

SHAPE SHIFTING

By Lara Parmiani

I'm not whole. Some women are whole, smooth and fertile and... perfectly round. Like an egg... like in that Suzanne Vega song, do you know it? I saw her once. 1992, Suzanne Vega playing in my town and I don't know how we end up backstage and she's nice or pretends to, asks us questions, probably has no idea what the hell she's doing in that industrial suburb surrounded by dismembered factories... Dismembered? No that's not what I mean. (typing sound) Vacated? (typing sound) Neglected (typing sound) Dismantled? (typing sound)

Disused? Is that a word? (Sighs)

I am not articulate. I know what you're thinking oh but your English is so good! No. Not for my standards it isn't, not when I have to ask a native speaker to double check, not when I'm describing a factory and I need to google what I'm trying to say, no! nah-uh. That is not me. I knew words. Words were my thing, I was never that pretty but I was articulate and people listened to me. Because I knew how to speak.

'Oh, she is destined to great things', my teacher said when I was in fourth grade, ok, she had a tendency to exaggerate. But I knew words. Now those words, the native words that I used to have on the tip of my tongue, those words are fading like an old photograph and the new language, this language I'm speaking now, still has... gaps. Holes. Crevices and precipices that I can fall into. It's like walking on a minefield.

You know when a building used to have a purpose and now it just stands there? Decrepit (typing sound) Abandoned? (typing sound) Dismantled? Partly dismantled because it's still there. In 1992 the factories in my town are still there but empty, skeletons of dark concrete and metal, they used to stand proud and shining and now, now they are falling apart and crumbling... like my language.... and she looks amused, the American singer, and we're dying to talk to her and show off, but our English is poor and we feel so embarrassed because we are the cool kids, the smart kids, those who write poetry in secret diaries yet there we are... Smiling like puppets. Like some stupid... fans. I'm not a fan.

I am not invisible. I wanted to be. The first thing I felt when I landed in my new country was freedom. I could be anyone. Except I can't.

I had a landlady when I arrived. A nice, well meaning, whole, smooth, egglike English lady with fine hair combed back like... like that thing that is linen before you weave it, straw? (typing sound) Jute? (typing sound) flax? You know fluffy and yellow and slightly dead? She says "I don't need to hear you speak to know you're foreign. I can tell by the way you walk into a room. You should practice. Next time you go shopping, enter the shop like an English woman".

How do English women walk into shops? Also, which English woman? Who is she? How old? What does she do?

So it's not just words, and gaps, and crevices that give you away. It's posture too. It's your body.

Yes, the first thing I felt when I landed was freedom. I'm on a train... whizzing through fields and fields and fields, empty, covered in purple lavender. It's summer. I am inebriated. By the flowers, the fields, the stations, the signs. The next stop is... Unfamiliar sounds. Consonants, diphthongs, words that are just background noise, like songs with lyrics you can't work out.

Has it ever happened to you? That all of a sudden after years, you listen to an English song and you understand the lyrics and it's like forcing a lock, opening a secret chest only to find a crappy piece of plastic in it. Really? Is this what I've been listening to?

The train arrives at the main station. I could decide to get lost. Forever. Who would notice? I am nobody. A blank canvas. I could board trains, walk along streets, canals, alleyways, invisible.

I am powerful. I only have a small suitcase. I am light. I walk through neighbourhoods with houses like in children's drawings, red bricks and pointy roofs and tiny gardens... I never had a garden. I grew up in a flat on the seventh floor looking at those steel factories, and beyond them, white mountains hanging in the air like old, bearded giants watching over us. Except most days we couldn't see them at all because of the fog. Acrid smog, grey, concrete and shreds of mountains. That is my postcard country for you.

I'm completely alone, and free, and I am a superhero in this strange land. I could transform into anything I want and build a whole new life, a whole new world. But then I walk into a shop like a foreign woman.

And reality strikes.

Hai deciso di vivere lontana dalla realta.

I chose to remove myself from reality, people back home have said to me. Apparently, it's easier being far, you don't see the pain... Your parents getting old, your country turning into a total mess, no future for our children, your friends becoming middle aged, and cynical and slightly overweight. How do you manage to stay slim? Tu non vivi nella realta.

Oh. I'm sorry,

Is reality a slightly overweight middle-aged woman who never left home? Does reality only happen in one place? Was there a straight line, a destiny, a clear thread going from my birth to my death all in one place and I made the sin of changing it? Twisting it, taking it somewhere else?

You decided to leave, change the normal, the expected, the right course of your life, you felt you were special, now your children will belong to another country, they won't be speaking your language! but I don't have children... So there you go, you don't even have children there, or a husband, you lead a selfish life. Away from reality Lontana dalla realta. Besides, if you didn't like things here, why didn't you just stay and change it?

I'm not brave. The brave stay. Fight. Change the culture change the rules change the politics change that man interviewing me for that job, sending me out into the hall for a moment 'please can you wait here for a second?' then returning to his office, talking to his partner, 'where did we find this girl, she doesn't even have tits'. I should have stayed.... fought, walked back into that room and said, 'sorry WHAT?' Instead, I ran away in tears, from that

man, that office, that corrupted horrid capital city that I hate, I don't care how beautiful it looks in the postcards, I left and moved countries so that I could walk free, light, invisible, the woman with no tits, ghostlike, past little gardens and red bricks, a face in the crowd, a superhero... until I walk in a shop like a foreign person and that screws it. Ruins it? Spoils it? Destroys it? No screw is fine

The shock of discovering you're foreign is hard at first. People speaking slowly to you. With a smile. Or rolling their eyes, it depends. Builders catcalling shouting "Ola!" Ola? Why? The realisation that far from setting you free and making you a superhero the foreignness makes you smaller, fearful, peculiar. The terror of voices on the phone spelling addresses too fast and you miss them and you don't dare say 'sorry can you repeat?'. You hang up and look at your piece of paper and the name you scabbled or scribbled or, whatever, written on that flipping notepad makes no sense where the hell is this place.

So, what is it that you do? Why is it that those from somewhere else always have to do something special? Be unique, make a contribution, why can't we just be? What do you do? I practice shape shifting. Language chasing. I look for firm things to hold on to. It takes a long time. It can be exhausting.

I used to have words.

The foreign language creeps up on me, like a virus taking hold of its host. I dream in it. Do I have an accent when I dream? But the old one is still there, fighting it, and the result is the free flow of language is blocked, in both directions. It's chaos. My mind is a battlefield. I can't just speak, open my mouth and wait for sounds to materialise. My brain always needs to be switched on. Which language, which person, who am I? There is always an effort, a strain, a barrier, an obstacle. Like clots. I have clots in both my languages. Little bumps, barriers, slowing down the current. Creating muddy swamps where words get lost, trapped, hooked.

When I was little, I used to play make believe, I created voices in my head. My mum wanted to have me checked by a doctor just in case I was schizophrenic or something. Living in a foreign land is like having multiple voices in your head, always.

I am not mad. I'm not a person. I'm somebody I am playing.

And then over time the old language also starts escaping you, it fades little by little, like in old people, who can't find the words, so they look at you, eyes wide open, help me, I know what I want to say but the words fail me and I used to be this clever person and now look at me, help me.

I saw that look in my father's eyes. Gasping for words. Then giving up. Choosing silence.

I am not a tortoise.

Somebody once told me people who migrate are like tortoises, struggling under the weight of that home that they take with them everywhere they move to. I'm not sure it's right. I think we leave bits of home along the way, we shed them like skin, scatter them and in the

end, we just have a skeleton left. Bones, random bits, mixed with new bits we have picked en route without noticing. And one of those bits we shed is words.

Years fly by and I bet my fourth grade teacher would be disappointed as I have not achieved any great things other than excellence in shapeshifting and there's no special award for that. But I can walk into a shop like an English woman. Whatever that means. "A" English woman at least. I walk into shops like an English woman and sometimes I am served by people from my country who call me Madam and speak to each other in my native language thinking I don't understand. And outside when the builders catcall and shout Ola, I answer "I can't speak Spanish, mate".

I'm not whole. I play with voices in my head. Sometimes they make a nice piece of theatre.