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DUSK

I watch the sky to see if I can pinpoint the moment when one thing turns into another. The sun sets out of view. The sky turns blue again, deepening like shades of indigo-dyed fabric, soaked progressively longer. I watch because I don't want to miss any of it, the most beautiful and fleeting bit of day.

I watch myself in the mirror with a similar attention—not to find beauty but to see where one thing turns into another. When do I look Asian and when do I look white? Unlike watching the sky, it feels unhealthy. I want to apologize to my face in the mirror for putting it through these trials, which are not only painful but, worse, basic. My husband, who is also mixed-race, says I'm regressing. "Go look at the Kip Fulbeck book¹ or something," he says, when I ask, "Am I a weirdly white-looking hapa?" I don't like to ask it, but I know I can ask him. I know his answer won't be to study my features and give me an empirical answer, as if one exists.

Each dusk is different. Or is it that each sunset is different but dusk is always the same? I don't trust generalizations, no matter how much data I gather. I barely trust a metaphor, so easily overtaken as it can be by projection or simplification. My face as liminal or hybrid is so obvious I want to barf. If it were a lecture—"The Mixed-Race Body As Liminal Space"—I would skip it. No, I would watch it for sure.

1 *Part Asian, 100% Hapa*, a book of portraits of mixed-race Asians

Sometimes it's dark before I'm sure whether dusk has begun, the echo of a sunset hanging in a pink band along the hills. Or is that light pollution, trapped in the smog? And sometimes the sky stays blue, in a full moon. It's hard to be sure of the boundaries.

Cheekbones, eyes, hair color... in the mirror, I look at the parts. Someone, the white father of a mixed-race baby, once asked me how Japanese and American attributes mix within me. "How does oil mix with water?" he asked. He was being sincere, I felt, but the question was absurd too. Is this how people see us—as an assembly of discrete parts that could be neatly separated again? Is this how I've begun to see myself?

("The two of us would make one white person and one Asian person," the adolescent joke went, between mixed people. "If you had two babies, would one look white and the other look Asian?" a friend might add.)

Right now, to look Asian in America is to be vulnerable to attack. My mother, for example, looks Asian all the time, to anyone. She and my father live in the most Japanese part of Los Angeles. When I lived there with them, my dentist, my hairstylist, my next-door neighbors, my first boss, and the man who repaired my flute were all Japanese. "If they start shooting Asians here, they'll have to shoot everyone," my mother joked once.

(A running joke with my husband: When a car slows down alongside us while we're on a walk, then drives away again, one of us might say, "They were wondering whether to do a hate crime on us." The other one might take on the voice of the driver: "*Inconclusive, let's keep driving.*")

I look Asian sometimes, to some people. The racism I've experienced has been less often the drive-by kind and more often from someone I know well. Less about my looks and more about how comfortable they've become opening up to me. By that point, the intimacy we've built is strong enough that to call them out feels like a betrayal. I begin to feel sorry. Or I can't even do it. I smile and shut myself off concentrically from the inside. This feels both weak and uncharitable.

Sometimes I accept that if race is only about perception, my race is whatever an observer tells me it is. It can change all day, with every interaction.

I'm tempted to ask everyone, *What do you think I am?* But I have just enough self-respect to resist most of the time.

Often, people will tell me anyway, without my asking. When they do, I look in the mirror or at photos of myself, trying to see what they see, then what I know. How many perspectives can I hold at once?

In her book *The Face: A Time Code*, Ruth Ozeki, also the daughter of a Japanese mother and a white father, observes her face in the mirror for three hours, reflecting, as she does so, on Buddhism, Noh theater, and her life. She describes the way even adults couldn't stop themselves from commenting on her face when she was a child.

"They were responding to something in my features that was so existentially unsettling it excused even rudeness," she writes, "but even so, it was my face that was at fault. In its refusal to resolve into one thing or another, my face was the occasion for their discomfort."

Even I sometimes wish my face would resolve into one thing, so that I might be stably seen. Really, I'd like to be seen more as I see myself. That is, mixed. Both Asian and white, and neither. Visible enough to need no further justification.

To be seen as white is to be given conditional safety and acceptance. But when I'm seen that way, I feel only reduced, fractioned and broken, set apart from my mother. If I am white, the logic seems to go, when a white person says something hateful to me, it's not racism but one white person confiding in another. It's a thought experiment. It's open discourse. It's a joke.

I've realized I am angry all the time, though the feeling recedes and swells again. I vent it with long walks that start with the sunset and end just after dark. My favorite route goes toward the Griffith Observatory, and I like to track its domed body as it pokes out from behind fences and houses on the hills. Its walls reflect the waning light of the sky, pink and then blue, until the golden floodlights turn on and cast a liquid glow. Just as I reach my turnaround point, I feel the excess energy drain from my body.

I know how to turn anger into something soft, something layered and bittersweet with gentle power. But more often lately I want to try letting myself be openly, nakedly angry. I want to be seen as I am.

One night, I sit on the floor in front of my bookshelf and look through the Kip Fulbeck book. I had previously come to consider it shallow—a display of faces with their ethnic identifiers beside them, like a collection of pinned butterflies. The joke is on me now

that I need it. Each face rises from the page, similar to but distinct from the ones around it. Of course.

Am I regressing? Sometimes I think so. Other times I think looking is a practice, and by repeating it, I sharpen my ability to see. What I see each time is the same but changed. Blue saturates the sky again and again.