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achievement

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achievement

by Kate Pashby

as a child, I was chronically not enough
not white enough to look related to
my blonde-haired and blue-eyed cousins
not Filipinx enough to fit in at
my Southeast Asian grade school
and not Mexican enough to speak a lick of Spanish

a third-generation Mexican American
whose mother never learned Spanish
because that's what my grandparents
spoke when they didn't want
their daughters to understand

as a child, my strongest connection to my Mexican heritage
was my American girl doll Josefina
the dark-skinned girl from 19th-century Santa Fé
my grandparents who raised me for two years
must have spoken Spanish with me
(according to language acquisition theory)
because I can mostly roll my Rs

but my mother seldom cooked Mexican food
because it was "too unhealthy"
and she rarely took us to the panadería
to buy "Mexican bread" because it too was unhealthy
cholas in hoop earrings and red lipstick were "ghetto"
while taquerías and taco trucks were "dirty"

in high school, as an aspiring ballerina,
I gave my mother an ultimatum:
let me take French classes
or give me a quinceañera
I was made to take Spanish and
I received no quinceañera

in high school, as a teenage prodigy
and professional slacker I earned the
Hispanic Achievement Award
along with the two "white Mexicans"
in my overachieving senior class

I was so incensed at being labelled
good for a Mexican
that I faked period cramps
and laid on the rickety cot in the nurse's office
for the duration of the award ceremony

after college, upon receiving my bachelor's degree cum laude
I was rewarded after the graduation ceremony
by being mistaken for the valedictorian
(a Southeast Asian woman I had never met)
because all brown people look the same