

2023

Assimilation

Khoa

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Khoa (2023) "Assimilation," *Exile*: Vol. 70: No. 1, Article 22.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol70/iss1/22>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Exile by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons. For more information, please contact eresources@denison.edu.

Assimilation
Khoa

Before I even saw my 5th grade PE teacher, Mr. Eric, that morning, I knew his last name (Adams), his race (White; all my teachers that year were White), where he was from (Colorado), and his height (5'7, which was 4 inches taller than Dad). The day I got my class schedule in mid-July, Mom and I spent an entire afternoon looking up my teachers on the school's website.

Upon seeing Mr. Eric, Mom said, "Oh, look! It's also his first year here. You guys will definitely get along."

I stared at her blankly. "How will he know?"

"Oh, he's a professional. He's trained to notice small details like that. Don't worry."

I imagined the muscular Mr. Eric greeting me in morning homeroom and then again in PE in the afternoon with his deep voice, wide smile, and colossally tall frame. Dad once told me, "If a son is greater than his father, his family is blessed." He had always said he wanted me to be at least 5'7, even though he was only 5'3. Mr. Eric was 5'7. Dad also told me a man must look strong and buff to intimidate people who threaten his family. His arms would look like thin, pencil-drawn lines if put next to Mr. Eric's sprawling biceps.

Mom didn't take a liking to just Mr. Eric. According to her, all White teachers were a lot better at teaching than my old Vietnamese teachers because they were more educated and had to go through more rigorous training to be teachers. Mom had never been taught by a White teacher before, but she knew this from reading Vietnamese articles about White people. She used to read them aloud to me. "Apple starts sales of iPhone 4 in America."

She would then show me a picture of an Apple Store with a large crowd circling around the block and say, "Look how nicely White people line up. Our people don't line up."

As she scrolled down the website, she fawned over all the teachers as she read their information out loud to me and always concluded their profiles with, "Do you feel fortunate to be able to have this education?"

"Yes!"

I envisioned myself sitting on the soft pink rug I saw during an open house and listening to an English book read aloud by the faces I saw on the screen. We didn't have a rug at my old school. We didn't have English books. We didn't even have White people.

Instead of sleeping the night before my first day of school, I was up reciting my teachers' names in the order I had their classes in, followed by the names of their subjects. I knew "8:30 was PE with Mr. Eric." I just didn't know what PE was.

That morning, I got to go to school in the car, which Dad usually took because he had to create good impressions with his new business clients. When I got in the car, I turned the air-conditioning up the entire way, which prompted Mom to immediately reach over and turn it back to low. We continued this tango for a while until she eventually said,

“Having it on too high will make you sick. But do whatever. We’re gonna be late if you keep this up.” She then pulled the gear stick, rammed the gas pedal, and navigated the rowdy 8-am streets. As I sat and listened to the sound of traffic, the gushing wind coming out of the air vents resembled a deep, booming voice and reminded me of my grating alarm that morning. I had woken up to Mom shouting,

“Just give me the keys. I don’t want him to come to school sweating like a pig. It’s a 20-minute walk. I might be late for work too.” A loud boom reverberated through the wall adjacent to my bed and the ceiling fan shuddered from the impact. My weighted blanket felt unusually light when I pulled on its corner to hastily rip it off my body.

I opened the door to Dad yelling, “You only want to look rich to them White parents. Have it your way. Here are the keys. Come pick them up.”

Dad tossed the keys towards her direction, which made a loud metallic clang that overlapped with the sound of the front door slamming as it landed on the wooden floor. Mom had her mouth halfway open to say something back but realized she had already won. The urge to talk did not go away, however, and manifested in her persistent mumbling about how she was thankful she did not have to deal with “batshit crazy” moped drivers in Vietnam. Eventually, this interrupted my daydream, and so I sat, arms raised out in front of the air vents, eyes focused on the busy four lanes in front of us, trying to pinpoint cars that Mom complained were driving too slow.

As we walked along the brick pavement, I tried to step over the lines that separated each brick tile. Slowly, the distance between my step and the next brick tile expanded, and ultimately, I took a step too large. My right arm flailed forward, letting go of my backpack strap, while my left hand reached for Mom’s sweat-lubricated hand. My right knee planted itself onto the lines separating the two brick tiles and my hands came down immediately after.

Mom looked at me straight in the eye and said, “Can you please just walk normally? People are looking.”

She hurriedly stood me up and dragged me along, with the only onlooker being the tall White security guard who greeted us as we walked in. I was slightly upset, not because I fell or because it seemed like Mom didn’t care at first, but there was no point avoiding the lines now. It was just another boring old walk.

Discordant conversations harmonized into a somewhat calming, rustling ambiance as we walked along the off-yellow, marble-plated hallway that led to my classroom. As we walked past some

students, I noticed I was the only one in pants. The typical attire, t-shirts and shorts, made guys look significantly more athletic than I did. The rubbing of the ends of my pants legs against the top of my ankle felt noticeably more uncomfortable. I looked up at Mom for reassurance. She ignored my glance, however, and kept on walking, her hands gripping mine more tightly with each passing step.

We reached a glass door near the end of the hallway. The block letters that spelled out "Class 5C" were partially hidden by stray vines that dropped down from an elaborate arch attached to the ceiling. Layered rows of plastic grass covered the bottom half of the door entirely. Through the door were two White students sitting on opposite ends of a U-shaped table arrangement, staring through the thick layers of grass. I gulped and looked down at my tucked shirt, which Mom had carefully ironed the day before. Tucking in my shirt stretched it out, which made my belly look big. I felt a light slap on my hand as I began pulling my shirt out. I gulped again. Mom opened the door, and I walked in, holding tightly onto my backpack strap.

"Hi. My name is Mr. Eric." Mr. Eric's large chest came through the door before the rest of his body did. It was so unusually bulky that his shirt rested on its distinct convex form and not his disproportionately narrow shoulders. My unassuming eyes were pulled in by its center of gravity, and could not help but follow it around the classroom.

As I continued to stare at the outline imprinted on his tight polo, he carried on talking. He spoke quickly, which made his words all jumbled up. The end of one word connected with the start of another, and together, they formed unfamiliar words that were a million syllables long. He might as well have been singing a song in Mandarin. Occasionally, I would catch words like "Vietnamese wife" (he repeated this multiple times), "skiing," and "December" and tried to piece together a story in my head. He took his Vietnamese wife skiing last December. Or maybe they met last December when he went skiing. Or maybe his birthday is in December, he likes skiing, and he has a Vietnamese wife. The confusion agitated me. I raised my hand. He noticed instantly and pointed at me, his chest now facing me directly. My eyes rested on it, and I noticed it looked even bigger than it did from the side. I rose from my seat.

"Can you repeat a bit slower what you said?"

From where I stood, I could see some students lean toward the person sitting next to them. Their lips almost touched their neighbor's earlobes. The thought of them biting each other's ears off almost made me laugh, but I managed to hold it right at the top of my throat. Cool and quiet. After a few seconds, giggles started bouncing around the classroom. I thought they too found their own behavior amusing and started laughing along, but the giggles subsided soon after my first few audible exhales. Their squinted eyes were now staring at me, wide, unblinking, perplexed. Then came more whispering.

Mr. Eric silenced the class and then said, "Guys. Let's be respectful here." He turned to me and took several steps forward. His chest now blocked half the classroom from my view. His chin dropped until his blue eyes stared straight at me.

Forgoing his gibberish language from moments before, he slowly said, enunciating each word, "I'm sorry, I didn't catch that. Run that by me again?"

I now understood each individual word, but what did catch or running have to do with our conversation? He did, however, say the word "again," and so I repeated what I had just said.

"Can you repeat a bit slower what you said?"

The whispers started back up but were quickly silenced by Mr. Eric's voice. "Come again?"

I made sure to enunciate each syllable this time, "Can. you. re. peat. a. bit. slow. er. what. you. Said?"

"Can you - Oh! Repeat myself? Yeah, I can do that."

He then repeated his story. I no longer cared for it. I was instead occupied with figuring out why my classmates were laughing at me. Was my fly unzipped? Mom caught my unzipped fly in the car that morning and pulled it up for me. Maybe it was my hair. Dad was not happy with the barber on Saturday. They got into a 15-minute spat while I sat and scratched itchy hair strands off my face. Maybe it was how my face looked. I can't change that. Maybe they noticed my big stomach. Dad had told me many times my stomach made me look like I was pregnant and that I needed to exercise to look more like a man. I can't change that, not overnight, at least. Maybe it was the way I smelled, my height, or how tanned I was or—

"Waaaaaaahhhhhhh!"

Streams of tears washed away the thin layer of blush Mom put on me every morning to make me "pop". My ugly face, my tanned skin, my big belly, my nasty body odor.

"Waaahhhhh!"

Mr. Eric paused his story and walked over, kneeling to get closer to my height. His manly chest now covered my view completely, and my head instinctively sank into it. I wrapped my arms around his shoulder, but he brushed them off and instead used his shirt sleeve to wipe my tears. His arm hair tickled my face, which turned my bawling into a bizarre half-laugh, half-sniffle. As his sleeves got progressively damper and damper, he shouted some more gibberish across the room, and one of my classmates dropped a box of tissue on my desk. He whispered some gibberish into my ear, patted my shoulders, and stood up, releasing me back into my classmates' cold, unwavering stares. I avoided their gazes with the layers and layers of tissue I pulled out until there were no more tissues to hide behind.

The staircase towards the second floor that afternoon smelled like new shoes, but with a tinge of mildew. It, too, was made of marble, though, unlike the clean hallways, there were noticeable white scratches on its brick-red surface. A line walked by us, perfectly single file, just like the lane-separated

traffic carried out by White people. Our line looked more like the messy arrangement of Vietnamese mopeds. Back in the classroom, Mr. Eric had put out his left arm and told us to line up under it. This would have been a good idea if his arm was 15 5th-graders long, but it only reached the 4th in line.

I stood near the back of the line and watched as my classmates filed into a grey metal door that separated the glossy marble surface outside and the plain wooden surface inside. I could feel a gush of cold air blowing out from the opening, and with it, a waft of bleach mixed with old rubber. The squeak of new sneakers braided with the rhythmic thumping of stomps and formed a sound that I now associate with "gym". Mr. Eric, who was outside holding the door open, struggled to stop this cacophony from getting louder and louder, and his aggressive shouting soon sounded more like a drowned-out cry for help.

As I came face-to-face with the gym entrance, Mr. Eric grabbed me tightly by the shoulders and pulled me lightly towards his side. His sudden movement made me stumble, but his tight grip drove into my collarbone and stabilized my flailing torso. We stood side by side and watched the last 2 students walk in. He then bent his back so that he was on my level and said, slowly,

"Hey. I just wanted to talk to you about what happened back there."

I turned toward him. "Yes".

"At this school, we try and not cry. Crying is bad." He dipped his thumb downward. "Are you a bad boy?"

"No."

"Ok, then repeat after me. I will not cry."

"I will not cry."

"Good boy. C'mon. Let's go." He gestured towards the gym. I followed him and felt his arm hair again, rubbing against my own. We walked in, side by side, and the gym felt warmer than the hallway outside.

"Warmup: 20 squats" was scribbled largely in bold red font on the board. I noticed that he wrote his s's from the bottom up. His p's also started at the bottom and went up with one stroke. I write my p's with two. White people really are more efficient.

When Mr. Eric noticed my inquisitive look, he pushed his two arms out in front of him and bent his knees. For a moment, I thought he was picking something off the floor, but he bounced back up, head still level with his shoulders. I realized I had seen Mom do "squats" before. Everyday, in fact.

I bent my knees all the way until my calves felt suffocated by my thighs. As I went back up, a small, delightful "pop" came out from my knee. Pop, pop, pop. I looked over at my classmates, who were not putting in as much effort as I did. Mr. Eric slowly approached me and said,

"You're doing it wrong."

I enthusiastically went down and back up again, twice, and looked up at him for praise. Instead, he was doing his own squats, and they resembled the low-effort ones I saw throughout the

row. Confused, I dipped down again, only for him to grab my shoulders and pull me up. He then used his index and middle fingers like a fork to point to his eyes. He bent his knees all the way this time.

“Cho,” he said. *Give.*

He then pointed to the ground and said, “Hai mươi.” He then pointed to a spot next to it and said “Ba mươi.” *Twenty. Thirty.*

I nodded my head. He was acting out a *chợ*, a wet market. He placed his hands on his knee and used his elbows to get back up.

“Vietnam squat. Bad,” he said. He then swung his arms in an arch over the top of his head to the front of his chest and stuck his thumb downward. “Grow up? Cho.”

Mom said, “Come. Sit. Do you want to help me prepare vegetables for dinner?”

I didn't have a choice. Maybe her voice's unusual softness was what gave it away, putting as much effort in as her paper-thin vocal cords could muster but failing to mask her discernable annoyance. Or perhaps the masterful, and rather aggressive, arrangement of her sentences rendered her question glaringly rhetorical. I knew I did not have a choice. I solemnly walked to the kitchen area and plopped down, the soles of my feet unevenly touching each other but not crossing. This formed a flesh-rimmed oval that my fingers traced inquisitively, making sure every part, from thigh-to-heel, was well-caressed. My legs acclimated themselves to the ice-like marble floor: ice-like because it was slippery, because it had off-white, silvery streaks, and because any exposed skin that touched it was in for a soul-sucking surprise. I impatiently watched as she grabbed a handful of water spinach from a moist plastic bag and bent their ends forcefully until they cracked off. She then deposited the tops into a plastic colander, immediately grabbed another handful, and repeated the same motion. I knew she saw me walk in and wanted me to copy what she was doing, but I wanted to gauge her tone now that I had shown up. I clapped my meaty thighs on the floor, which made an unpleasant “bop,” and realized I could produce a cacophony if I alternated my left and right thighs. My hellish symphony was shut down promptly by her irritated glare.

I asked, “Why do we have to do this? Just put them in a pot and boil them.” My Hail Mary to get out of work. It was instantly shot down.

“The ends are old. They don't taste very good. Stop doing that with your legs. Sit like how I'm sitting.”

I looked at her and saw a pose all too familiar. It was so familiar, in fact, that I did not take notice when I first entered. Butt hovering just above the ground, weight on both knees with two feet as points of balance. I refused to move and instead picked up a loose spinach leaf from the colander and started tearing it to pieces.

Seizing this moment to end the lull in the conversation, Mom said, “How did school go?”

“Fine.”

She glanced up from what she was doing and looked at me. I avoided her gaze and stared at the green bits of spinach leaf, now scattered all over the floor. She said, "Something wrong?"

"No."

She picked up the half-full colander and brought it to the sink. Still staring at the floor, I could hear the starting whoosh of the water lower in pitch as it went through the spinach leaves.

"Mom, do you work in a *chợ*?"

Raising her voice a little, she quickly said, "No. They're filthy. Plus, there aren't any here. Why do you ask?"

"You sit like you're working there," I said.

She turned towards me and said, "Sitting like this puts less strain on your back. Your ancestors all sat like this. None of them worked in wet markets. It's just a thing we do."

I did not know who this "we" was.

"Mr. Eric said it's bad. I don't want to work in a *chợ* when I grow up."

"You won't. He's wrong. Everyone sits like this back in Vietnam. I used to sit like this with your grandma to prepare food every day." She grabbed the now-rinsed bundle of water spinach from the colander and shook it near the sink. Water droplets splashed in a small perimeter around her. One landed near my feet.

I pressed my finger on the lone droplet as I mumbled, "Well, he's White. You're not. You're not American enough."

She froze. Her eyes widened, and she shoved her lower lips forcefully under her upper lips. I looked down at the bundle of spinach still left on the floor as a recognizable clang arose between our coil stove top and her beloved metal pot, except this time, her pot sounded denser and heavier.

The spinach leaves on the floor came in two shades: green and darker green. Mom had always told me darker spinach leaves taste worse, that "The dark green ones grew in soil with less nutrients, so they are never going to be good enough to compare."

Mom brought back the colander, now empty, and set it in between us. She mounted her body weight on her knees again and started to reach for the bundle of spinach still left. A tear streamed down her face and landed on the pile of leaves. Another followed. I inched closer to Mom and dragged my shirt sleeve up to her face to dab her tears. She wrapped her arms around my shoulder.

I wanted to cry. I couldn't cry. I pushed Mom's arms off my shoulders and got up to grab a tissue box. I wanted to be a *good boy*.