

Resuscitating yourself

I've never seen a dead body. I've never experienced a family member die. But I've held my best friend after her grandmother passed away. I've watched someone's face as they tell me they were the first one to find her father dead on the kitchen floor. I've never experienced the loss of a loved one to death. But I've lost. But my life began with loss before it knew love.

I was 6 months old when I met my mother. The orphanage was full of babies who were ready to be adopted, but I wasn't when I was put into my mother's arms. "I could choose you and have to wait another two months in Kazakhstan or I could pick a different baby and leave sooner" my mom tells me, "but you smiled, so I chose you." My mother, a Canadian woman who didn't speak Kazakh or Russian, lived in Karaganda for two months, alone. "I was allowed to see you for two hours, twice a day. Other than that I was in a small apartment counting down the days until I could take you home."

Home. She declared that Canada was now *my* home.

Debra Thompson, author of *The Long Road Home: Blackness and Belonging*, expresses the word "home" from the diasporic experience as the feeling of "belonging"; as something that changes as we change.

Belonging was something I didn't feel growing up. I've never met another Kazakh. Before my Canadian citizenship, my name was Saule Maratkyzy Atenbek. My mom renamed me Annika. She didn't want me to get bullied with the name Saule as she thought it sounded too "boyish". My birth certificate changed to Annika Saule Olson when I was 8 months old, when I

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was introduced to my adopted mother's Irish, Scottish, and Norwegian heritage. Annika felt uncomfortable after I moved away to university. I changed my name back to Saule at age 21.

Controversy has grown about Interracial adoption as it could be viewed as depriving one of their cultural identity, considering it as "cultural genocide" (Encyclopædia Britannica). The opposing views see adoption as a care that "promoted integration and interracial understanding" and is a better option than living in an orphanage or foster care. "Better" or "preferred" in a Western society might imply "easier". They believed it was easier to live if everyone was the same. Making *my* life easier was my mom's intention with naming me.

It was not "easy". Trying to look for identity as a brown skinned girl in a colonized country has been like looking for a monster under my bed. I grew up in a household with a white mother who burned rice. I grew up around middle-class families in "white" neighborhoods. My public school made sure we sang "Oh Canada" every morning to remind us about nationality: speak English and French, act polite and kind, land is a commodity, think about the self first. My settler teachings were strong and Kazakh bodies weren't present in my home, in my city, or on my screens. I wanted to meet a monster under my bed because in feeling alienated, there's an urge to relate to something that's different. My "whiteness" didn't feel comfortable dressed in Asian skin. I became racist towards myself. I was taught to believe I was not "good enough" when scrolling through social media as a teenager and existing in 'multicultural' Canada as a citizen. Why didn't I feel like I belonged here? Wasn't Canada supposed to be *my home*?

What does it feel like for a plant to be potted? To be taken out of earth's soil and put into a plastic mold around store bought dirt to make a house look "pretty" and "full of life". We need to be closer to nature, which means taking plants out of their native homes and inside our man-made houses. We control our environment---bring inside what we want for ourselves. We get mixed up between care and freedom. It is now a "houseplant". We water it everyday, put it beside a window—we want to care for it so much that we forget what it wants. Adopting a plant brings the goal to keep the plant alive, because survival is important now. Suddenly the possibility of neglect is stronger when it is taken out of the wild. Because possession means responsibility. No longer in the hands of Mother Nature, of its home, of its natural habitat, the house owner controls its survival.

How can we let something free when we've never been totally free ourselves?

Being a Kazakh in Canada feels like being in a group photo where I'm told to smile, so I fake one. My Canadian passport has made travel easy. My "white" name has protected me from mispronunciation. My mother's protection has made me comfortable in white innocence, but uncomfortable in a Kazakh body. A body that inhabits my ancestors' lived experiences. I hold the histories of Kazakh tribes. These nomads moved along the Kazakh Steppes with pastures, slept in yurts (portable houses), represented freedom, and wrote literature to resist Soviet rule until independence in 1991. My ancestors are strong, egalitarian, and adaptable. It's hard to hate my Kazakh body after learning about it. My Asian skin used to be something to shame, shrink, and scrutinize. Until I taught myself my roots, the skin I live in and the ancestor's I carry.

Maybe our identity is when we have the knowledge and the language to simply be who we are. Ignorance is not bliss—Innocence is not freedom, only a smaller reality. Freedom comes with responsibility, and knowing is a responsibility.

The word “identity” used to make me anxious because I knew nothing about my culture. Now I believe power comes from identity, and no matter how long I’ve lived in Canada, no nation will ever cut off my Kazakh roots. When a Kazakh moves, they take their pasture, tribe, and culture with them like a steppe eagle—their national animal. On the Kazakh flag its wings extend almost completely horizontal as they soar underneath a large golden sun. The eagle represents freedom and power, while the sun represents abundance, life, and energy. The steppe eagle migrates—it changes its direction of flight when the air changes, in other words, it belongs where it moves. It reclaims it’s home wherever it soars. As a Kazakh Canadian, a temporary home is in a place, a loving home is in people, and a permanent home is in my body, which I have learned to love through reclaiming roots. When my skin is not uncomfortable to live in, I introduce myself as Saule.

A body holds memories, memories from ancestors, from your mother and her grandmother who you may not know. It is history that exists in the body, trauma through generations which may not be lived through but felt. It is grieving that brings us closer to our ancestors. It is loving that brings me closer to my heart and it is change that brings me closer to my identity. An identity is not only culture, ethnicity, roots, religion, but the communities we belong to, the people we love, and where our soul belongs. This changes everyday. As humans we change, and being open to change helps us explore the possibilities of who we could be.

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When I lost my birth mother, my culture, my name, I also gained the courage to name myself.

What does it mean to name something, to call it yours, when it belongs to the world?

I am free when I say I change with the world.

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