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Seeing Cuba from a Parking Lot in Miami

[\(/vanessagarcia\)](#) **Vanessa Garcia** [\(/vanessagarcia\)](#)
Nov 03, 2021

I used to think Miami was a kind of carbon copy of Havana. But I was wrong. We are not a copy, but a conversation.

Several years ago, I was with Papan, my grandfather, who was in his early nineties back then. We were driving out of a shopping mall in Miami, after having bought him some comfortable walking shoes. He was very picky about his sneakers, and we'd found the

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perfect pair with just the right amount of cushion and the right amount of style—we were in an excellent mood. As we were coming out of the dark parking lot, driving down the ramp, into the light, we could see a view of the city from above.

Papan said, “Que linda es La Habana.” *How beautiful Havana is.*

I looked over at him, at his half smile, his eyes looking out into the distance. Then I looked back at the view, and my heart sank, just before I saw what he saw: Havana.



APPLY NOW

I knew, logically, that we were looking out at a section of unincorporated Dade County, a piece of city between Coral Gables and Coconut Grove. And I knew, logically, that what was happening to Papan’s mind was a crossing of brain cables. His memory had been bleeding lately, slipping into dementia. Back then, I used to spend every Tuesday with him and my grandmother. Called those “Tuesdays from Mars,” playing on the word *marte* in Spanish, which means both Tuesday and Mars, give or take an s at the end.

I knew the drill of those Tuesdays. We’d be doing something completely ordinary, making lunch, and then something would slant. The day would become a crooked frame through which I had to tilt my head to look, in order to better understand my grandfather. All of a sudden, Papan would ask me where my grandmother had gone, even when she was standing right in front of us. Or he’d ask where his brother, Pedro, had disappeared to, claiming he’d just been speaking with him, though Pedro had been dead for years. Papan had escaped three tyrannies with Pedro—Franco’s, Hitler’s, and Fidel Castro’s, in that order. It was hard

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to imagine life, or crossing any border, without his big brother. Perhaps that's why when Papan got closer to crossing his final border, he'd created a figment of Pedro to be by his side.

But that day, as I looked out onto Miami with Papan from that parking lot, nothing slanted. Instead, something clicked. I had just been to Cuba for the third time in my life, despite the fact that I considered myself Cuban—an American-Born Cuban. From our parking lot, I saw the short buildings, the canopy of Caribbean flora, green with life, vigor, and the dance of morning. The flamboyant trees

(<https://www.uncommoncaribbean.com/caribbean/flamboyant-tree/>) adding flashes of orange flame to the portrait. The pinks of walls. The Mediterranean architecture lingering over design, the promise of arabesque Spanish tile in the distance. My imagination drifted west toward Miami's Biltmore Hotel in Coral Gables, whose architects also designed Havana's Hotel Sevilla. All the pieces were there.

This was, indeed, a very similar view to the one I'd just seen on my trip to Cuba, where I stayed at a casa particular—homes that Cubans rent out, Airbnbs before Airbnb existed—in the neighborhood of Vedado, the same neighborhood my grandparents were from.

“Sí, Papan, sí,” I replied to my grandfather that day, “que linda es la Habana,” realizing that was the closest he would get to Havana's true shores before he joined his brother Pedro on their last adventure.

Papan died this year at the age of ninety-eight, on April 3—my birthday. His death set us all adrift. With his absence, my mom keeps saying she feels like a woman without a patria, a homeland. I can understand why. She was kicked out of Cuba when she was five, and it was my grandfather who carried their country inside him. He carried it inside him when he looked out and saw it in Miami. He projected it onto my inherited memory forever. Or perhaps, before that, he encoded it into the helix that makes *me*, into the geography of my biology.

My family is a family of exiles. When they left Cuba, they were called *gusanos* by Castro, no better than vermin. So was everyone who thought differently, who refused to succumb to Castro's tyranny and dictatorship, like Papan and Pedro, who were hospitality union organizers in Havana. Papan and Pedro had seen communists and fascists at work in

Europe, had escaped their grip, and, as a result, were pro-democracy and anti-communist in the face of the Cuban guerillas. Because of this, Papan and Pedro became wanted men when Castro finally came to power.

My grandparents had heard about many middle-of-the-night knocks on the door that ended in paredón, or death by firing squad. Others ended in summary trials followed by long imprisonments. So when Castro's militia came literally knocking on Papan's door, Papan escaped through their apartment window; my grandmother, Maman, very pregnant at the time, made up a story for the militia about how Papan had cheated on her and was out in East Cuba somewhere, "probably with his mistress." She was a good-enough actress to get the militia off her back long enough for my grandparents to go into hiding and plot an escape.

The plan: My grandfather would escape with the help of a friend who worked at the Venezuelan embassy. This friend—let's call him Roberto—would meet Papan at the corner of the embassy. Roberto would then drive Papan in, incognito. Once inside, Papan would claim asylum and would wave to my grandmother from the window: safe. Maman, who at that point had already given birth, would then escape on a ship called the *Marques de Comillas*, to Spain, with my five-year-old mother and newborn aunt. Papan would, as soon as he could, meet them in Spain.

Everything did not go exactly as planned. Roberto bailed on Papan, didn't show up the day he was supposed to. As the time passed, my grandfather imagined the worst and tried to make an alternate plan. He saw that between the spot where he was standing and the Venezuelan embassy were a series of yards he could run across to get to the back entrance of the embassy. He did this, like an action hero doing his own stunt.

Once in the yard of the embassy, he saw guards huddled toward the front of the building; the sky was promising a downpour. The threatening deluge gave the guards a blind spot and an avenue for Papan: a staircase to the roof. But then, as the guards returned to their regular posts after the rain, Papan found himself stuck. For days, he survived on the fruit of a mamoncillo tree that hung over the roof. Until, one morning, he spotted an open window in the embassy and scaled the side of the building during another rainstorm. Turns out the window was a bathroom and Papan jumped in on a man taking a shower, also a refugee.

Finally, the next day, arm in a sling, Papan waved discreetly at Maman from the window, and my grandmother boarded the *Marques de Comillas* soon after. Pedro, however, did not join the plan of escape. He wanted to stay and fight. He'd fled enough, he said. As a result, he ended up captured and was tortured in Castro's prisons for nine years, until Papan got him out with the help of the Spanish and American governments. My grandfather always used to tell me that more stressful than getting out of Cuba were the years he spent trying to get his brother out, unsure whether they would ever see each other again.

For a long time, my family could not return to the island. Even when they legally could, they felt it would have been unethical to feed tourist dollars to the dictatorship that exiled them and murdered those they knew. If they were going to return, it would be to a free Cuba.

Many who were exiled from Cuba to Florida in the '60s and '70s thought of Miami as a momentary point of pause, a place to hold footing while our country regained its democracy. It was, in other words, a place between worlds. A stop in transit. A parking lot. But around that parking lot soon grew trees, roots, homes, elaborate bridges. As the teeth of Castro's regime sunk deeper into Cuba—taking away one freedom after another, codifying repression into the very constitution, hiding its corruption from the rest of the world—that parking lot, Miami itself, slowly became a free home away from home, echoing a once-free Havana.

For many years, I learned about schools and shops that had been replanted in Miami from Cuba—replicas of what had once been on the island. I learned that my friend's restaurant Centro Vasco was actually a re-creation of the restaurant her family had owned in Havana, that the shoe store my paternal grandfather, Tachi, opened in Little Havana was an attempt to bring back their shoe store in Sagua la Grande, which had been nationalized—stolen from his family at gunpoint.

I used to think Miami was a kind of carbon copy of Havana. But I was wrong. We are not a copy, but a conversation. We are in a call-and-response with the island of Cuba, a continual and constant song with our people, which works its way through water—or rather, which the water helps to carry. No authoritarian government can remove that connection, no matter how hard it tries. When Papan saw Cuba from a parking lot in Miami, it was not about some sad-sot Lear losing his thread. It wasn't a pathetic or sweet nostalgia either. It was power, the future, a network, the unbreakable bond of family, a pulse we share that cannot be quieted.

I used to think Miami was a kind of carbon copy of Havana. But I was wrong. We are not a copy, but a conversation.

About three months after Papan died, on July 11 of this year (<https://www.onthisday.com/events/july/11>), the people of Cuba took to the streets all over the island. They took to the streets in protest, demanding their liberty from a tyranny that has imposed itself on our island for over sixty-two years now. For many people who live under democracies, it can be difficult to understand what it means to throw yourself to the street under a repressive regime, such as Cuba's. It means that you are putting your life and the life of your children at risk. So much so that even people in exile often choose not to say or do things against the regime because it could affect their family in the homeland. Knocks on the door, like the one Papan received, still exist on the island.

After the people went out into the streets of Cuba on July 11, Miguel Díaz-Canel—Raúl Castro's hand-picked successor, who the Foundation for Human Rights in Cuba calls a “shadow puppet president”—went on national television and told the world and its people that they would secure Communism at all costs (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CRM51ijBblN/>), even if that meant killing its own people. There's a word for that: democide (https://books.google.com/books/about/Death_by_Government.html?id=aYBrAgAAQBAJ&source=kp_book_description).

The Cuban government has been committing democide (<https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/cuba/article118282148.html>) for over six decades. The world has remained ignorant because dictatorships are good at burying truth, painting facades, controlling the narrative. Since July 11, over one thousand people (<https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/human-rights-watch-says-cuba-arbitrarily-abused-arrested-protesters-july-2021-10-19/>) have been jailed for protesting peacefully.

Among those people are artists like Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara (<https://time.com/collection/100-most-influential-people-2021/6096092/luis-manuel-otero-alcantara/>) and Maykel Osorbo (<https://freedomhouse.org/article/cuba-we-condemn-detention-musician-and-activist-maykel-osorbo-and-support-international>), who peacefully demand freedom of speech and expression. The government also completely disappeared (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/08/cuba-amnesty-international-names-prisoners-of-conscience/>) people like José Daniel Ferrer (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/leading-cuban-dissident-jose-daniel-ferrer-ordered-serve-four-year-pri-rcna1701>), a peaceful opposition leader. Ferrer is no longer disappeared but is still in prison (<https://www.prisonersdefenders.org/2021/09/11/rechazamos-el-nuevo-trato-cruel-a-jose-daniel-ferrer-y-su-familia/>), and it is clear he has been, like Pedro, tortured (<https://democraciespaces.com/trending/2021/1/13/uyx1klxxxz02gc45xry97kjowr84m9>). During the protests, the government not only imprisoned people but also shot them dead (<https://www.miamiherald.com/article252777713.html>), in the back, for being on the street, calling for liberty.

Since July 11, I have come to this parking lot quite a bit. I stand here and I look out at Miami and take up my grandfather's fight. There's a lifeline here I can't help but feel is connected to those days on the rooftop of the Venezuelan embassy, when my grandfather's flight was his fight. Now, my fight sits in the pocket of my palm. My cell phone, my computer, and my words are my weapons.

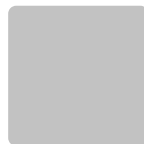
The internet is one of the things that is cracking the mirage that the Cuban government has created. Though the Cuban government shuts down the already-censored internet on the island whenever it wants, some Cubans were able to get images out of July 11 and the days that ensued. Despite all odds, many have found ways to rig connection, to get information to the outside world. It's for this reason that Cuban Americans have asked the Biden administration and companies to provide the Cuban people with internet (<https://www.rubio.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2021/8/senate-adopts-rubio-scott-amendment-to-provide-internet-to-cuban-people>).

From where I stand, I can share the messages I hear from my family, from friends, from fellow artists on the island; I can verify truths through networks I have created over the years, through that unbreakable bond of family—that pulse we share that cannot be quieted,

no matter how hard the regime tries. I can amplify the messages my people want to share through social media (<https://www.instagram.com/vanessagarciawriter/>), my writing, speaking, conversations with friends and strangers.

There are thousands of literal and figurative parking lots around the world now. The Cuban diaspora is over two million strong. These are people whom the regime has tried to silence, who have been exiled from their country. It has taken, in some cases, generations, but they have learned the languages of the places that took them in, took us in. And we are, together with the Cuban people on the island, unmasking the dictatorship in those many languages, around the world, from our individual parking spots, where the higher we go, the better the reception. And we need *all* of the reception right now.

I am sitting in this parking lot now, writing this, speaking with my grandfather, and to you. Just like Papan needed to conjure Pedro, I need Papan now. Because we are, right now, attempting the seemingly impossible. We are, upon the anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, in November, attempting to break down our own wall. The people inside Cuba have already said they will hit the streets again in November (<http://translatingcuba.com/category/14ymedio/>), despite the government's threats. We are here, perched. Ready. Because this is no longer just a parking lot. It can't be. It's a launching pad.



(/vanessagarcia)

Vanessa Garcia (/vanessagarcia)

Vanessa Garcia is a multidisciplinary writer who has written for Sesame Street and Caillou, among other shows. Her debut novel, *White Light*, was named one of the Best Books of 2015 by NPR, and won an International Latino Book Award. Her plays, most recently *The Amparo Experience*, have been produced around the world. She co-hosts a podcast with her mother and sister, called *Never the Empty Nest*. Her pieces have appeared in *The LA Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post*, *National Review*, *ESPN*, among others. She holds a PhD from the University of California Irvine. www.vanessagarcia.org

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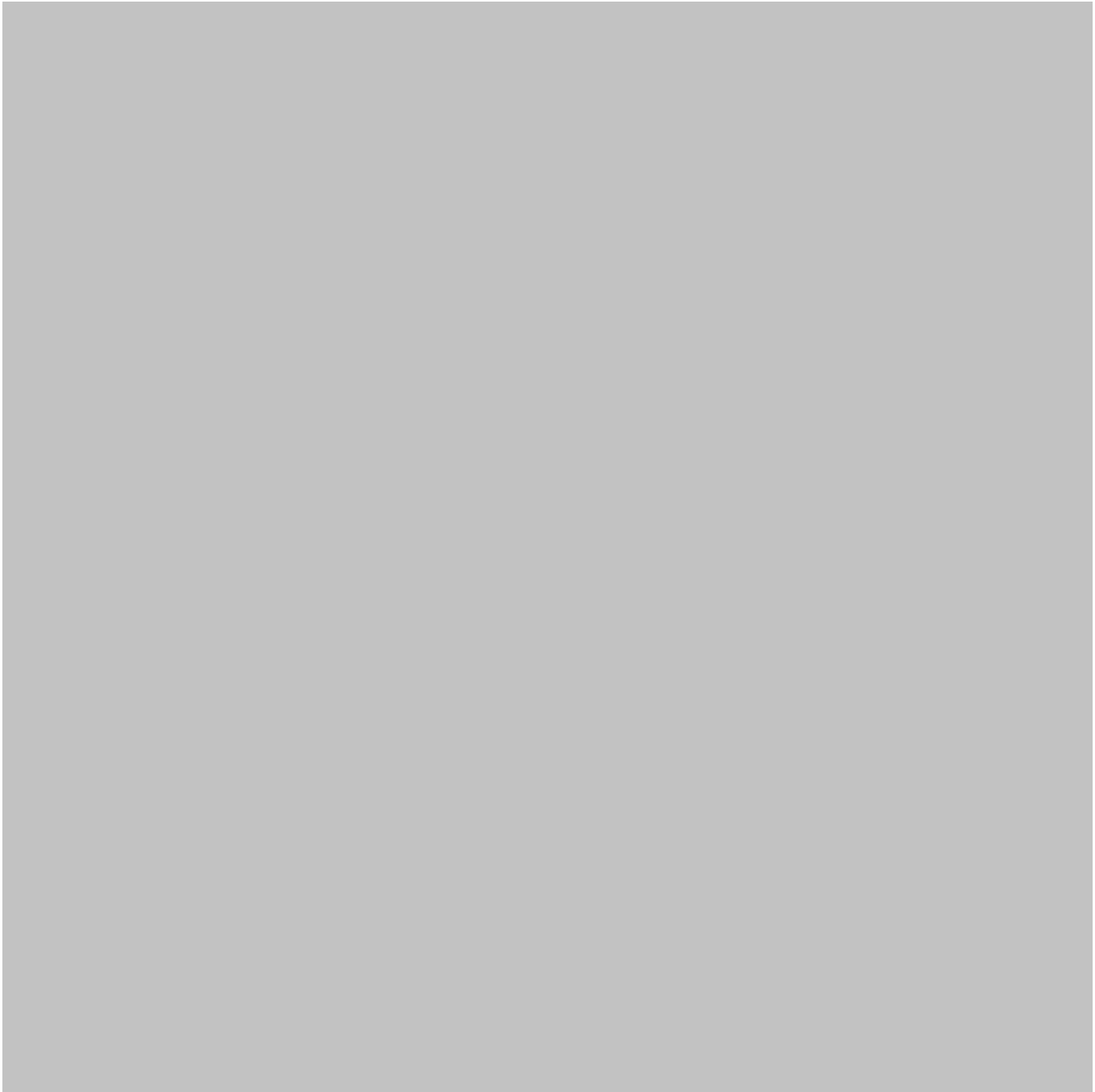
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We'd denounce the marches and torches and chants. When that moment passed, we'd continue to live with the ghosts of our country's peculiar legacy.



(/patricegopo) **Patrice Gopo** (/patricegopo)
Jan 14, 2019



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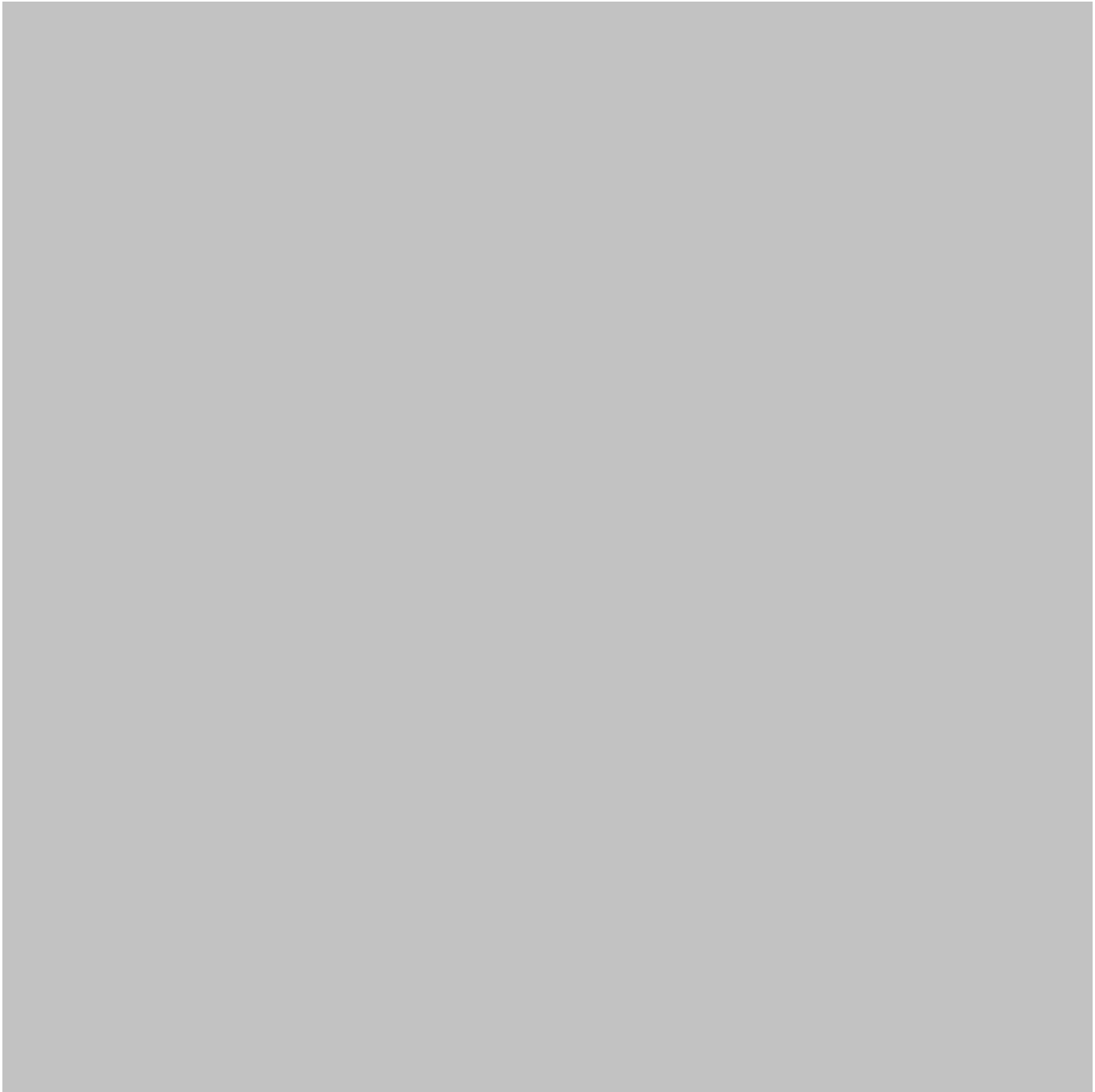
I Wanted to Know Why the Ocean Ate My Grandfather (/stories/indonesia-chinese-ceng-beng-immigration-family-traditions-theodora-sarah-abigail)

As a child of many cultures, I wasn't sure I could lay claim to one. But I learned that identity can grow and stretch, widen and encompass more than a single country or language.

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(/ebi) **Theodora Sarah Abigail (/ebi)**
Feb 26, 2019



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A Eulogy for All the Black Boys Who Loved the Sky (/stories/a-eulogy-for-all-the-black-boys-who-loved-the-sky-jordan-thomas)

I'm longing for the day when folk like me and Trayvon and Korryn and Lennon and Aiyana and Botham don't need to be lucky to stay alive.

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(/jordankcasomar) **Jordan K. Casomar** (/jordankcasomar)
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