# campur

*"Wow you weren't born here?! Your English is so good, I couldn't tell… How old were you when you came here? Oh, you were seven? Do you remember what it was like there?"* Through the years I learned to boil my responses down to maximize efficiency and minimize the urge for uncontrollable spillage. The extent of it all lives only within me, in this vessel displaced by time, a living archive of sparingly shared memories.

My twenty sixth year is quietly knocking. She knocks the way my mother knocks on the door of my childhood bedroom, where I still find myself after all these years and all the miles I have ventured. I find it amusing to think about all the life I have accrued, only to continuously return to right where I began. Western ideology and conditioning attempts to stigmatize living in the comforts of your childhood home with your parents, but I am glad to have never internalized that insecurity. To have a safe place to return to in times of hardship or mundanity is a privilege I acknowledge and will never take for granted. Besides, I cannot tell you how many profound moments I had in this room.

I watched a show some time ago while bedridden sick isolated about an Indigenous police officer leading a case on the murder of an Indigenous runaway girl. I won't dare to spoil the plot, but at the conclusion of the show the main officer reflects on how her personal upbringing impacted her involvement in the case because she resonated with much of victim's struggles, yet their outcomes were so vastly different. She reflects how "…stories have no end and no beginning. We always get a piece, picked from the whole. Stories of our futures are stories of our ancestors." I remember encountering this line and immediately pausing the show to replay it because her words made something tangible I was unable to do on my own.

I celebrated my eighth birthday, my first in the US, at Chuck E. Cheese playing skee-ball and eating pizza for the first time. I also started second grade. I remember my classmates' parents buzzing around the teacher and their kids in the classroom on the first day while I silently sat alone, not knowing what was happening because my parents did not know to come on the first day and my brain was still a *campur (pronounced 'cham-poor' meaning mix)* of Bahasa Indonesian and broken English. I had no idea what was going on. I hardly said word to anyone that day, not even to my teacher. Not a soul there knew who I was or where I came from. To be thrown into the fire with very limited tools and no guidance to navigate the intricacies of American life, let alone the zoo that is American public school system as a young little brown girl was jarring and uncomfortable, to say the least. I genuinely don't know how I survived it, but I did. I had no other choice. This life was thrusted upon me and I had to learn how to cope with the loneliness and isolation of having your canvas painted over. My understanding of

everything I ever knew up to that point was forced to be remolded into something palatable to the American comprehension.

Fast forward nine years and I find myself at an ice cream social before the start of my sophomore year of high school. I was truly American by then, not a drop of my native language resided on my tongue and I had established myself as an upstanding member in my academic and social circles. However, unbeknownst to everyone, I had entered a dark period of my life several years prior and was reaching my breaking point. I was waking up to an anger I didn't have the language for, and it had nowhere to go but deep inside. The void of angst and hopelessness amassed behind my eyes blinded my ability to envision my future, any future at all. I became a ghost in a breathing body for years of my life, hiding behind accolades that still never protected me from life's violence, volatility, nor injustice.

For years I sat in church pews watching adults cry over their sins, praying to make sense of the things our feeble minds were never meant to understand. I understood where they were coming from. I, too, wanted to make sense of it all, but I knew the answers were never going to come from a man in the sky. When I got older, I found respite in the words of strangers, taking in their poems and songs as communion, attempting to memorize and embody them more than I ever did the words of any holy book. I think it is true many find their path to spirituality when Death makes himself known; but when Death has always been a friend, he leads you to the stars. And as the stars decided, I am still here kicking.

Nine more years and I now find myself writing words I struggled so long to find the language for. Sometimes I worry that I am still watering things down. I spent so many years distilling the seasons of becoming and unbecoming into something digestible to the world, I worry I have lost too much of what I really mean in the process. How can I capture all the nuances in those pivotal moments? Who else is willing to hold these memories as lovingly as I have done with others' I hold dear to me?

I make a list of things I learned that year in the days leading up to my birthday. This ritual started as a distraction from the weight I always feel around this time of year, but it has since transformed into a grounding tool. I will have to come up with twenty six things I learned this year, though I struggle with doing so more and more each year. Truth be told, I didn't even successfully came up with twenty five things last year. You would think coming up with twenty six things one has learned from twenty six years of life would be easy, but the moment I confront the blank pages, they stretch infinitely before me. I still find myself paralyzed by the enormity of the task. Like wrangling the sun or bottling an ocean, my noble attempts quickly turns into a feat. The task of reflection is always a courageous one and even now, I still find myself transformed to the versions of me scared shitless of what all I have to face or hopelessly

lost in the void of my own making. I try to focus on identifying all the relief from the accrued losses and gains in my life, but the weight I carried leading up to my birthdays haunts me still. A decade has gone by yet grief still lurks in quiet moments. I know life is never without pain, and I am grateful for my expanded capacity for the beauty and terror within me and the world, but not knowing whether the upcoming days will be filled with torment or celebration feels like a wound threatening to reopen again and again…

My twenty sixth year is quietly knocking. She knocks the way my mother knocks on the door of my childhood bedroom where I still find myself after all these years and all the miles I have ventured, still alone, still sifting through the archives of time sometimes in pieces, sometimes all at once. The weeks leading up to my birthday are always a quiet reckoning; I am always falling apart or falling together. I look to my mirror for reassurance of existence. Sometimes the face I see reflected back is an old friend I have lost or forgotten through the years. Sometimes the face I see reflected back is a stranger.

I know my existence is just a small slice of time's archives. There are memories and people I loved and cherished then lost in these archives. Joys and disappointments nestled between milestones and setbacks in these archives. I still treasure them, but they mostly remain untouched in the many rooms of what once was. Sometimes it makes me sad to realize there are some places, people and moments I will never return to, but I am learning to let go. I can no longer afford the cost of the baggage. People always say you stop caring about birthdays the older you get because all your "important" milestones are behind you but I don't think that will ever be the case for me. There will be quiet years, the ones that mosey in and out quickly without any significance, but every year I find myself farther from the darkness I found myself in so young, is like bathing in the sun for the first time. I am outliving every fear, every doubt and every dread I have ever felt. I am at the end of this cycle, I am on the precipice of a new. I am finding comfort in the patterns unfolding before me, ones I have finally found the language for and those I have not. Whether these stories are the beginning or the end, I do not know. I only know the stars beckoned for me to follow.

I am here, I am here, I am here.