I Am

I was seven the first time I saw someone like myself on the TV screen. A rounder face with a wide nose and smaller, slanted eyes. I watched, entranced as her straight, dark hair swished behind her, her mouth opening in a laugh at something the other person on-screen had said to her. My young eyes greedily traced over her features, my mouth open and my little nose breathing in like I could absorb her essence, like I could be on the screen with her. She was beautiful and she was smart, but most importantly—she looked like me.

I was twelve the first time I truly screamed my rage at my parents, frustration and anger shattering out of me like a glass cannon. Looking back, it wasn’t even for a good reason, but one that seemed all-encompassing and important at the time: a silly costume party. “Dress up as your favorite book character!” read the innocent invitation, tiny printed books and colorfully inked balloons surrounding the words. But how could I dress up as a character when none looked like me? Pale, porcelain skin, light-colored eyes, blonde hair, and small, pointed noses stared back from book covers—there were no tilted brown eyes or golden skin or widened noses and dark, swishing hair to be found in the pages of the stories I read.

“How can I be a book character when there’s no one that looks like me?!” I snarled, furious in a way I couldn’t understand. “There’s no one I can dress up as!”

My parents exchanged equally frustrated glances over my tantrum, partly from annoyance at my outburst over something as miniscule as a party but, moreover, frustration at their helplessness to fix it—there were no characters that looked like *me*. No characters that looked like *us*. No characters who ate rice with every meal or left their shoes neatly by the door before entering the house. No characters that knew dragons were actually wise and auspicious, bringing rain for farmers instead of fire and greed and destruction.

Lost to the overwhelming torrent of emotions swirling through my chest, screaming through my insides, I furiously spat something I would forever regret.

“I hate being Asian! I wish I was never born Asian!”

My father rose, furious, seething at my attack on my heritage. On *our* heritage. But my mother just sat, a quiet kind of sadness surrounding her in a way I couldn’t understand until later.

I didn’t go to the party.

I was sixteen the first time I saw the president of the country I called home verbally attack my heritage. I watched him blame a virus on my people, watched him mock our language and those who bore names showcasing their—*our*—heritage. I watched people cheer and uphold him—people with pale, porcelain skin, light-colored eyes, blonde hair, and small, pointed noses. Yet not just them, but also people with dark skin and braided hair, people with brown faces and dark eyes, and even people like me with golden skin, wide noses, and slanted eyes. I was sixteen when I watched my family—my aunts and uncles and grandparents—fight and argue over a man none of us knew in person. None of us had even met him. I watched our family bonds pull over a man who mocked and belittled us. I was sixteen when I heard six women, with wide noses and brown eyes and dark hair like mine, had been shot and killed by a man with a gun, a man with the blonde hair and light-colored eyes of the protagonists of my childhood stories. I was just sixteen when I realized that the world is not kind to people like me.

But I was also sixteen when I watched my community rally together. I was sixteen when I watched the TV showcase people that looked like me, with golden skin and wide noses and brown eyes ablaze with a hunger for justice and life. I was sixteen when I watched people with dark skin and braided hair, with brown skin and dark eyes, with light-colored eyes and porcelain skin band together against injustice. I watched them raise their voices in protest and leave the resounding cry for change and justice ringing through our nation. And I was sixteen still when my teachers hung flags and posters, bright and colorful and welcoming; when men could wear dresses and not be less for it; when it wasn’t a crime for two women of color to marry and love each other. I was sixteen when I realized that just as much as the world was cruel, that people could hurt others…that the world also heals, that people can stand in solidarity through hardship, that when someone stumbles, there will be someone to reach out a hand.

I am seventeen and the oldest I’ve been, but not the oldest I’ll be. Against injustice, I shout with the voices of a thousand others, people of all colors and shapes and heritages, but with the same thrill in our blood, the same fire in our eyes, the same hunger in our voice. I am my heritage and more: I am the future, the wave of change, the fire of justice, the storm of representation, the earth-shaking movement of righteousness. My name is Jade Long, and I am seventeen and proud to be an Asian-American.