

THIS IS MY TESTIMONY

JINJIN XU



This Is My Testimony

tes·ti·mo·ny:

1. a spoken or written statement
that something is true

how might a testimony dwell in silence

Experiment #1

The coming-of-age writer is sitting in her first Fiction Workshop at a Liberal Arts College. She grew up devouring the stories of this country the way only an outsider could, by looking up each phrase and testing it out on her tongue. But certain pairings still catch her off guard. “Chock full of nuts.” Reveals, in an instant, her outsideness.

out·si·der:

1. a person who does not belong to a particular group

Experiment #2

The coming-of-age writer writes coming-of-age stories: girls surviving abortions in roiling rivers, girls fighting off fathers amongst crumbling tombstones, girls getting their periods in a field of jasmine, girls crying on flights crossing many days and oceans.

The Fiction Workshop mixes up the girls and the writer. They know it is Fiction, yet, there is an Otherness to these girls that don't quite exist in this language, so the girls must be True to the writer, so the writer must be, at once, all these girls.

fic·tion:

1. invention or fabrication as opposed to fact
2. a belief that is false, but that is often held to be true because it is expedient to do so

Fern & Rosemary
chimp & girl, a novel
 Karen Joy Fowler, 2013

GIRL:

My sister's lock-jawed silence lures
 prosecutors who sink their feral laws
 into her primordial refusal of speech,

their devotion to the rational
 scratches *so-un-d* into neat constitutions
 of human language,

barring speech
 from other realms
 distinctively non-

human, annuls our sisterhood,
 an experiment.
 Spare her,

my sister, my muted mirror,
 her animal sentence
 an act of hominid piety.

Palm to palm,
 the glass fogs;
 her truth, partitioned, slips -

con•sti•tu•tion:

1. We The People

(*ah – ee – iii- oopen– uup –*)

sen•tence:

1. a set of words complete in
 itself

(Like all sites of silence, we
 begin at the margins -)

2. punitive

(by looking for “speech” in the
 first place, we have already
 failed -)

3. deterrence

(my sister - but by that logic -)

4. rehabilitation

(we shouldn't be calling her -)

5. incapacitation

(my sister, either -)

Experiment #3

The coming-of-age writer is asked about Setting. None of the places in her stories have Names. But the Fiction Workshop insists.

Correction: The Fiction Workshop names the place, China.

Experiment #4

The Setting is True as long as it is foreign. They are interchangeable, is Beijing is Chengdu is Lhasa is Taiwan.

Experiment #5

The coming-of-age writer is asked about writing as an “Asian-American.” She knows she is neither parts of the equation. But the question is somehow fundamental to her ability to keep writing.

ques·tion:

1. an interrogative expression often used to test knowledge
2. torture as part of an examination
3. room for doubt

Gua & Donald
chimp & boy, an experiment
Florida, 1931 – 1932

BOY:

Your growl,
 my growl.

Father's search for likeness,
 my biology as his son.

Your spooning,
 my spilling.

Feet wobbling yellow overalls,
 shock of your fingers pulling, upright.

Your terror of the first word,
 my babbling trials of speech.

Father's hypothesis
 strips your animal tongue of meaning.

My imitation of you,
 self-assured in your ancient skin,

Condemns father's experiment,
 condemns you, my sister,

To orphan, to chimp, to our superior cruelty,
 casts your infant hoots out of evolution's dying vocabulary.

My nuclear family, one short,
 sheds memory, sheds childhood,

Your baby hairs gentle against mine,
 sheds me into the word *boy* -

bi·ol·o·gy:

1. the study of life
 (*my nose, my father's nose*)
2. the workings of living systems
 (*his imagination, my own*)

tri·al:

1. formal examination before a
 competent tribunal
 (*pa - pa -*)
2. made or done as a test or
 experiment
 (*repeat after me, pa -*)
3. a test of faith through suffering
 (*Come quick! She said -*)
4. & error
 (*I swear, she -*)

boy:

1. an immature male
 (*Here, he says, Where I end-*)
2. son
 (*you -*)

Experiment #6

The coming-of-age writer explains her People's definition of "Middle Kingdom," ie. the center, ancient. Only here would she write as if she has "A People" to speak for.

speak:

1. to utter words or articulate sounds with the ordinary voice
2. to serve as spokesperson

*KingKong & Charles Gemora
monster & actor, film set
Hollywood, 1933*

MONSTER:

The director asks his child,
“What is a name befitting
A Monster?”

Her screech, his laughter:
“She was reacting to your
yellow face.”

Director’s note:
*He is the last surviving member of his species.
A very lonely creature, absolutely solitary.
It must be one of the loneliest
existences you could ever possibly*

Imagine - ACTION!
His command pierces my thick costume
- I tear open my animal bellow,

Search my belly for what
they know me to be:
Fucking Little Island Boy

Never learning speech,
my gesticulations an obedient madness.
English unmoored, pure sound.

CUT! I take off
my *face half-beast, half-human,*
cough out hairs stuck to the roof

of my mouth, exposing myself as PingPong
(at least, that was their name for me
on set). My Hollywood dreams

Shape their fears, loom over their Empire,
acrobatic monkey suit clutching their erect towers,
civilization's mask rupturing with dark desire.

Admit it - They desired me, desired
to be that fallen blonde, desired to be me.

*When you stand on the ground
and you look up at it, the only thing
that can go through your mind is:
"That's a god!"*

Victorian terrors imagining my face
onto their Empirical violence,
secret monsters locked up in attics.

Oh, Sleeping Beasts of Asia,
awaken their nightmares
of Yellow Peril, Come!

*Apes, Lesser men!
Primitives, Children, Madmen!
Beings possessing special powers!*

Let us come for them!

yel·low per·il:

1. apes
2. lesser men
3. primitives
4. children
5. madmen
6. beings possessing special powers

Experiment #7

Only here would she have the authority to speak for a Dead Filipino Actor Dressed in a Monkey Suit.

Experiment #8

Correction: Only here would she speak for a Dead Filipino Actor Dressed in a Monkey Suit as if her story depended on it.

Experiment #9

The coming-of-age writer asks herself, Would She Write The Same Stories In China? She realizes she no longer speaks the language.

Experiment #10

The White Male Fiction Professor pauses the Fiction Workshop to check Twitter. It is 2016, the winner of the Prestigious Book Award is Vietnamese. "It Is All Politics These Days," he says, slamming down his phone.

Experiment #11

In the Fiction Workshop, the coming-of-age writer reads other coming-of-age stories: elderly couples disguising murders at a lake house, Goth girls chain smoking in suburbia, hysterical Russian literature students. She gives herself permission to try.

Experiment #12

She sells her childhood to strangers. "Immigrant Fiction Is So Hot Right Now," Nam Le's character is told, in his Short Story.

story:

1. an account of imaginary or real people and events told for entertainment
2. anecdote, especially an amusing one
3. a lie

immigrant:

1. a person who comes to a country to take up permanent residence
2. a plant or animal that becomes established in an area where it was previously unknown

Experiment #13

The coming-of-age writer attends a Nonfiction Workshop. She thinks her truth must be true here. She writes coming-of-age essays: her father sitting silent at the dinner table, her mother who is no longer her mother. The Nonfiction Workshop asks, “Where Is The Setting?”

moth·er:

1. a woman in authority

Experiment #14

The Professor says, “Write Into The Difference Between Your Country VS. This Country.”

2. an extreme of its kind

especially in terms of scale

Experiment #15

Correction: She is asked to write for Her People.

Gua & Donald
chimp & boy, an experiment
Florida, 1931 – 1932

BOY (again):

I am that feral boy raised in the laboratory
of my father's wildest imaginings.

My sister's cry, wakes
her clenched silence.

Would you believe me if I did not speak?

My testimony for her
unravels - How daring
it is to speak for another.

My bark awakens father's inbred duty.
Only Darwin's first-born lives to tell:
something monstrous.

His experiment concludes:
Boy's *language retardation*.

And I am that boy who avenges his father's sin
by dying, grasping life by my own mortal neck,
calling and calling to my sister's disquiet.

daily tests:

memory, body size, scribbling,
reflexes, depth perception,
vocalization, locomotion,
reactions to tickling, strength,
problem solving.

daily tests:

manual dexterity, fears,
equilibrium, play behavior,
climbing, obedience, grasping,
language comprehension,
attention span.

tes·ti·mo·ny:

1. for?

(first seven days of first-born
William Erasmus Darwin's life,
his father recorded:
sneezing, hiccupping, yawning,
stretching, suckling, screaming,
reaction to tickling)

re·tar·da·tion:

1. to hinder

(three of Charles Darwin's
children did not live past
age eleven-)

2. an abnormal slowness of
thought or action

(he writes, "My children are not
very robust"-)

3. a musical suspension

(hidden beneath his genetic revela-
tions -)

4. ableist slur

(marriage to his first cousin,
Emma Wedgwood -)

Experiment #16

She sells her childhood to strangers.

Correction: translates

Experiment #17

“Immigrant” is another Identity she does not dare take on.

Experiment #18

She imagines herself into animals, non-humans, monsters.

It is, right now, the only way.

Red Peter
chimp, a report
Franz Kafka, 1917

CHIMP:

My suffering told in your language,
falsifies.

Kafka's pen = my existence
= suffering = this speech

His idiom to describe me:
head over heels.

Preposition of logic, head imposed over feet.
Reductively human.

I learned to drink his drink,
rubbed my belly in gratitude.

Am I kin to Kafka's other creations,
anthro-creature consumed

by human desire?
Is Kafka, closeted Jew,

my father? No one
thrust a pen into my claws.

head over heels:

1. turning over completely in
forward motion

(my father's humans
metamorphosize into grotesque
creatures, rotting, consuming your
own flesh -)

2. madly in love

(the creatures take on a "human"
clarity -)

father:

1. a male animal in relation to its
natural offspring

2. an important figure in the in the
origin and early history of something

Experiment #19

The coming-of-age writer greets the pine tree outside her window. Singular, being, being.

Experiment #20

The coming-of-age writer finds herself inside a dying consciousness.

dy·ing:

1. having reached an advanced or ultimate stage of decay or disuse

Red Peter
chimp, a report
Franz Kafka, 1917

CHIMP (again):

Father famously said:
 Now I can look at you in peace,
 I don't eat you anymore.

He was speaking, supposedly, to fish,
 backlit in their exhibitionist's prisons.

Father always knew how to curry
 human flavor, warm enough.

pris·on:

1. a place of confinement for law
 breakers

*(Kafka's dietary needs & refusal
 to participate in conventional
 modes of consumption is now
 diagnosed as: atypical anorexia
 nervosa, anancastic obsessive-
 compulsive depressive
 personality, autism, depression,
 social anxiety etc.)*

writer:

1. a creature

*(J.M. Coetzee, a white South
 African male writer, imagines
 himself into a white Australian
 female writer Elizabeth Costello,
 who imagines herself into Red
 Peter, into a corpse, into Nagle's
 unthinking bats -)*

2. a creator

(language slips -)

Experiment #21

The coming-of-age writer is in the kitchen, dragging her knife across the chicken breast.

Experiment #22

She flinches.

Experiment #23

She is slicing into her own body.

Experiment #24

She greets her coming-of-age animal self.

Experiment #25

flip:

1. to cause to turn

(Kafka the writer wails through the walls of his Berlin basement-)

2. to lose one's mind or composure

(But I don't eat you anymore! -)

3. racial slur

(His family had long abandoned the sharing of meals. Had he withdrawn time to time from his writing, would they have stayed?)

Experiment #26

Monster & Frankenstein

creature & creator, an experiment, a novel

London, 1818

Every mutant longs

for a name -

Reader, you named me after my father,

but you never forgot my stitching,

my holding together

of unwanted, dying parts:

eyes watery white,

lustrous black hair, yellow skin.

read·er:

1. one that reads

2. one appointed to read to others

Experiment #27

She finds herself cornered into Poetry.

Experiment #28

The Poetry Workshop is careful to distance the
Speaker from the Writer.

“You Are...I Mean, The Speaker Is...”.

Subject-verb disagree.

Experiment #29

The White Male Poetry Professor reads us the letters
of Elizabeth Bishop. In between the syntax of her
Poems, we look for her Ghost Lover.

ghost:

1. the seat of life
2. a disembodied soul
3. a faint shadow

Experiment #30

I am asked to confess the Setting.

Experiment #31

Correction: Elizabeth Bishop never confesses.

Experiment #32

The Chicana Female English Professor reads *Jane Eyre*, pulls from the attic, a mad Creole woman who is not Jane who is not Charlotte the writer nor me the reader nor you the reader, neither seen, nor alive.

Experiment #33

“Reader,” Jane, the White Female Protagonist, says,

Experiment #34

The woman-in-the-attic comes out of hiding, driven mad
by our seeking.

Experiment #35

Here is your voice, the woman-in-the-attic says,
before the day happens, before the others come,
with their logic and sound and voice, sweeping away all
that is within reach inside you, their mismatched choir
rising like the year's first flood, its dreadful expectedness

-

Experiment #36

The Setting: 2021, New York

Between an exiled madwoman and her storied homeland,
the writer comes of age.

Experiment #37

You are happening, she says.
Again you wake, not yet weary
of the encroaching dawn,
determined to strip the real you
to a world overdressed & watching -

wake:

1. the track left by a moving
body (*such as a ship*) in a fluid
(*such as water*)

NOTES

Cover Design:

- Carson Wong

Fern and Rosemary:

- *We are All Completely Besides Ourselves*, Karen Joy Fowler

Gua and Donald:

- *Comparative Tests on a Human and Chimpanzee Infant*, W.N. Kellogg, L.A. Kellogg
- Nuwer, Rachel. "This Guy Simultaneously Raised a Chimp and a Baby in Exactly the Same Way To See What Would Happen." *Smithsonian.com*, Smithsonian Institution, 28 July, 2014

Red Peter & Franz Kafka:

- "A Report to an Academy," Franz Kafka
- *Franz Kafka: A Biography* (1960) by Max Brod, as translated by G. Humphreys Roberts and Richard Winston Fichter, M. M. (1987)
- Fichter, M.M. (1987), The anorexia nervosa of Franz Kafka. *Int. J. Eat. Disord.*, 6: 367-377.
- Kafka and Autism. The undisclosed logic behind Kafka's work. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. 47. 2336-2347.
- *Elizabeth Costello*, J.M. Coetzee

King Kong:

- NYT Obituary: Charlie Gemora, 58, Had King Kong Role
- "Yellow peril": Dower, John. *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1986.
- "A face half-beast half-human": *Van Hise, James (1993). Hot Blooded Dinosaur Movies. Pioneer Books Inc.*
- "When you stand on the ground and you look up at it, the only thing that can go through your mind is: 'That's a god!'" : "Kong: Skull Island' Director Promises 'the Biggest Kong That You've Seen on Screen'." EW.com

Monster & Frankenstein:

- “Eyes watery white, lustrous black hair, yellow skin”:
Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus, Mary Shelley

The woman-in-the-attic:

- *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë
- *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe my animal path to the wonderful probing and guidance of Geoff Sanborn and Adam Sitze.