How to Kneel on the Earth

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I was never taught to bow to anyone except for when my grandmother passed away and we burned paper money in a cauldron in our backyard in Houston, Texas. My father instructed me to kneel on the earth and touch the ground with my forehead three times. The air was cold, the ground was dirty, and I didn't want to do it. But I bowed, my forehead touched the ground three times because I was afraid he would think that I did not respect my grandmother.

My grandmother was born in Beijing, China and grew up during the Second Sino-Japanese War. She went to the University of Beijing where she met my grandfather. Somehow, they escaped the communist regime in 1959, one year before they would graduate. They moved to Hong Kong, where my father was born, and then moved again to Venezuela in 1963. In Caracas, Venezuela my grandmother raised her son and three daughters. I was born in San Cristobal, Venezuela to a Chinese immigrant father and a Venezuelan mother. I grew up hearing stories of a land I could not fathom. China to me, was the mystical dragons and ladies painted on the vases displayed in our home. I imagined China in the sky, out of reach and extraordinary.

My father told me that my grandmother only allowed them to speak in Mandarin at their home in Caracas. She wanted to preserve their native tongue. Whenever he scolded me for speaking to him in English instead of in Spanish, I snapped at him, asking why he never taught us Chinese. This always silenced him.

The older I get, the more I empathize with my father's experience growing up uprooted. My father did not step foot in China until he was in his twenties. Although my father cooks us Chinese food, tells us Chinese stories, teaches us Chinese traditions I don't think he has ever felt Chinese, after all he was three years old when he moved to Venezuela.

My mother was born and lived the majority of her life in San Cristobal, Venezuela, the city where I was born and where all her brothers and sisters currently live. Founded in 1561, it rests on the Andes mountain range. She grew up in a family of thirteen kids, where the only income came from my grandfather. He was a truck driver. She is the only person I always speak to in Spanish. Unlike me, my mother made sure that the separation from her land would only temporary, that the Andean soil would always wait for her to return. Although I have been uprooted from the soil where I sprouted, my mother's roots grew and extended, across oceans.

I always wonder why my father married my curly-haired, green-eyed, Venezuelan mother when he could have married a Chinese girl and produced Chinese children. Although my father has always want-
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by Michelle Kiang

ed to be culturally Chinese there always existed a pressure for him to be more Venezuelan, the same pressure that made me lose my accent when I came to America. I’m not saying my parents didn’t love each other, because they did and still do, but there are political motives even in love. Like my father, I am an outsider in a culture that my face should match. I am not Venezuelan enough or Chinese enough, or American enough, and I never will be. I imagine myself as a water lily in a pond full of black spotted coy that are nibbling at my roots. I float between continents and let the waves pull and push me home, wherever that is.

*Three: Touch the earth with your forehead three times.*

When my grandmother died in a car crash when she was visiting her hometown right outside Beijing on December of 2008 I realized the weight of all the shame I was carrying. She was, I felt, my only validation to my Chinese roots, and the only person left in my father’s family who could tell me stories about a place I had never been to. Her death unraveled my shame of never feeling whole. When I was young, I thought that I had been born broken in half, one half was Chinese and the other Venezuelan. When I moved to Houston, two parts became four, I was Chinese, Venezuelan, American, Resident Alien. The feeling of never being whole is the same. Although we will never speak about it, my father and I will always mourn the death of my grandmother together, carrying confusion, doubt, and an everlasting sense of displacement.

Yet, as I kneeled and bowed to the burning paper, I knew she would forgive me because love is not a stationary feeling, because the earth beneath my feet could change but my family never would, and because I was ashamed of something that had never been anyone’s fault. If only, someday my father and I could forgive ourselves for not being born whole. ☐