

TIGER IN A BIRCH TREE FOREST Zaraj Carrucini

First-grade artwork adorned the walls. Each of them was a comical replica of the last, with birch trees fabricated from white construction paper, snow forged of glitter glue, and skies built from swirling watercolors. But among the designs was one that had a pop of orange. A tiger, watching its viewer through lopsided olive eyes. I loved those green eyes, admiring how they looked like mine. I worked relentlessly to color the stripes with dried Sharpies and angled the crooked nose with a ruler. My art teacher, Mrs. Smith, a lovely lady with a big heart, equally loved my artwork and hung it first in the class. As I held the thumbtacks excitedly, she started a conversation I would never forget. The day I made the paper tiger, art was not the topic of conversation; it was my hair.

“Your hair is so *exotic*! All those tight curls and strands, they’re just so you!”

Exotic. The Merriam-Webster has two definitions for the word ‘*exotic*’:

1. *introduced from another country: not native to the place where found, and*
2. *strikingly, excitingly, or mysteriously different or unusual.*

I am Puerto Rican. I was a US citizen at birth. Mrs. Smith was a lovely lady with a big heart, but neither one of those definitions made me feel like she was. Unknowingly, she had implied two thoughts that day.

The first definition implied that I did not belong there. While I didn’t understand the feeling at the time, the painful realization of not belonging to a place one called home only dawned on me when I used the word to describe someone else. I met my African American best friend in middle school, who, like me, enjoyed drawing people. We’d doodle cartoon characters during lunch hours, imitate manga into sketchbooks during recess, and toss one another notes with still life works in the middle of class. To us, it seemed like we were set to be professional artists one day, the kinds that could sketch anyone in a mall. Despite our closeness, however, we often got into hotheaded arguments over our work. It was on one of these days when she flipped through my sketchbook angrily, having bottled up her feelings for a long time.

“You only draw white people.”

Confused, I retorted, “I’m just copying what I see other people draw; it just happens that they’re white.”

“Why can’t they be Black?”

“They... just can’t. That would be kinda... *exotic*.”

You do not belong here; you are exotic. She had lived in the United States for almost six generations. *You do not belong here; you are exotic*. I wish I could take those words back because they weren’t true. *You do not belong here; you are exotic*. The idea that a character could be Black like her wasn’t *exotic*; it was that the characters refused to look like her. I had carelessly filed the word into a sword that I was never meant to wield, nor anybody else should.

During my freshman year, I came to understand the implications of the second definition: you do not fit the local standards. After two notorious pandemic years living in Chicago, I had developed my passion for civil rights and legal justice, determined to pursue it regardless of how difficult. In the third week of high school, I walked into the job counselor’s office, excited to seek the resources that could help me find a job to pursue the legal route. I made sure to dress in a formal plain shirt, made sure that my manners were “yes, ma’am” and submissive head, and made sure that I was nothing she could reject; the only action I forgot to take was to tie up my

fountain of Hispanic curls designing my summer-tanned skin. When she looked at me, she saw me as 'exotic.' She was kind, like Mrs. Smith, but her words were deadly too.

"You know, we got some real good jobs that pay well. It would be next summer, called Work America, and you'd spend the whole summer in California working in the fields. Wouldn't that be exciting? You could even bring a friend."

I tried to brush off the implications of the kind of work she wanted me to do and respectfully explained that I was looking for an internship in the legal field (preferably in the state that I was living in). She looked pitiful.

"Oh honey," she comforted, "That's real difficult. Don't you want to make some easy money?"

Translation: *You do not meet the standards of a lawyer; go back to the fields where you belong.*

"Ma'am, I am not looking to earn money right now. Even if it is unpaid, I would like to assist in the district court."

She tsked at me and told me 'no' and sent me on my way without help. While I would eventually create my own internship with the court, she never stopped bringing up those California fields and how wonderfully *exotic* they were. *Exotic* is where I should be. The word that had once been a sword to cut up my friend was now aimed at myself.

In these experiences, I felt like that tiger in a birch tree forest. Like that *exotic* tiger wandering in the *American* birch tree forest. Therefore, I have come to define the word *exotic* as "*a description for someone that does not look like oneself.*" My hair was not exotic. My friend was not exotic. My career choice was not exotic. The only exotic visual was that tiger in a birch tree forest. And even that was a child's imagination.