy. Suddenly I felt like I was too old to ask for a riddle like I had when I was little. I would sometimes plan in my mind to go into her room and sit and talk with her, but I never knew what I would say to her.

In the end I always convinced myself that she didn't need my company. I convinced myself of this for a very long time. Even if she did want to talk to me, though, I knew there wasn't much she could do. Sometimes she would call out my name over and over again until she grew tired, and I still would never come to her side to see what she wanted. I would pretend not to hear her voice and go about my own way. Soon she stopped yelling because she knew I wouldn't come. I had other things to do, and I didn't realize then that life doesn't go on forever.

When my grandma died, I cried. I cried because my cousin cried and I stopped crying when she stopped. Outside I showed no emotions, but inside, I felt a horrible aching. When she was lying in her coffin, I touched her cold face. I wanted so badly for her to wake up. I wanted to have one last time to see her. I wanted her to come back and lie on her bed, so she could yell out my name one more

Westlake High Media Center

Nora Okja Keller is the author of the novel Comfort Woman *(Viking Penguin, 1997). She lives in Hawaii with her husband and daughter.*

My Mother's Food

BY NORA OKJA KELLER

Send to Michelle

I was weaned on kim chee. A good baby, I was "able to eat anything," my mother told me. But what I especially loved was the fermenting, garlicky Chinese cabbage my mother pickled in our kitchen. Not waiting for her to lick the red peppers off the won bok, I would grab and gobble the bits of leaves as soon as she tore them into baby-size pieces. She said that even if my eyes watered, I would still ask for more.

Propping me in a baby carrier next to the sink, my mother would rinse the cabbage she had soaked in salted water the night before. After patting the leaves dry, she would slather on the thick red-pepper sauce, rubbing the cloves of garlic and green onion into the underarms of the cabbage, bathing it as she would one of her own children. Then, grabbing them by their dangling leafy legs, she would push the wilting heads into five-gallon jars. She had to rise up on tiptoe, submerging her arm up to the elbow, to punch the kim chee to the bottom of jar, squishing them into their own juices.

Throughout elementary school, our next-door neighbor Frankie, whose mother was the only other Korean in our neighborhood, would come over to eat kim chee with my sisters and me every day after school. We would gather in our garage, sitting cross-legged around a kim-chee jar as though at a campfire. Daring each other on, we would pull out long strips that we would eat straight, without rice or water to dilute the taste. Our eyes would tear and our noses start to run because it was so hot, but we could not stop. "It burns, it burns, but it tastes so good!" we would cry.

Afterward when we went to play the jukebox in Frankie's garage, we had to be careful not to touch our eyes with our wrinkled, pepper-stained hands. It seemed as if the hot, red juice soaked through our

skin and into our bones; even after we bathed, we could still feel our fingers tingling, still taste the kim chee on them when we licked them. And as my sisters and I curled into our bed at night, nestling together like sleeping doves, I remember the smell lingered on our hands, the faint whiff of kim chee scenting our dreams.

We went crazy for the smell of kim chee—a perfume that lured us to the kitchen table. When my mother hefted the jar of kim chee out of the refrigerator and opened the lid to extract the almost fluorescent strips of cabbage, she didn't have to call out to us, although she always did. "Girls, come join me," she would sing; even if we weren't hungry we couldn't resist. We all lingered over snacks that lasted two or three hours.

But I didn't realize that I smelled like kim chee, that the smell followed me to school. One day, walking across Middle Field toward the girls' locker room, a girl I recognized from the gym class before mine stepped in front of me.

"You Korean?" she asked. She narrowed eyes as brown as mine, shaped like mine, like mock-orange leaves pinched up at the corners.

Thinking she could be my sister, another part-Korean, part-Caucasian *hapa* girl, I nodded and welcomed her kinship with a smile.

"I thought so," she said, sneering. Her lips scrunched upward, almost folding over her nostrils. "You smell like one."

I held my smile, frozen, as she flitted away from me. She had punched me in the stomach with her words. Days later, having replayed this confrontation endlessly in my mind (in one fantasy version, this girl mutated into a hairy Neanderthal that I karate-chopped into submission), I thought of the perfect comeback: "Oh yeah? Well, you smell like a chimpanzee." At the very least, I should have said *something* that day. Anything—a curse, a joke, a grunt—anything at all would have been better than a smile.

I smiled. And I sniffed. I smiled and sniffed as I walked to the locker room and dressed for P.E. I smiled and sniffed as I jogged around the field, trying to avoid the hall and other girls wielding field hockey sticks. I smiled and sniffed as I showered and followed my schedule of classes.

I became obsessed with sniffing. When no one was looking, I lifted

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my arms and, quick, sniffed. I held my palm up to my face and exhaled. Perhaps, every now and then, I would catch the odor of garlic in sweat and breath. I couldn't tell: the smell of kim chee was too much a part of me.

I didn't want to smell like a Korean. I wanted to be an American, which meant having no smell. Americans, I learned from TV and magazines, erased the scent of their bodies with cologne and deodorant, breath mints and mouthwash.

So I erased my stink by eliminating kim chee. Though I liked the sharp taste of garlic and pepper biting my tongue, I stopped eating my mother's food.

Shame

I became shamed by the kim chee that peeked out from between the loaf of white bread and the carton of milk, by the odor that, I grew to realize, permeated the entire house. When friends pointed at the kim-chee jars lined up on the refrigerator shelves and squealed, "Gross! What's that?" I would mumble, "I don't know, something my mom eats."

I also stopped eating the only three dishes my mother could cook: *kalbi ribs, bi bim kooksoo*, and Spam fried with eggs. (The first "American" food my mother ever ate was a Spam and egg sandwich; even now she considers it one of her favorite foods and never tires eating it.)

I told my mother I was a vegetarian. One of my sisters ate only McDonald's Happy Meal cheeseburgers (no pickle); the other survived for two years on a Diet of processed-cheese sandwiches on white bread (no crust), Hostess DingDongs, and rice dunked in ketchup.

"How can you do this to me?" my mother wailed at her American-born children. "You are wasting away! Eat, eat!" She plopped heaps of kim chee and *kalbi* onto mounds of steaming rice. My sisters and I would grimace, poke at the food, and announce: "Too fattening."

My mother had always encouraged us to behave like proper Korean girls: quiet, respectful, hardworking. She said we gave her "heartaches" the way we fought as children. "Worse than boys," she'd say. "Why do you want to do things like soccer, scuba, swimming? How about piano?"

But worse than our tomboy activities were our various adolescent diets. My mother grieved over the food rejected. "I don't understand

you," she'd say. "When I was growing up, my family was so poor, we could only dream of eating this kind of food. Now I can give my children meat every night and you don't want it." "Yeah, yeah," we said, as we pushed away the kim chee, the Koreanness.

As I grew up, I eventually returned to eating kim chee, but only sporadically. I could go for months without it, then be hit with a craving so strong I would run to Sack-n-Save for a generic, watery brand that only hinted at the taste of home. Kim chee, I realized, was my comfort food.

When I became pregnant, the craving for my own mother accentuated my craving for kim chee. During the nights of my final trimester, my body foreign and heavy, restless with longing, I hungered for the food I had eaten in the womb, my first mother-memory.

The baby I carried in my own womb, in turn, does not look like me. Except for the slight tilt of her eyes, she does not look Korean. As a mother totally in love with her daughter, I do not care what she looks like; she is perfect as herself. Yet I worry that—partially because of what she looks like—she will not be able to identify with the Korean in me, and in herself. I recognize that identifying herself as Korean will be a choice for her—in a way it wasn't for someone like me, who looks pure Asian. It hit me then, what my own mother must have felt looking at each of her own mixed-race daughters; how strongly I do identify as a Korean American woman, how strongly I want my child to identify with me.

When my daughter was fifteen months old, she took her first bite of kim chee. I had taken a small bite into my own mouth, sucking the hot juice from its leaves, giving it "mother-taste" as my own mother had done for me. Still, my daughter's eyes watered. "Hot, hot," she said to her grandmother and me. But the taste must have been in some way familiar; instead of spitting up and crying for water, she pushed my hand to the open jar for another bite.

"She likes it!" my mother said proudly. "She is Korean!"

I realized that for my mother, too, the food we ate growing up had always been an indication of how Korean her children were—or weren't. I remember how intently she watched us eat, as if to catch a glimpse of herself as we chewed.

Now my mother watches the next generation. When she visits, my daughter clings to her, follows her from room to room. They run off together to play the games that only the two of them know how to play. I can hear them in my daughter's room, chattering and laughing. Sneaking to the doorway, I see them "cooking" in the Playskool kitchen.

"Look," my mother says, offering her grandchild a plate of plastic spaghetti, "noodles is *kooksoo*." She picks up a steak. "This *kalbi*." My mother is teaching her Korean, presenting words my daughter knows the taste of.

My girl picks up a head of cabbage. "Let's make kim chee, *Halmoni*," she says, using the Korean word for *grandmother* like a name.

"Okay," my mother answers. "First, salt." My daughter shakes invisible salt over the cabbage.

"Then mix garlic and red-pepper sauce." My mother stirs a pot over the stove and passes the mixture to my daughter, who pours it on the cabbage.

My daughter brings her fingers to her mouth. "Hot!" she says. Then she holds the cabbage to my mother's lips, and gives her *halmoni* a taste.

"Mmmmm!" My mother grins as she chews the air. "Delicious! This is the best kim chee I ever ate." My mother sees me peeking around the door.

"Come join us!" she calls out to me and tells my daughter, who's gnawing at the fake food. "Let your mommy have a bite."