Once, in first grade, we played Pantomime. The game was simple: to play, you acted out a gesture or action that the class would have to guess.

One kid mimed eating a bowl of spaghetti; the next mimed brushing her teeth. Another kid skipped back and forth across the room, pretending to fly a kite.

It was my turn. I stood up in front of class, then bent at the knees and pretended to lift a heavy object in each hand. I stepped to the right, stepped to the left, climbed a few imaginary stairs then settled into an imaginary seat. I stared out as if taking in a view, shut my eyes then

popped them open, as though waking from a deep sleep. I stood up and walked across the room, looked at the ceiling, floor, and walls, gave a nod to signal that I was done.

Someone guessed I was going to the dentist; another thought I was on a ride at Disneyland. I shook my head, annoyed that no one could get it right. I acted it out a second time, a third; everyone was stumped. Mrs. Wade, my teacher, said, "Tell us the answer."

I looked at the class. "I'm in the Philippines," I said, "and I'm getting on an airplane and I'm flying to the United States." Then I took my seat, frustrated that no one had understood what I'd meant, when it was all so obvious and clear.

I had no idea what I was talking about.

I seven months old when we left the Philippines for America. All I know from that day is what I've been told by my parents and siblings—that our relatives saw us off at the airport and wept, that my grandmother asked my parents to leave me behind with her, so that she could keep at least one of her grandchildren. We flew from Manila, had a long layover in Tokyo, arrived in San Francisco. My father was in U.S. navy, but the military housing promised to us wasn't ready, so we spent our first days in the Navy Lodge, in a room with two double beds and a small black and white TV mounted so high on the wall no one could reach it.

We finally got housing, in a town called Lemoore, in the middle of California. We bought a yellow Volkswagen Beetle and an upright piano, though no one in my family could play. My siblings enrolled in school, did their best with what English they knew. My mom stayed home with me, so lonely that my sister, who was lonely too, sometimes called her on a payphone between classes, to make sure she was okay.

I was an infant then, but I'm convinced that I have one perfectly clear memory from that time: a bird swoops into the room, darting wall to wall like a ricocheting bullet, barely grazing the edge of my sister's face.

A few years ago, I asked her about it. "When we arrived," I said, "those first few days, did a bird fly into the house?"

My sister, who is fifteen years older than me, looked puzzled, almost skeptical. "You *remember* that?" she said.

I've always been told: *you had it easy.* It's true. Unlike my parents and siblings, there was no new language for me to learn, no old one to keep—English is all I've ever had. The loved ones we'd left behind I never really knew; I couldn't truly miss them. Even the food I craved was all-American; one of the first words I ever spoke, apparently, was *McDonald's.*

And the question of home had only one answer: here. As in, *now.* As in, *America.* Despite three trips to the Philippines—when I was seven, twenty-seven, then forty—they were always visits. But for my family, it was different. For them, those trips were returns.

As I write this, we're in the process of selling my parents' house in San Diego, the one I grew up in, the only real home I've known (I live in San Francisco, a likely renter for life). I visited the house a few weeks ago and found it empty, carpet and wallpaper the only things left. But instead feeling bigger, every room was boxy and cramped, the ceilings lower than I remembered. Even the stairs seemed to have fewer steps. "It shrunk," I said.

The first time I ever saw a Filipino character in fiction was in college, in a story called "Fighting For The Rebound" from the story collection *The Middleman And Other Stories* by Bharati

Mukherjee. In it, a woman named Blanquita, a former aristocrat from the Philippines, struggles with her new life in Atlanta, and with her relationship with Griff, her American boyfriend. She's a supporting character, but vivid on the page—smart and opinionated (she tells Griff: "'You're all emotional cripples. All you Americans.'"), manipulative but sympathetic. I wanted more of her, and more people like her, in the books I read.

The next semester, I took my first creative writing class, taught by Bharati Mukherjee. My stories weren't good, and a classmate called them immigrant-tragedies-of-the-week, even pointed out how long-buried, life-altering secrets were always revealed two pages before the end. But I worked harder for that class than I ever had before, had sleepless nights because of it.

I teach and I write. I spend time with my partner, see family and friends when I can. I've been traveling in recent years, and hope to do more. None of this makes for compelling fiction.

The part of my life that inspires my work is the part I don't remember—those first days and weeks in America, the few years after. Maybe I'm wrong, but I'm convinced that period could somehow explain everything that's happened since, be the true reason of every good or bad decision I've ever made, help explain whatever I've won or lost.

Departure and arrival. Letting go and holding on. They define, to some extent, every immigrant's story, mine included. And yet I can't really tell it. I can't write it, either.

At readings, I'm sometimes asked if the stories in *Monstress* are true, if they really happened, if they're based on my life.

I've never beaten up the Beatles or run through the night dressed as a superhero. My grandfather wasn't a scam artist faith healer, and I've never starred in monster movies. The

circumstances surrounding these characters are emotionally-charged and highly dramatic, sometimes weird or absurd, often bewildering. Plot is my way into narrative, a circuitous path toward character.

But *Monstress* is emotionally autobiographical. The characters grapple with tensions familiar to me, to those closest to me. They struggle between familial history and individual destiny, seek out personal victories amidst so much loss, fight to be who they are against forces that demand they be someone else. And for most of my characters, these conflicts stem from leaving home, from crossing over from one country to another—an act of bravery, fear, genius, stupidity, defiance, compliance, regret, hope. An act I committed yet can't recall. The best I can do is make it up—write it as fiction, act it out as pantomime.

The last story in *Monstress* is called "L'amour, CA." The plot: a family moves to America, tough times ensue. As stories go, it's perhaps the most ordinary in the book, utterly familiar, the kind of thing that happens every single day.

It took me ten years to write.