Cultural Daily

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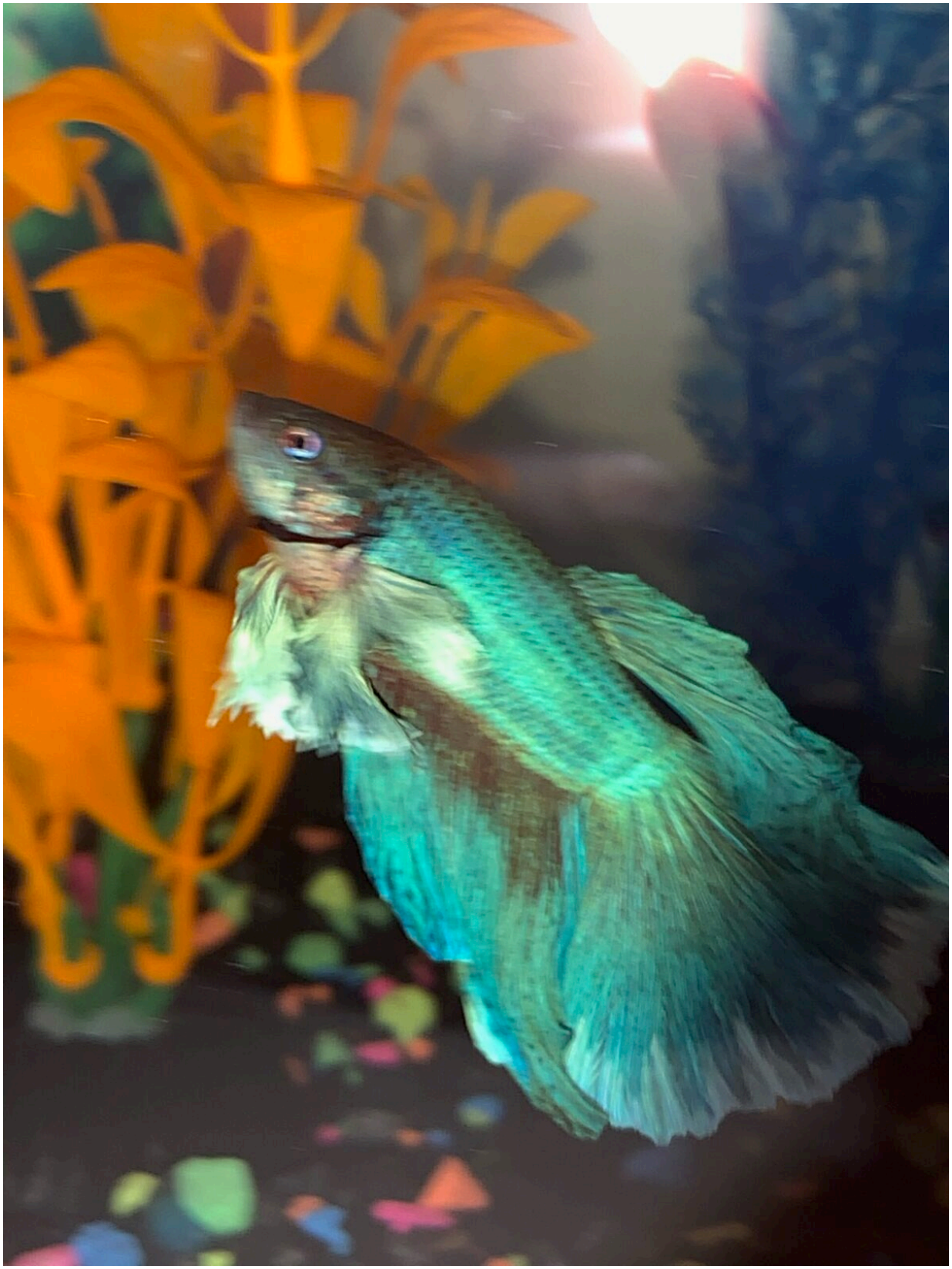
in a dream you saw a way to survive

Addie Tsai · Tuesday, July 6th, 2021

Dates are important.

You've always had a thing for numbers. You can still remember the student ID number that was printed on the top left corner of your report card (they were actual cards in the 90s). The phone number to the landline in your father's house long before the word landline was used, that you never call anymore. The address to an old house whose look you can no longer recall. If someone is on the phone and the person on the line gives them a phone number, they never need to find a pen and a paper if you're present. When you hear a row of numbers, you write them on a little piece of paper in your mind. Never mind that you aren't great with math, that you had to take Calculus twice in order to pass it (the second time you aced it). Geometry might as well be a foreign language to you. But numbers and dates. Those stay with you forever.

You will remember, without hesitation, without prompting, the day the two of you met. The day you first kissed. The day he first said he loved you. The day you proposed. The day he proposed back. And of course, the day you were wed.



You will not remember, however, the day that you drove through rush hour traffic to stand before a judge and commit to divorce. A year later, you will look it up in your old calendar appointments. And you will forget it again.

You will remember his birthday. Luckily, you have another close friend with the same birthday, and so you will try a sleight of hand, a trickery of the mind to force it to associate that day with something else, something brighter, something safer, something true.

All of these dates, which once brought you joy, now bring you. Something else. As though you

were living this one true, grounded world. Only to discover it was all a fiction, and you were living in someone else's reality the whole time.

Except, that reality was a lie, too. And so, all those memories, tied to all those dates, are now blank squares. Except the blankness hurts. That's the only way you can think of to describe it.

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Exactly a month before a year after you stood in front of the judge and said, yes, your honor, I do testify that I am not with child, yes, your honor, I do testify that I seek a divorce with this figment of my imagination, you would open an email from your ex-spouse. At this point, he has sent you many unwanted emails. You never respond to any of them, but they keep coming. But, this one, somehow, is specifically worse than all the ones preceding it. This one, addressed to China virus. As if that wasn't bad enough, it includes a parenthetical clarification (*yes, you are COVID as a person*). He then demands (in all caps) *you stop calling yourself queer and non-binary*.

It is not only dates that remain in the mind, but the memories associated with them. You remember his being offended that a photographer you previously collaborated with would sometimes take photos of you in white face paint and red lipstick. He thought it was exoticizing of Asians. Was appropriately offended by Long Duk Dong in *Sixteen Candles*. Held you with compassion when you received harmful messages from a self-proclaimed white supremacist student.

It was he who inspired you to wear masculine ensembles to school when you were scared of what would happen. To fully embrace your gender fluidity and non-binary identity. Who loved it when you cut your hair not just short, but intentionally modeled after men's cuts.

You were in it together, two queer weirdoes against the world.

Until you weren't.

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But, there are other dates. Dates you will mark as important for your development as a creature in the world, one that will never be the same. Once a person has been led to question their own trust in themselves, she will never be the same again.

On March 26, 2021, you will advocate for yourself against this email, and its implied violence.

While doing so, you will play a mix of songs you compiled for your wedding. You will speak about this in multiple ways over multiple platforms, saying that the mix told your history together as a couple, the sonic version of your love. But now, as you write this, you realize that it is actually **your** story of your love together. You are a storyteller, and this is your soundtrack of that time of your life. It belongs only to you. He is just a character in the story that you tell. And that is what he will always be.

You believe the music will make you sad, and indeed, you do cry at first, but something larger is happening for you, that you can only grasp at. You are being emboldened to advocate for yourself, and for your love. How dare he trash it. But, he's a character. Of course he would.

It is early in the morning, the sun just beginning to wash over your typing fingers as you hit send.

You get your haircut. It is yours, and yours alone. It is both feminine and masculine, neither and both all at once.



And then, you decide to make a spontaneous purchase. Two days before March 26, 2021, you happen upon a post on social media by a dear friend, who's just welcomed a betta fish into their home. You're a Virgo sun and a Cap moon, so you don't tend to make impulsive decisions. But, there it is. This gorgeous fish, bold in color, and fluid in motion. Sexy tail opened out like a handheld fan. You know it is what you need, in this moment of your life. Maybe for always.

You quickly search for a betta fish store on your browser, and come upon one that is on the other side of town, run by a Vietnamese family. What better way to reclaim your life and your future than to fight against anti-Asian hate speech by someone you thought was love and replace it with an Asian creature taken care of by your Asian community?

You expect a store, but instead, you are led to an unassuming house in the suburbs. A garage filled with separate containers of water, each accompanied by their own halfmoon betta fish. You stare at the wall. And again, unexpectedly, it takes just a few seconds, and you know which one is yours. They are moving with and against the water, shooting up, and sliding down again.

You name him Sufja Sapphire Issa Tsai. Sufja is, of course, short for Sufjan, the first name of the musician whose songs tell so many stories that come from your heart and history. Sapphire is your birthstone. And Issa is the name of your favorite Japanese poet and also one of your favorite Black media creators, and represents Black Asian unity. She is too luxurious and glamorous not to have an equally fabulous name.

Sufja was a name you had talked about with your ex as the name you would give the child you would have together. You know now that that dream was always yours, and yours alone. But maybe Sufja was always meant to be for this little creature, getting you through these long isolated days, swimming through life in similar ways as you. And then you remember. The book you wrote in sixth grade called *The Boy and the Fish*, a very romantically-inclined friendship between a boy violinist named Matt and his best friend, Cappy. You remember that you wanted to be a marine biologist after you first touched a dolphin at Sea World.

When you visited New York in your mid-twenties, you saw a Jenny Holzer exhibit for the first time, and came across a piece from her **Truism** series, a small porcelain bench with the words *in a dream you saw a way to survive and you were filled with joy*. It held itself close to you. At the time, you felt it was the line that described your entire way of being, since you were a child. For you it meant what it felt like to be a child abuse survivor, fighting so hard to crawl your way out. It was this dream that kept you going. And yet, now, there is a new dream, a new survival, a new joy you are hoping to find on the other side. You haven’t found it yet. But now, you pause, turn your head slightly to the right of your computer screen, and breathe for a few minutes as you watch Sufja glissade in and out of their neon plants, or suddenly shimmy up to the top of their neon-lit aquarium and then suspend in place for a breath or two, you think to yourself, maybe they are the dream towards survival, joy.

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