



**A SENSE OF
BELONGING**



ROOTED

ISSUE ONE: A SENSE OF BELONGING

The collection of art, poems, and photos within this zine breathes life into the immigration stories that shape our communities — its pages spill with experiences and memories ranging from hardships to immense pride. In a society that demands assimilation, we are often pushed to question whether it is necessary to shed our immigrant identities to become truly “American.” With this zine, we stand in proud defiance. By highlighting our unique backgrounds, we pay tribute to our heritage and hope to inspire appreciation for a mosaic of experiences.

In the age of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are bitterly reminded that our country is still rife with xenophobia. Our country suffers from systemic racism at the hands of inhumane immigration policies, police brutality, healthcare inequity, and countless other injustices. We are inspired by the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter Movement to come together as students hailing from immigrant families that do not conform to hegemonic America. Our differences are the threads that stitch us together.

Through these pages, we are reminded of our childhoods, our upbringings, our families. We see ourselves in the stories that follow our fingertips; we embrace our roots.

MIT ASIAN AMERICAN INITIATIVE

Growing up in the suburbs of New Jersey, I thought that every immigrant experience felt like my own. At MIT I was fortunate enough to learn that my childhood assumptions were wildly inaccurate—I met friends of all backgrounds and in the process of learning their stories, I came to better understand my own. I found communities that welcome diversity, nurture space for listening, and lift people up to share their stories.

A Sense of Belonging is a celebration of sharing: our contributors have poured their dreams, hardships, and successes into artistic expression. I encourage you to read every single piece in this publication. Embrace their differences. Know that beyond the 25 in front of you, there are infinitely many more stories to hear.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Olivia Yao', with a stylized, cursive script.

OLIVIA YAO

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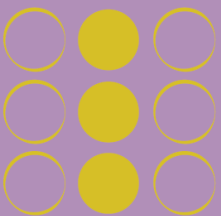
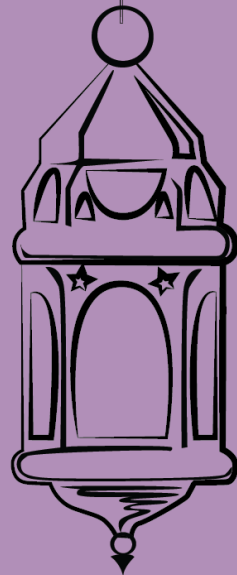
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'American'

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Mumbai

03

COUNTRY OF DREAMS



FOR THE BEST

He weighs his suitcases. "This is for the best"
He reassures himself under his breath.
"Soon, we'll have a home in the country of dreams,
And this separation won't be as bad as it seems."

He uses words he doesn't believe to calm my mother,
And his heart breaks as he kisses my older brother,
When he arrives in the land of the free,
He's in a family of one instead of three,

He spends his days busy and his nights alone,
Occasionally calling his family on the phone,
His hopes for our future keep him going,
And when our family reunites, it starts growing,

And I am born in Chicago, surrounded by December ice,
For the next few years, everything seems pretty nice,
We are a family of four, and then a family of five,
Finally together, trying our best to thrive,

Our bubble bursts when Sheriff¹ moves away,
Deep down, we knew he couldn't stay,
And he comes home on the weekends, so it's not that bad,
But my high-school self is still really sad,
It's just four years, I think, this is for the best,
He'll spend those at college, then come home for the rest,

And then his four years end, and mine finally start,
Leaving home puts a crack in my heart,
This is for the best, I remind myself once more,
Hoping one day I'll go back to my family of four,

¹my older brother

The first time I spend the weekend at school, I pick up the phone,
To tell my parents that I have to finish my work alone,
I expect “magayteesh lay? Ma’andikeesh dam?”²
But instead I get “Ma’lesh ya habibti, maslahtik aham”³
And somehow, that hurts even more
When did my family of five become four?

Suddenly, I am my father, an ocean away from home,
And separation feels like all I’ve ever known,
But I remind myself that this is all a test,
And despite the hardship, this is for the best.

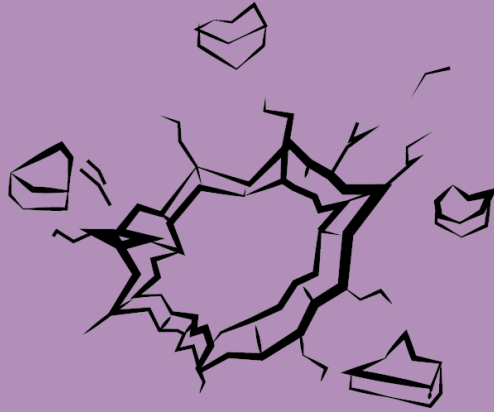
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²Arabic for “Why didn’t you come home? Have you no heart?”

³Arabic for “Don’t worry, sweetie. Your work is more important.”

CHICAGO
DECEMBER
CE

04



MA'LESH
YA
HABIBTI

01

BENDING
OVER
ONE OVER
THE OTHER
SHE WOULD
TIE US IN

and she would tie us in, loops
in a length of ribbon. our torsos
like rice wrapped in seaweed,
protecting

our precious flesh from the chill

BEDTIME RITUALS

[summer]

my grandmother sews bamboo
sheets for our beds
in the summer. they gather

connected by a fishing line, laid
on top of my mattress like toy soldiers
guarding against the hot august air

i'd wake up yanking my hair, thin
strands left between the cracks
of the covering, chained

to their lustrous prison

[spring]

we were warned that our baby
smooth faces would turn
wrinkled and coarse, collecting

creases from evenings squinting
at screens, a protest against time
grandmother traced the valleys

along our foreheads. i rubbed
spoonfuls of pearl powder
against my cheeks. specks

dancing as they rolled off our skin

[winter]

she didn't trust us to sleep
soundly, so she folded bed sheets
in half, their embroidered lilacs

bending one over the other. we slipped
our bodies in, twisting

around

and

around

and she would tie us in, loops
in a length of ribbon. our torsos
like rice wrapped in seaweed, protecting

our precious flesh from the chill

[autumn]

when the crickets cease singing we gather
by the porchlight, night lights waltzing
as the queens of the night reveals herself

in full bloom. the sacred petals awaken
only once a year; by dawn, wilted
and we stagger into the orange lacquered

front steps. callous stem and soil
connecting the celestial light to earth
we drink in the moonlight reflected in the

blossom, a prayer to the heavens

■

UNDER FOREIGN SKIES

We huddle in the corner
bones aching from the weight
of heavy furniture and heavier dreams

we drink soup from the same pot, burning tongues
warm us from the beatings of autumn wind
But even warmer was my sister's laugh

bounced on anything it could find—
cracked walls, deflated sleeping bags
How it filled empty cabinets and bodies

the way a child gives life to a balloon,
swelling despite the pressure, the fog
of uncertainty, the murk of strange lands.

▪

ጠስቆል (FINDING OF THE TRUE CROSS)



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Hands clenched.
Bags tight.
Eyes forward.

THE PURSUIT OF A BETTER LIFE

Hands clenched. Bags tight. Eyes forward. Together, the mass of feet approach the sliding doors of the LAX terminal. Looking through the windows, everything is visible yet unseen. All that lies before us is unexplored territory: desires lie beyond those doors.

THE BLINDING LIGHTS HIT US INSTANTLY,
HIGHLIGHTING OUR DIFFERENCES – TWO
CONTRADICTING TONES.

Looking up, I am comforted by the faces of my people. To the right, my mother's warm hand grips me tightly as we move forward. The blinding lights hit us instantly, highlighting our differences — two contradicting tones.

Brown, the warm soothing color that grounds. All around me used to exist my tone, my security. Hard work and perseverance in the field yield the comforting brown common to our people. The tone that I usually associate with those who live and thrive on the ground. Even my mother's fresh tortillas had this same hue. This warmth that used to caress my spirit.

Now, white is all I see. White, the blinding yet revealing light. Within it, nothing remains unspoken. It penetrates the extremities from within, placing them out-front for all to see. The piercing reality of difference settles in. Never having seen people as pale as a sheet of paper brings a shiver of unfamiliarity down my spine. The unknown is different. The unknown is foreign.

NEVER HAVING SEEN PEOPLE AS PALE AS
A SHEET OF PAPER BRINGS A SHIVER OF
UNFAMILIARITY DOWN MY SPINE.

My mother manages to secure a cab, and we leave the chaos of the airport behind. Sleep overcomes me. Soon enough, I awake to a variety of sounds all at once. My mother sobbing with tears, and what sounds like my father and sister pleading for a second consideration. As I look over my family, I am filled with joy at having them all together, yet mutual sadness is translated between the four of us. We are no longer in the cab or

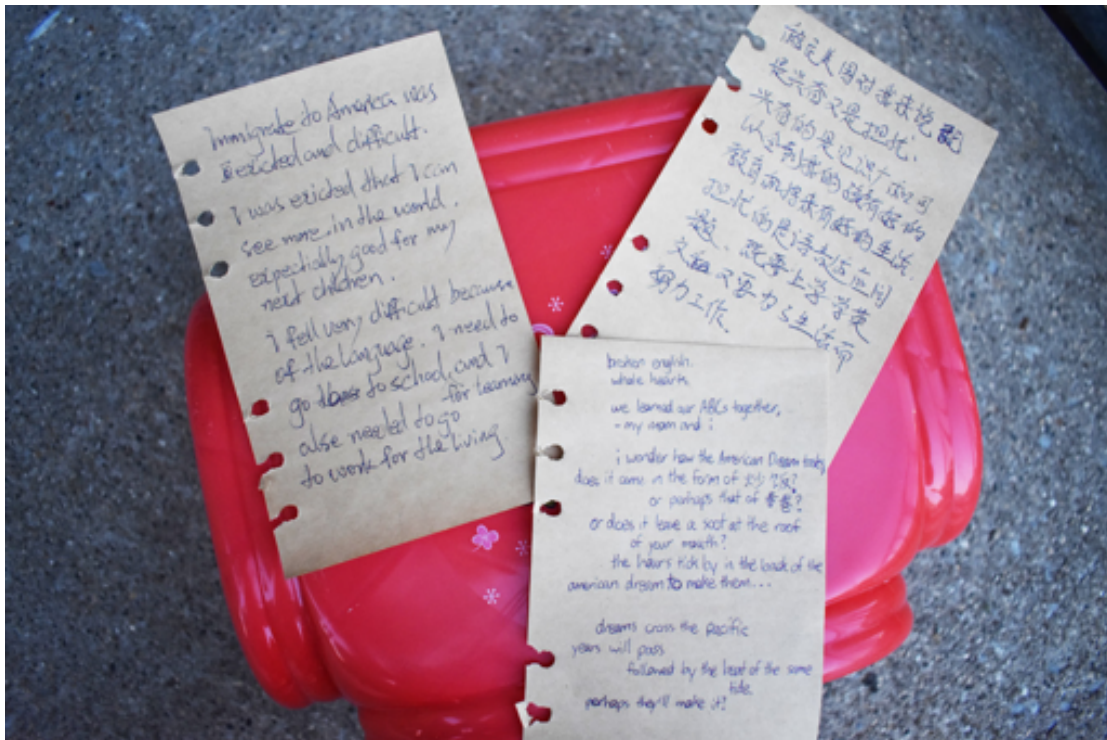
the airport. We are on the curb of a dusty street. Cars pass by occasionally gifting us with a chilly breeze and abandoned newspapers drifting through the wind. I turn around to see my sister collapse to her knees while my dad incessantly pounds at the door of a building — his pleas remaining unanswered.

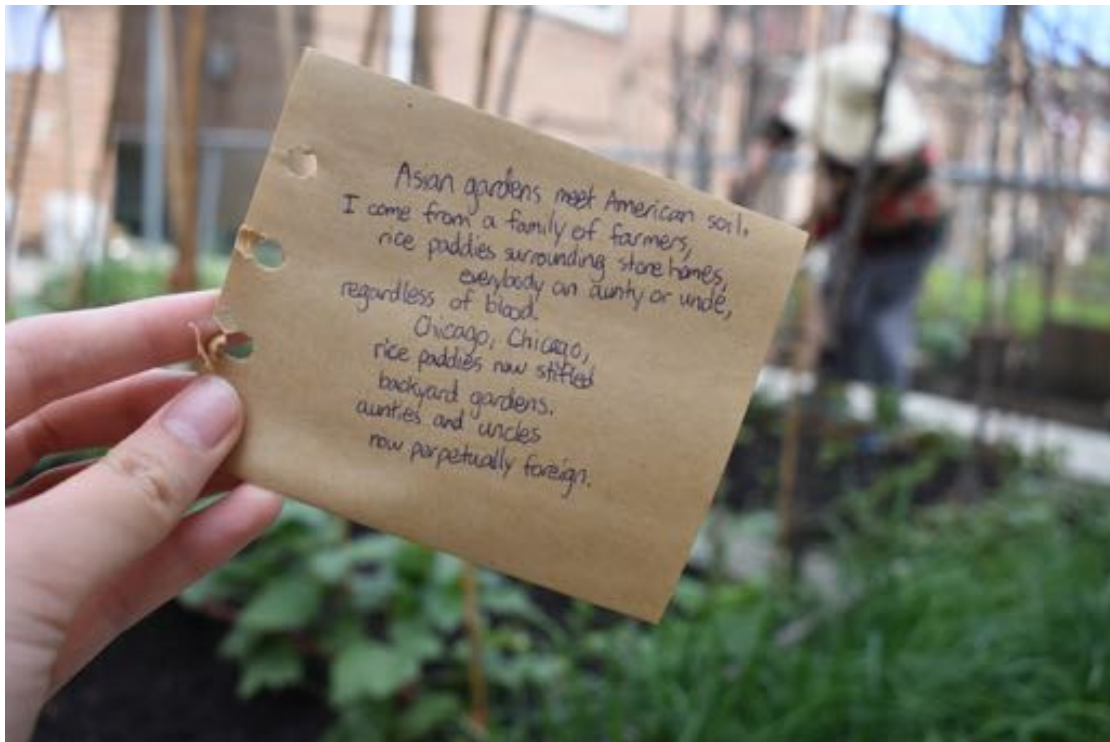
GIVING EACH ONE OF US AN EDGE PIECE, WE
STRETCH OUT THE LONG CLOTH AND SET IT
DOWN ON THE DAMP AND DIRTY FLOOR.

Drained of energy and defeated, my family and I wander the streets. We find ourselves at the foot of a little closing next to the dumpsters of a hotel. He places his bag on the floor and with his beaten-up fingers takes out a long, beautiful linen cloth. Giving each one of us an edge piece, we stretch out the long cloth and set it down on the damp and dirty floor. Reclining against the dumpster, we manage to shelter ourselves from the piercing cold whose sharp needles still manage to cut into our very bones.

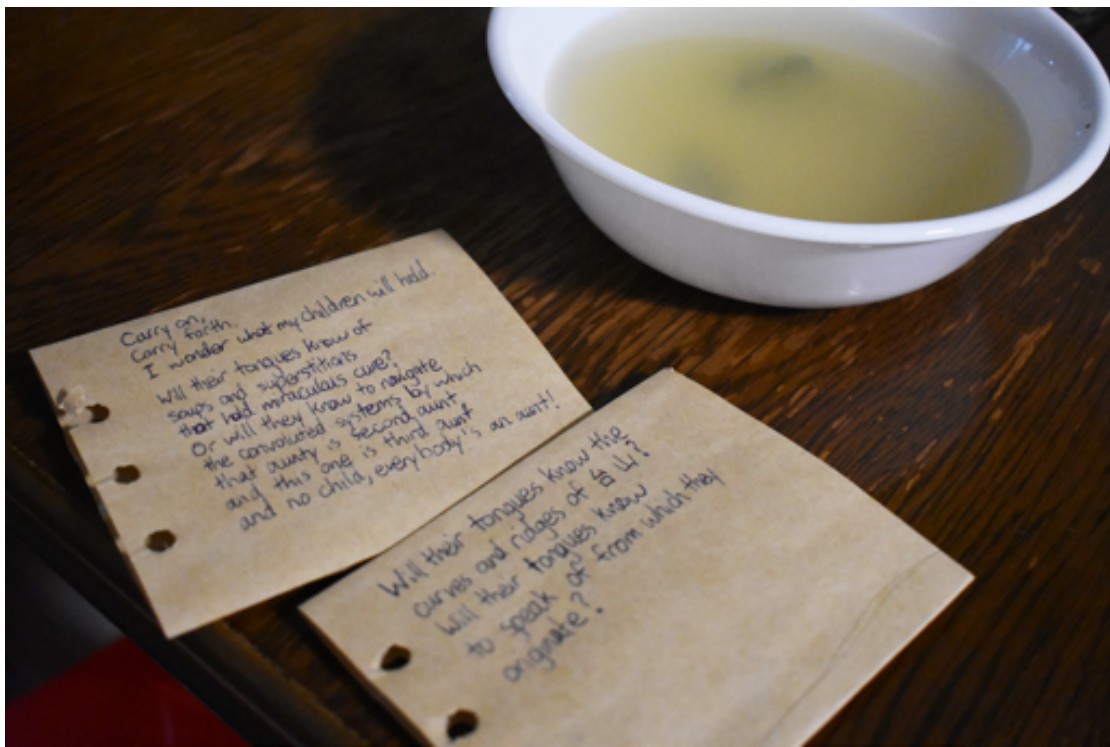
Now, we huddle together with merged arms, hands atop hands, and fingers interlocked. All together, we combine into one. One disparity in the complexity of a new world. Within this foreignness, my father's voice echoes: "We will get through this. Success comes at a cost, and I will never let you down." ■

RICE ON AMERICAN SOIL





Asian gardens meet American soil,
I come from a family of farmers,
rice paddies surrounding stone homes,
everybody an aunty or uncle,
regardless of blood.
Chicago, Chicago,
rice paddies now stifled
backyard gardens.
aunties and uncles
now perpetually foreign.



Carry on,
Carry forth,
I wonder what my children will hold.
Will their tongues know of
soups and superstitions
that had miraculous cure?
Or will they know to navigate
the convoluted systems by which
that aunt is second aunt
and this one is third aunt
and no child, everybody's an aunt!

Will their tongues know the
curves and ridges of a lip?
Will their tongues know
to speak or from which they
originate?