

A photograph of two people in a red tent, with large white text overlaid. The text reads "LABY RINTH".

LABY RINTH

COLLEGE OF SAN MATEO • THE WRITERS' PROJECT

ISSUE 9

Spring 2019

The Writers' Project and Labyrinth staff would like to extend our sincere thanks to:

The CSM Honors Project faculty, staff, and students, with special thanks to David Laderman, for their continued support of our club and our vision,

our inspiring club advisors, Sarah Mangin, Keira Travis and Jill Kolongowski,

the artistic guidance of Rebecca Alex and Vera Fainshtein,

the always encouraging ASCSM,

and

the students who submitted their work to be considered for this publication.

A special note: This semester, our group of dedicated students faced an unprecedented challenge. Their answer was to reaffirm the foundational principles of teamwork, dedication, focus, creative ambition, and to embrace the very nature of the human experience. Hence, our three themes for this issue. We, as a team, looked through the submitted work and felt the weight of their words, the power of their photographs, and the resolute stroke of their brush strokes— to reveal that every piece was distinctly personal.

We want to thank you for reading our new issue of Labyrinth and hope that this publication continues to inspire you.

Keep writing. Keep learning. Keep creating.



Labyrinth Issue 9
Copyright © 2019
Friday Afternoon Press

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, write to the publisher at the address below.

writersprojectsubmissions@gmail.com



contents

nurturing roots

- 7 **Beautiful Illusions**
Isabella Murray
- 9 **The Ocean, The Empty**
J.A. Rose
- 14 **Crow-Eyed Wisdom**
Eli Tomitch
- 16 **Coronet Theatre**
Peter Jew
- 18 **The Winds of Change**
Connie Cummings

interwoven tapestry

- 21 **The Poetry of a Certain South Indian
Childhood**
Pavithra Mehta
- 26 **Period.**
Dikchhya Palikhe
- 29 **We The People**
Carmelena Murphy
- 30 **On My Way to Myself**
Michelle Djack
- 36 **The Girl Who Ate Her Horoscope**
Pavithra Mehta

new understanding

- 41 **The Poetry of Fountain Pens**
Pavithra Mehta
- 42 **A Final Farewell**
Anonymous
- 44 **The Blessing**
Connie Cummings
- 46 **After Mac Miller**
Sacha 9
- 50 **Untold Story of My Suitcases**
Dilek Duygu Yavuz
- 52 **The Emotional Significance of Phonemes**
Maya Riley

Front and Back Cover Art by **Min Mon Kha**



Design & Management

Ariana Davarpanah

Maya Riley

Editorial

Gabriela Topete Eng Goon · *Editor Emerita*

Justin Alley · *Managing Editor*

Candela Graciarena · *Editor*

Brandon Rodriguez · *Editor*

James Daniel Bitoy · *Editor*

Allison Hom · *Editor*

Matt Yeung · *Editor*

Molly Liu · *Editor*

Advisors

Jill Kolongowski

Sarah Mangin

Keira Travis

Photograph by Min Mon Kha

Human.

Traditionally, this page has been dedicated to the "Letter from the Editor," as is customary with most literary journals. This issue of Labyrinth, however, is not traditional. Spring 2019 is an issue that represents change and our first step toward a new era. Labyrinth will transform into a community-based journal, and to reflect these changes we, as a club, have decided to substitute our traditional page with a statement of our vision for this issue.

Our talented and creative contributors sent us pieces about the ups and downs of life, from observations of the natural world, to the journeys of day to day people, to the diversity of culture. Our art submissions featured human subjects and images of real places, as opposed to abstract pieces. We were inspired, and pulled together three themes to create an issue based on being human.

We wanted this issue to feel raw and real. Life is constantly changing and obstacles arise without warning. The good, the bad, and the beauty that comes with experiencing life as humans is what we wanted to portray in this Spring 2019 issue.

Regardless of the changes that Labyrinth may experience in the future, our vision will always remain the same. We will continue to work to showcase student talent and allow their voices to be heard and appreciated through poetry, stories, essays, paintings, drawings, photographs and pieces of artwork alike.



Art by **Carrie Govan Skelly**



nurturing
roots

Photograph by Benjamin Zawilski

Beautiful Illusions

By Isabella Murray

Tragic dreams send brave, disillusioned, young warriors into
the flames

Romantic is the darkness to those who cannot see
Obsidian dust in my eyes, glass shards in my hair

Silence accomplishes more evil than any word ever could
Is it better to stand with one's foe than to fall alone?
Opposing sides wage unseen wars in every conceivable crevice
on Earth

No one writes their own history
In between each aeon, forgotten hours tick by, appreciated by
only a select few
Thieves swoop down from the stars to steal time



Illustration by **Peijiang Xie**

The Ocean, The Empty

Vanessa Marie Arkavadas —
Personal Log

By J.A. Rose

I've stared out the same window more times than I can remember. It's become a daily thing to do—second nature. Wake up, watch the ceiling morph into impossible shapes according to my imagination, wake up again, and plant my eyes to gaze out this thick glass window beside my bed. The same black canvas with a slightly different sparkling pattern every morning. I like to say to some people that I've looked out that window so much that I recognize whether or not I'm staring at the same stars as last week or not—but that's a lie. I don't. I see the glints and wonder if anyone else is staring back. Or what the red star might have going on—pirates, or a colony around it? The blue stars have to be part of the Earth Union. Maybe that close quadrant to the left today was a...

And then I'd see my face in the stars. The faint reflection in the mirror tainted my thought process. I distracted myself with my own existence in all these stars. At this moment in the mornings, I'd normally sigh and go about the responsibilities of my reality.

Today was no different. I woke up, watched the ceiling churn, woke up again and stared as I always do. The goosebumps were as prominent as usual—this damned station was always

cold. I stepped a little closer to the glass this time and could see the ridges along my pale arms, screaming "Put a shirt on already!" to me. I ignored the pleas. Nothing would take me away from watching the same stars and the same blackened background. It was an ever changing painting—but only subtle changes would be made. So subtle you wouldn't notice. If you stared at stars and blackness every morning, and just that, would you really notice if anything's changed? Do you take notes on where each speck was the day or week before? Does it really matter if what you're looking at is just that? Maybe not. It doesn't matter to me at least.

I get to think within all this nothingness, and it moves and lives without me. I do nothing with it, but that's exactly what I need every day. Thoughts left unfeathered in my mind because I can't talk to anybody remotely human on a regular basis. They all treat me like a deity to fear and answer to. I ask how someone's day was and I get, "I've been triple checking our oil reserves on Ring B all morning ma'am and can safely say that we are—" That's not what I want to hear. I want to hear about their thoughts, their dreams and their desires. I want to hear if they hate

their job or love it. I want to hear why. But I don't pry for it. I get the stale responses, nod, and leave. Maybe I ought to fix that.

When I was younger, in my teen years, I never actively sought out people to spend time with or parties to go to. School did its best to make me sociable, but you can't change a person by throwing a couple of school dances and relationship pressures at them. My brother tried his best, per our mother's wishes and his own concerns, but he was just as impatient as Mother. He found himself with different cliques and made his way around. I opted to stay at home and cradle Ana around the mansion with aunt Vera's help. It also gave me more time to read more books other than what history classes and high school literature offered. I never liked Fitzgerald much. Social drama never interested me. But Mom showed me more "advanced" works of philosophy like *The Metamorphosis*. Absurdity, I think. A book from an age gone by, three centuries ago. But I won't rant about books. I don't read anymore. I haven't since high school. Still I thank Mom for reaching out to me to help expand my readings. And more.

With Orion out so much and Ana just a toddler, I didn't get out much. Aunt Vera could only do so much and Mother was absent most days. That left me with Ana—me and Mom at least. She took pity on me one weekend (I'd babysat Ana for two months in a row without willingly going out) and took me aside. Mom sat beside me on the couch in the living area, I held Ana a little more loosely with her butt rested against my forearm. I wanted to see if she would reach for Mom. The three of us smiled when she babbled and flexed her stubby baby fingers towards Mia's shoulder. "Vanessa, darling," Mom began as she tucked her hands under Ana's arms and lifted her from my hands, "Do you have any plans

tomorrow? Maybe a day out in South Tahoe with a friend?"

I'd promptly reached for my notebook after my hands were freed. "No," I answered curtly. "Thought I would go spend time in the garden with Ana tomorrow. Let her see uncle David and then play by the willows." My fingers naturally found the page I'd left off on last, now brushing against the crisp cream page to find the paragraph I was most familiar with. I strayed more on the left page and glanced at it to make sure I pinned it—a silent game with myself. I was nearly there, just two paragraphs down too far. Now prepared to read, my eyes met Mom's grey lenses that remained fixed on me with a tired smile. She'd asked me if I had plans when she clearly knew I would stay home again, based off the last two months. I was curious. "Why do you ask?"

"I hired a babysitter for Ana tomorrow." Mom was quick to cut to the point, but that didn't stop her from brushing her nose against Ana's chubby face. My baby sister laughed and cried out "Momma!" out of excitement of being given motherly affection. "I was planning on going out to Boston to go spend the day there. I hear it will be nice out there—much better than San Francisco as of late. How about you come and join me?"

I didn't quite have an answer to immediately give. "Um" was what I left her with as I thought—a babysitter? But...I'm here for that. "Can't I just stay home?" I blurted out only to realize a moment later that what I said was rude. Mom's scrunched expression was telling enough.

"Would you rather stay home with a stranger babysitter and your aunt than come out with somebody you are more familiar with?" Mom retorted. I lowered my head, onyx bangs hung over my defeated, yet thoughtful eyes. "Don't get me wrong — I don't mean to say you and your aunt are distant.

Far from it, in fact. But she's stuck unable to partake in anything physical with her...technological limitations. I'm sure Vera wouldn't mind a day of rest though."

"What would we do out there? And how would we even get there so quickly?"

"I'll borrow one of your mother's chauffeurs." Mom grinned, both at her answer and at Ana who was tucked against her chest. "You know, the military shuttles. Have you ever been sailing, Vanessa?"

"I've never been out in open water before." My answer was snarky, sassy—new for me, but Mom seemed to enjoy that. A quiet laugh, raise of her brows, and a shake of her head let me know that my faux back-talk was received in good nature.

"Then you will see the ocean with your own eyes, Little Love."

Memories of nervousness come back to me now as I recall the next morning. I'd been settled with occupying the kitchen or living room with Ana and journals for the last couple months. That day, the routine changed.

The babysitter had arrived well before I was woken up by my step-mom, her left hand (promptly gloved) pushing my shoulder until I groaned her away. "I've taken the liberty to pack your things for you," she murmured to my sleepy face, which was scrunched and peering with mild annoyance. It wasn't until I had finished showering that I realized it was only five in the morning. At breakfast, I asked Mom why we were up so early. She mocked my unpleasant tone. "If I am to show you the ocean, I would want you to see it for as long as you can today. It's not every day that I am able to coerce you out of your studies and self-inflicted frustrations." She had a point; Now that I knew how she would go about dragging me out, I would be less likely to fall victim to her schemes. But she

wouldn't need to scheme anymore after that day.

"Shouldn't I wear a vest or something?" We'd arrived at the Boston docks by nine and Mom had me board onto one of her personal boats. With my feet slipping and my heart racing out of fear of falling, I'd managed to squeeze in a peaceful thought: "You don't really see these much anymore." Water-based ships weren't as common in the twenty-second century. Pollution had risen since the settling of the Penumbra Wars and the storms weren't much help either. Traveling by air was, while more expensive, more accessible and faster than going by sea. Most of the business had been run out anyways, but cargo ships remain with it being cheaper to export overseas as opposed to by sky. People still did it for leisure as well. Mom did it for both. An undying passion.

She assured me I would be fine but offered me a vest to help relieve my fears for now. Her weather report was correct, too; only a dozen or so clouds littered the sky today, but the ocean breeze still pushed me and the rocking of the waves wasn't helping my nausea. Trying to find something to hold onto, I eventually found myself retreating to the seats behind Mom as she worked her hands graciously around the wheel. "Vanessa, what are you doing back there? You can't see the water from there." I'd dug my hands comfortably around the inflated orange vest, holding onto myself like it were some kind of harness, treating it as if it would actually keep me in place. The closest thing I could relate this to was a rollercoaster—the harness that would fasten across your torso from above your head locked in place, keeping you cemented into that poorly cushioned and worn seat while the raw speed and outrageous turns thrashed you around like a doll. Except I was not locked in place with this life vest, and there were no outrageous turns. Just lots of ups

and downs and ups and downs; the good thing about a rollercoaster is that you know it will end. The park can't afford to keep you on it forever. The sea, however, has no ends. "Come up here, darling. You'll be fine, I promise."

I shook my head, which she couldn't see. So I gave her an "I'm okay," before pulling my lengthy legs up against my vest, arms soon wrapped around the knees. I hadn't even shed my t-shirt or shorts yet. The instability of the floor beneath me discouraged familiarizing myself with any kind of comfort while on this ride. "Vanessa," Mom called again with her left hand beckoning me to join her. I shook my head, chin rubbed against the vest—an audible indication to my wordless answer. My eyes shut tight, bangs fell over my nose, and I was curled up like a hermit with a black silk drape to cover half my legs. The weight of my body rolled back and forth, up and down. I was like some kind of cannonball left in storage, rolling around in place, perhaps waiting to be fired from this ship so my fears of falling would end for now. My choppy exhaling was the only thing I could hear with my success in turning everything else down to a zero—the air I released curved back from the vest and splashed back against my sobbing eyes and reddened nose. The first few waves made me jump, but it didn't take me long to realize that the hot air was just my own doing.

Thinking that I would be able to get away with this anxious breakdown, I'd found solace in crying behind my step-mom and not standing up to do what I'd agreed to do. "It'll be over soon—she'll feel bad for me and we'll go right back home." It was a perfect plan I'd made up in the last couple of minutes of my shy sobbing, foolproof at best. But Mia thought otherwise. Maybe she saw right through me, or maybe she was just fixed on getting me to see it. Her fingers swept my hair aside and she tipped my chin up,

finding my weary, tearful eyes. "You won't accomplish anything by running away from the world, Nessy. Come—let me show you. You can hold the wheel and I'll be right behind you."

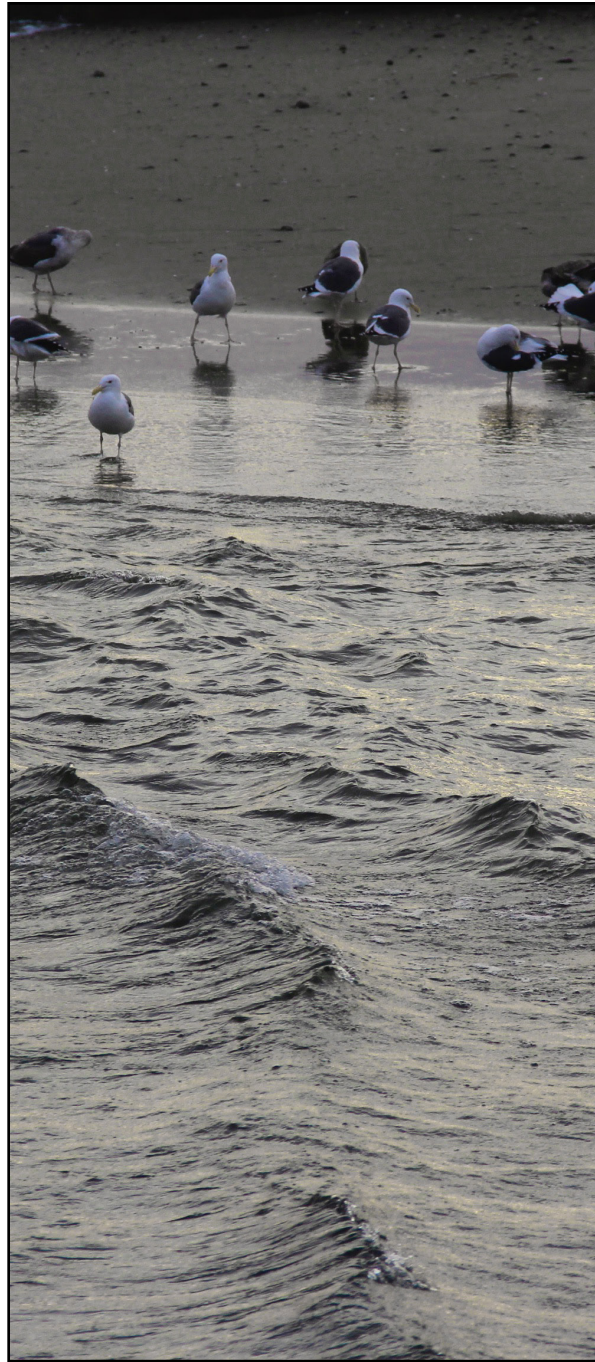
I wasn't sure what to do. My private space had been invaded a second time now. Surely, my plan couldn't have been foiled so easily... She'd leave, get impatient, tired of my worry and have her own fun without me. Mother would often do the same. She had no patience for petty drama or a crying teen—"Get up, grab your shit, and act like an adult already," she'd say if I'm having a bad day waking up for school. It was always bluntness, no skipping corners, there was always a schedule that had to be followed to her expectations. But Mom stayed here, holding my chin and met my eyes whenever I'd wander forward to see her. She'd found me. "Little Love," she murmured with a little soul in the words—you know, that honeysweet passion, burning concern, and beaming smile of truth that only a parent could offer. I felt disappointed in myself, confident in myself, and angry with myself all at once. I don't want to disappoint her if she has this confidence in me. I was angry for trying to keep her from this bond, this moment. So I looked up at her. My pianist fingers slipped under her arms and I locked them together at her back, stuffing my nose against her neck. Trembling, minty breath washed across her throat. She held me all the same and laughed. "You're okay, darling. I've got you."

I don't remember if I'd told myself I was ready or not. I don't think I cared at the time. Maybe it wasn't parental convincing but peer pressure that led me to stand up. It sounds better if it was the former, and I like to believe that it was. Just as she promised, she stood behind me and held my arms as I held the wheel, my heartbeat thumping against the freshly polished, but visibly aged wood. The

beat rang through my palms, echoing against itself, resonating in my ears. My beating heart, her silky fingertips, and the sound of waves thrashing against the boat at our sides. She instructed me, guided my hands along whenever I froze up. Silent whimpers of acknowledgement faded into a shy nod, and at least an hour and a half later, I'd began taking deep breaths and responding more audibly for her to understand. "Yes," "Like this?" and "Okay."

They were small words. Small words for small steps.

Each step was another bump over the ocean, gently dipping down and up. I'd yelp from the larger dips, fearful of losing my footing still, but Mom held my elbows and tucked her ankles against mine to correct my posture whenever I'd get a little too wobbly. What a pitiful sight, I'd thought—this six foot teen standing at the wheel, quivering like a hunted shrew, but being guided and assisted by this small, five-foot-something lady. I swear though, there's one thing that I pride myself in at that image—if anyone had seen us and saw our matching color palette of black hair and pale skin, they'd have seen a mother and her daughter. Here, I felt the blood, even if we weren't. For that brief moment we were made the same forever. A reflection of who I was raised by. Like sisters in arms, we were made blood by a quiet creed, a silent respect and mutual understanding of one another—I felt freedom on my arms, breathing against my hair, and smiling at my small success.



Photograph by Qiyao Zheng

Crow-Eyed Wisdom

By Eli Tomitch

Crows hopping,
pecking
order

She looks at me with crow-eyed wisdom
loaning out her body to the young sky,
the forgotten

The stillborn night unmoved by her plight watches
while crows hop and tear viciously at her remains

Do you quantify my loss?

because I learned to laugh through tears,
the lessons my father never taught me
now laid bare by the stripping peck of crows



Photograph by **Min Mon Kha**

Coronet Theatre

By Peter Jew

When I lived by Rossi Park I used
to see you every time I walked home.
You were perched by the corner with your
name emboldened vertically in an Art Deco marquee
and underneath your playbill labeled in lights.

I always muttered to myself, “I must see that movie.”
Maybe tomorrow, maybe this weekend.
After all, I only lived a block away.
You were like the close neighbor
with whom I could have been great friends
but, sadly, never was.

I did see some blockbusters with you
and was seared during some gory scenes.

But I have also laughed with child-like spasms
along with hundreds of other audience members
during hilarious moments of silliness.



I have cheered when the hero shot the bad guys
and cried when a poor diseased child died
and slept during uninspired scenes or in bad company.

You are superior to any modern multiplex
with digital projectors and surround sound
and vibrating seats that send you wanting to piss.

I miss you and your curved wide screens,
your velvet curtains, and your 3 tiers of seating.
Your grandeur that made moviegoing an event.

Bring me back and hug me with your plush arms.
Engulf me with your cavernous air.
Drown me with the smells and spirits
of a half-century of laughter and tears.

Photograph by **Nicole Godinez Esquivel**

The Winds of Change

By Connie Cummings

Greenhouse gases. Wildfires. Things are getting hotter.
To shield you from this latest storm, my precious baby daughter,
we'll need a house that's safe and warm, and free from tainted water.
With no money or insurance, I may have to be a squatter.

Our future's been uncertain. Your father's job is gone.
Axed by tech's insertion, he's been angry and withdrawn.
He'll run from all his burdens just to seek that greener lawn,
but I'll never cast aspersions, and, as always, I'll move on.

Far and wide, the seas are rising. The climate's all askew.
Fake news endorsed denying makes it hard to know what's true.
But I know I love you deeply. I long to hold you safe.
It consumes me so completely. You will never be a waif!

We're all in this together; on this Earth we all are One.
Protect her. It's the only way to see more life to come.
Such hoarded wealth and power just preserve percents of one.
Unsustainable and cruel, this system needs to be undone.

The patriarchal cycle is coming to a close.
Perhaps, then, all the violence is simply its death throes?
Within our loving light, we transform our grim shadows.
To come as one in love creates new adagios.

Upon this soggy land, underneath this waning moon,
I hereby make my vow: To the Mother I attune
my new imaginal cells in this readying cocoon
and release them to the winds of the indomitable typhoon.





**interwoven
tapestry**

Art by Carrie Govan Skelly

The Poetry of a Certain South Indian Childhood

By Pavithra Mehta

The poetry of a certain South Indian childhood means that you have bathed in at least three waterfalls and been blest by more than one elephant. You know with a knowing that pre-dates language: the scents of jasmine, of camphor, coconut oil, and filter coffee. Know them the way you know the particular sound of your mother's bangles. The way you know the sound of the latch on your front gate and the sound of wet laundry slapping stone.

You belonged to an off-key choir of schoolchildren who chanted morning lessons in unrecognizable English and ear-splitting unison. Your to-go

meals were eaten aboard trains and came wrapped in banana leaves and newsprint, neatly secured with twine. All your uncles rode motorcycles.

You are an encyclopedia of wonderfully specific wisdom. You know what a hill station is, and are familiar with the many shades of cow dung. Also the urgency of pressure cooker whistles and the buoyant trill of bicycle bells. You know exactly how stubbornly red earth will cling to white canvas footwear. And how deliciously lime pickle will stain a snowy bed of curd rice in the bottom-most compartment of a steel tiffin carrier. You spent a monkish amount

of time sitting cross-legged on the floor.

You memorized a poem about daffodils long before you ever saw one. You were raised by a village. Leaning out the window of a school bus, you didn't yet know what was a luxury, you watched little girls march bravely to school. Small brown faces dusty with talcum powder. Beguiling bite-sized ghosts in their too-big pinafores and too-tight braids doubled-up and tied with bright ribbon bows.

In a lamplit shrine, you waited for the shred of holy leaves the priest pressed into your palm that later tingle on your tongue.

You placed a coin in a withered, grateful palm on a busy street, and wished with a sudden fierceness that you lived in a fairer world. You encountered an anonymous rickshaw driver or tea stall owner who did you a kind turn, when you were most in need of one and then promptly disappeared.

Unsung talents dwell in you. Such as the ability to drink water from a tumbler without your lips ever touching the rim.

You were raised in a home crowded with miscellaneous context. Bougainvillea. Black bobby pins. Borewells. Beaded lunch baskets. Brooms that require you to bend while sweeping. Bandini dupattas. A scythe to split coconuts. Steel buckets. Storerooms. The spit and crackle of mustard seeds in hot oil. Pow-

er cuts. Petticoats. Gas cylinders. Guava trees. Geckos. Head baths. Handkerchiefs. Kerosene lamps. Kannmai. Kolam. Cotton wicks. Custard apples. Curry leaves. Ceiling fans. A cyclone of cousins. A fond flock of aunts. Tear-off calendars. Turmeric stains. White-washed walls. Red chilies dried on hopping hot terraces. Key bunches tucked into sari waists. Safety pins stored on mangalsutras and sticker pottus on mirrored surfaces. Stories of mango-stealing monkeys. Hibiscus bushes. Heirloom silk saris stacked in the mystical recesses of your grandmother's olive green Godrej scented with a strange, heady mixture of sandalwood, incense, and mothballs.

You traveled a fantastical landscape cluttered with color and chaos rendered familiar by dailyness. Loudspeakers. Lopsided buses. Buffalos. Bullock carts. Banyan trees. Boiled peanuts sold off carts in paper cones. Paddy fields. Dried river beds. Dragonflies. Temple bells. Bus conductors sporting pink nail-polish on a single untrimmed thumbnail used to tear off tickets. Bananas, green, yellow and red hanging in thick clusters like the fingers of a giant. Stray dogs. Colossal crows. Cricket matches.

The peculiar and literal sales pitch of street hawkers whose hoarse, hypnotic chants floated above the din of narrow streets and into open windows.

The crumbling, friendly, Draculaesque smiles of the city's paan-chewers.

Diamonds that flowered and flashed in an old woman's nose ring. A vegetable vendor's impossible earlobes freighted with dull chunks of gold and stretched like chapati dough down to her shoulders. Women jostling with curved rim water pots at taps that ran dry (their wells of rough-mannered affection did not).

Weddings where hundreds came and nobody RSVPed. Where the serpentine notes of the Nadiswaram coiled through the air only to be overtaken by the adrenaline rush of the thavil in gettimellam mode. Where food was ladled out of large shiny pails by sturdy men and you were plied with freshly fried appalam the size of frisbees, mountains of steaming white rice, and shockingly orange jalebis sticky with sugar syrup.

One day you watched a man climb to the top of a coconut palm pulling himself up with his bare hands. On another, you touched a garland thick as a tree trunk woven from tuberoses and marigolds. You woke a baby fast asleep in a cradle fashioned from nothing more than an old cotton sari, soft with use and slung low from a ceiling hook.

Once upon a time, you were bitten by an army of tiny red ants. You wondered about the white stripe that dances the length of a squirrel's back. You rode triples with your sister on your

father's trusty scooter. You opened a pale blue aerogramme. You chewed a neem leaf (the memory still has the power to pucker your face). You cracked open a tamarind pod and sucked the sweet and sour flesh off its hard black seeds. You were stalked on a hot summer night by an impressively single-minded cloud of mosquitoes. You caught sight of a spiky green chameleon in the garden.

From a small roadside stall that sold soap and sugar, peppermints and pencil boxes, you purchased at the princely sum of fifty paise, for a geography class, the outline of a world map printed on grimy grey paper. Nameless continents and countries stitched together. One vast and various world of implacable mountains, whistling deserts, talkative oceans, and fertile jungles. Not unlike the nation of a certain South Indian childhood. Each day a planet and a profusion. Of unremarked, yet not unremarkable experience.





Photograph by Min Mon Kha

Period.

By Dikchhya Palikhe

My family gathered around the dinner table for dinner for the first time in a while. Our house had become home once again. The dining room was filled with everyone's laughter. Among those happy faces, I could only see my mother's gloomy face. She sat on the floor, far away from the dining table, wishing she could be a part of the celebration. She ate her supper all alone on the floor.

At bedtime, mother came to my room. She wished me goodnight, but I stopped her. I asked her, "Why didn't you join us for dinner?" She smiled weakly and replied, "You will understand one day."

The day came when I became a 12 year old girl who got her first period. My grandmother always warned me that I was to never enter the kitchen or temple on my period. I wasn't even allowed to touch her or any male family member.

During my time of the month, there was a day I was excitedly running around in the house. That was until the moment when I accidentally touched my grandmother. She became furious and sprinkled herself with holy water. I felt scared because I thought I committed a sin. A million things went across my mind. Thinking that now God will punish me, I cried that whole day. People say every female wishes to be a male at some point of their life.

This was my first and last time when I wished I was born as my parents' son.

A menstruating Nepalese woman has to be cautious not to touch food and water because once touched during menstruation, the food and water becomes impure for others. The stigma of menstruation is even worse in the rural areas. Women are sent to live in cattle sheds, better known as the menstruation huts. There is minimal hygiene in these places. We are only allowed to wash our bodies once a month.

It is embarrassing how the rest of the world has already stepped into the 21st century while our women are still forced to follow a tradition that risks their lives. The restrictions toward Nepalese women are not the only reason why I am against this tradition. We worship women in the form of Goddesses such as Durga, Laxmi, etc. But the women cannot worship them while menstruating. Additionally, a son is told not to touch his own mother or sister during their time of the month. How are men going to learn to respect women if they are taught to avoid menstruating women from childhood? Menstruation is a serious taboo in my society and the mentality needs to be changed. These restrictions against women are one of the main reasons why a girl falls behind in development.

Menstruation taboo has deep

roots in the Nepalese community from the past few decades, but that should not stop any female from fighting for what's right. There was a day when I felt lonely and angry when I had to sit back in my room while others were celebrating. So, I gathered my courage and told my elders how humiliating the restrictions were and how it affected me. After a few seconds of astonishment, they let me join them with the only restriction to not go near any temples. That day, I learned that standing up for something right does not always mean disrespecting the culture. No matter what plans and policies the government executes against such practices, all efforts will be pointless if people still follow them behind closed doors. At present, there are other girls like me in the country with similar views who are against this. Instead of warning adolescent girls about the restrictions, they need to be educated about menstrual hygiene which will help them to get ready for their first period. Both girls and boys should be taught about menstruation to overcome the disgust and shame associated with it. I hope one day, all the girls are empowered to raise their voice against these issues and no female would ever have to wish to be born as a male.



Photograph by Andy Pascual



Photograph by Yueying Wu

We The People

By Carmelena Murphy

Homage to Howl

(One nation)

Dislocated families and fragmented cultures left behind.

Who sit in the dark, mesmerized by adulterated click-bait on glowing
screens,
bingeing tweakers attempt to make super-machines out of old appliances.

(Liberty)

Celebrity and wealth flash brightly in lonely pockets.

Who compulsively follow semi-naked photo-shopped bodies,
glued to gaming consoles, side hustlers tracked by programmed devices.

(Equality)

Simulated mindfulness and compassion.

Who pass homeless lying on city streets, contemptuously grumble “junkie”
before our next hit of nicotine, alcohol, or confirmation bias.

(We the People)

Consumers overfed by saccharin merchants.

Who incessantly grasp for the latest fleeting luxury,
always leaving us emptier than before.

On My Way to Myself

By Michelle Djack

I am a young lady from Souza, a small city near Douala, the economic capital of my country, The Republic of Cameroon which is in the Center part of Africa. Despite the fact that I was born in Yaoundé, which is the Major city and the political capital of my country, I chose to give these specifics details to remind myself where I am from and who I have been trying to be these last years: MYSELF.

This can sound ridiculous for some, but it became a big Challenge that I have been trying to overcome for years. When I arrived one year ago to the USA, this feeling or this need to be myself has especially grown up deep inside. It has become far more complicated with all the struggles and racial stereotypes that I have been facing. On my way to myself, I overcame “culture shock” (Kalvero Oberg, Culture Shock and the Problem of Adjustment in New Cultural Environment), faced racial discrimination, and physical bias; however, that has not changed my determination of being myself.

The tone was set up ever since my arrival in the USA. I received a cold shower contrary to my expectations! First, “The America” portrayed in movies and Magazines in Cameroun wasn't so great. In fact, my experience

with the customs for instance was so frustrating! After 43 hours of flying, the last thing I expected was to stand around for: an hour in line to check out my papers and stuff. Moreover being asked to remove my shoes and my belt was humiliating but not as much as when the officer patted me. I know he was doing his job but in my culture this can be misjudged. Also, my transferring flight from New York to Oakland had a 6 hours of delay and with the lack of communication from the staff it was unbearable. Furthermore, after we could finally fly, I arrived to Oakland with a completely low-battery phone and no way to communicate. Worried about missing my friend, who came to pick me up— I actually did miss him unintentionally. Yes, I confused the terminal by losing direction and with all the frustration accumulated I was unable to communicate with people who immediately knew I was a foreigner. However, instead of helping me they were very focused on me; staring at me as if I was a Martian. Someone even asked me if I was African! Anyway, I wandered an hour looking for both my luggage and my friend. Finally desperate, I walked outside to take some air and to refresh my mind. While walking, crying, and

praying inside me, my friend appeared in front of me as an Angel. It was the first hope. But the overflowing drop was when we figured out that my luggage were missing. I just thought that I may need to fight more than I had imagined to “survive” in the USA. Consequently, I had the feeling that my “honeymoon” was sabotaged (kalvero Oberg, Culture Shock and the Problem of Adjustment in New Cultural Environment). My disillusion was just starting!

The sun was too brutal to me in Oakland, and when I went to Monterey the weather was inexpertly cold, gloomy, and overcast; “just like people living there!” I said to myself. I felt isolated even in the school I was attending, The Institute of Middlebury. Indeed in my ESL class students were from all parts of the world. They came from the same countries or same regions such as Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America except me. I was the only Black and African in between all these people who immediately regrouped by countries, by cultures, by languages, and by race. They were interacting with me only in class activities when the teacher asked. No one knew and didn’t care to know what country Cameroon was. Instead of asking information about my country, they were asking me about Africa. What Chimamanda Ngozi calls “the danger of a single story” comes into play when people have preconceived notions of Africa and Africans. So did my classmates with me. As I mentioned, Africa is a continent, not a country. In that instance, even now some people still believe that Africa is a single country so they ask me questions such as “Which language do you speak in Africa?” In addition, the stigma of poverty, corruption, and war is prevalent. I have many times faced people talking about Africa and its political situation, talking about corrupted leaders as if they were different or more corrupted than leaders in the USA, in Russia,

Syria, China or France. Many times they implied I must have been running from the war. Most of the time I try to be polite but sometimes it is hard. For example, one of my Chinese classmates not only asked me if I was living in a village which is acceptable, but asked me if from my window I could see monkeys. I couldn’t stand it, and I simply answered that I can’t because of my pet lion.

Besides the uncomfortable situation in that school, I had to stay for a month in different hotels because the school didn’t provide housing. Many people indirectly asked me where I was taking money to be able to live in a hotel; they ignored the fact that I, almost every day, asked for their assistance and complained about cost and expenses. But they did nothing. I spoke with my friend about all the frustration the situation engendered and he kindly offered me to live with him and his family. He also told me that people were different, friendlier, and more liberal in Palo Alto and its vicinity. I was optimistic, even if I knew up front that I will be discriminated against because people/their society had decided that I was different.

Yes I am different; yes I look different with my Kinky and rebel hair that I have learned to love and be proud of without any shame; yes I have an accent. Nevertheless, all these characteristics should not change the human that I am. Despite all these fears I had hope. However, if there is one thing I wasn’t prepare for I would say is being discriminated against by Black Americans and some other black people from other countries, including Africans. Other than being sometimes upset by Caucasian or Asian comments and reactions, I wasn’t that much surprised. But what shocked me was as I said, that rejection from people from the same race. I remember for instance when I was looking for a hairstylist specializing in African hair near me. It

was impossible to find one but finally, after a few weeks I found online a salon owned by a Black woman and specializing in Afro hair. I made an appointment by phone. I told her that I had very short hair and, because of the cold, I wanted a protective hairstyle. She said she could do that. However, when I arrived with my friend who is white I felt a kind of resentment. She was very kind and polite on phone but not when we met. She at least gave me a seat. However, she took long to receive me and in front of her other clients she removed the hat I had on without even asking me, and she started to touch my hair. Then she asked me what exactly I wanted and as I was trying to explain to her as clear as possible, she pretended that she didn't understand and suddenly asked me where I was from. When I asked why this question, she said she was from Senegal and that she could speak French with me; it might be easier for me to explain. It turned out that my speaking skill in English was far more superior to her French. Plus I had my friend with me who was there to help in case I needed but she completely ignored him. After wasting our time she finally decided that she couldn't style my hair this day but maybe another day, and I would have to book again. This experience was frustrating and remains mysterious in the strangest way for me...

Also, there was this Black international student from The Commodores, whose eyes are always made up and hair braided, that clearly seems uncomfortable besides me but relaxed with other international students. Or the Haitian girl in one of my Fashion Class who speaks to everybody and is not even able to answer when I come inside the classroom and I say hello to everyone... I might be wrong. I might be the one with stereotypes and let say that it is true. But why people, including Black people, react differently when for instance I decide

to wear a wig or weaves— Also when I have my hair braided and wear makeup as promoted everywhere on medias, magazines, and TV shows? I guess it is because that way I look like others. I recollect a Turkish friend of mine told me once that I should have weaves/wigs and makeup more often because I look better wearing them. Another one told me that it would be easier for me to have my hair done if they were relaxed. All that is true and ever since I was a little girl, I heard the same thing over and over with my relatives, my friends, or again, Medias

For a long time I believed in beauty standards that the world has set. Moreover, I even did modeling and it was the same story: the skinnier and lighter you were, and the longer hair you had, the more beautiful you were considered, and the more contracts you would have gotten. I faced too much pressure while modeling that I got to a point where I got enough. I didn't want any more rules. I wanted to be myself and free of my wills and choices. Be focused on the inside. Since the American society was diverse, I thought it would be easier for me to express myself, but I was wrong. Starting from the beginning until now, I faced lots of challenges related to the fact that I was different. I am a foreigner, I am not yet fluent in English and have an accent. Moreover, my skin tone and my natural kinky hair do not please everyone. However, I have chosen not to be dictated any more about who I should be. I am more than ever determined to be myself and "Out of the huts of history's shame...I rise" (Angelou, 2017).

Works Cited

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. "The Danger of a Single Story." YouTube, uploaded by TED, 7 Oct 2009, Oxford, England. [www.youtube.com/watch?v= D9Ihs24zeg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs24zeg).

Angelou, Maya. "Still I Rise." Rpt. In ESL 400 Composition for Non-native Speaker Course Reader. Comp. I. Rebekah Taveau: Canada College Bookstore, 2017. 26-27.

Oberg, Kalvero. "Cultural Shock: Adjustment to New Cultural Environments." Practical Anthropology, Reprint aus OBERG, K. 1960.





Art by **Carrie Govan Skelly**

The Girl Who Ate Her Horoscope

By Pavithra Mehta

Twist time's arm behind its back and see me as I was by moonlight. Roof warm (and forbidden) beneath me, the night air still. I am listening to the wheels of the bullock cart trundling down the road as I chew on my horoscope chart. Planets and constellations slip down my throat. Taste of faded ink on aged yellow paper. I am twenty-three years old and swallowing my destiny in an ingenious attempt to avoid it. They will not be able to match my horoscope with any man's now.

In the morning my mother, who is given to much hand wringing and disaster prediction, has a merry fit. "What kind of girl eats her horoscope?" she asks me, her eyes wide with horror and fascination. My mother married my father two weeks after their horoscopes were matched. They had spoken to each other only once and in the presence of both sets of parents. My seated father had cleared his throat and addressed the border of my standing mother's sari

where it touched the floor. "Do you like music?" he had ventured to ask. And she had tilted her chin towards her hidden toes and whispered, "Yes." And on the basis of that slender, innocuous interaction they were married the very next auspicious day on the priest's calendar, even though my father is about as musical as a coffee grinder. "What shall I tell the people who are coming to see you?" my mother asks sorrowfully.

There are always people coming to see me. I am asked to braid my hair, put on a sari, gold necklace, bangles, and a humble expression. I try staring at the perfect red dot between my brows. "Tell them your daughter is cross-eyed," I say, "and that she has a marvelous talent for street dancing." My mother fills her eyes with tears and sharpens her voice to broken-hearted viciousness, "The trouble with you –" The trouble with me, she is going to say, is that I "don't understand reality".

This may be somewhat true.

The last time reality was introduced to me came in the form of a photograph. A 6'2" anesthesiologist from a small town 250 kilometers away. A town best known for putting its women and children to work in firework factories where every once in a while there are unfortunate explosions. Such a decent boy, they told me, no bad habits and from a good family. The only thing he is looking for is a tall girl. The questionable nobility of that particularity leaves me underwhelmed. I am a tall girl. But I am also just waking up to the wild beauty and adventure of life that lies just beyond the purple horizon and I intend to hitch my wagon to a star. Not the mild-eyed young man in the photograph with his uninspiring mustache and his professional talent for putting people to sleep.

When they tell me he is to come with his parents to see me once our charts are matched, I put on a demure expression. Not something I consciously cultivate; it seems to have grown on me of its own accord. It is a convenient thing to have in these parts. But that was the night, out on the roof, the white-hot moon as my witness, that I ate my chart.

My mother summons my father from the depths of his newspaper. He is a perpetually preoccupied man and a Physics professor. He works very hard, speaks very little and looks to my mother to define his paternal responsibilities. "You talk to your daughter," she tells him. So my father clears his throat, wipes his brow with a folded white handkerchief, stares at the ceiling for a brief moment and then

tells me, "This is no laughing matter and it is high time you settled down."

Settle Down. The phrase sets a stallion pounding along the shore of my heart every time. A stallion that shies impressively, with tossed mane, powerfully flailing forelegs and a whinnying cry of rebellion. None of my friends seem to have such stallions within them. They drop into marriage like flies-one by one. Settling down as if life were some sort of sediment belonging to the bottom of someone else's glass. Settling down as if life were a bargain and you're at the raw end of someone else's deal. That night my mother announces with chilly formality that they are proceeding with the prospective bridegroom's family. Chart or no chart. There will be a "bride-viewing" the day after tomorrow, she says, in a voice as tender as a slammed door.

I am an unmarried girl of marriageable age and as such, I am answerable not just to my parents, but to the society at large. An elderly woman on the bus the other day wearing a large nose ring and a solicitous expression poked me in the ribs, "Not married?". She rapped out the question sharply and I involuntarily straightened in my seat, and assumed an appropriately guilty expression. "No Auntie." "Well, you are not getting any younger," she informs me. And then, "You know this is the age to have issues." She is referring, of course, to the sort of issues that enter the world through the womb.

Masticating one's planetary charts is a decidedly dramatic gesture. I must hasten now to tell you, that under normal circumstances, I am not a girl

given to dramatic gestures. Not because I object to them, but largely because I am too lazy to be bothered. I admire the passion and intensity other people seem to be able to summon up at will, but I have never aspired to that kind of fervor. Curled up with a book, I have generally been content to let the world wag on as it chooses. Until now.

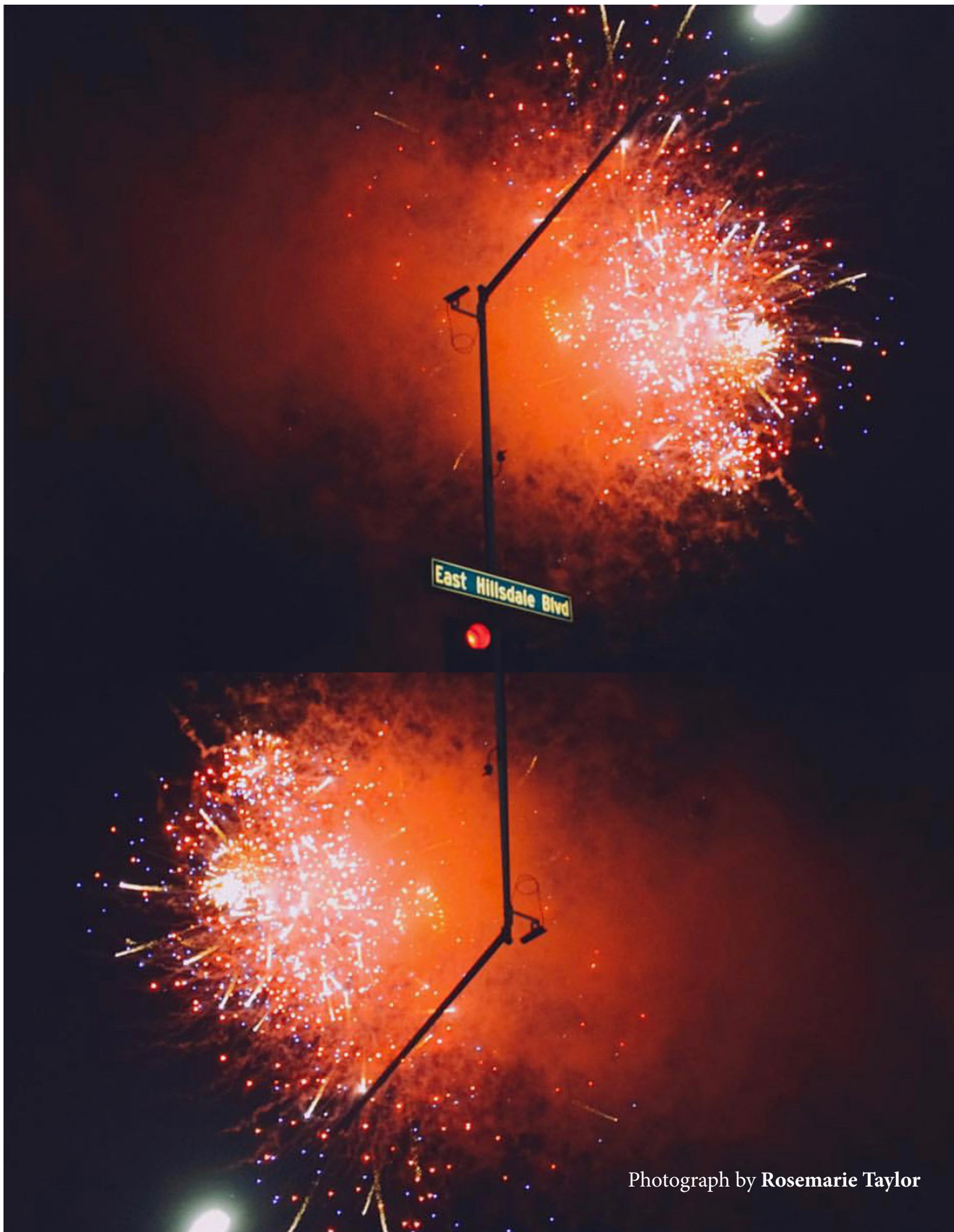
The next day, I consider my options. Jumping off the roof might do the trick. I can-without difficulty-environment myself stepping gracefully off the ledge. Poised, courageous, ready to prove my point. But then I see my parents' stricken faces. No. I will not do that to them. And besides, I like being able to use my legs, and I do not do well at the sight of blood. Perhaps I could ring up the prospective bridegroom with a false and clichéd confession. Tell him I am madly in love with the boy-next-door and plead with heartbreaking eloquence for him to call off the visit. But what if he tells his parents (he looks the sort), and they tell the town? Things would get rapidly and tiresomely complicated. I am not clever with the webs of deception. What else then?

I could always disappear tomorrow. Pack a few bananas and sneak away before dawn. I could catch a bus to one of the obscure villages a few hours away, and spend the day posing as a cultural ethnographer. I could interview men and women for a fictional thesis on, say, the differences in their child-rearing philosophies. I entertain this possibility for awhile, fleshing out the details. The warm welcome and too-sweet cups of coffee the women will give me as we sit cross-legged together on mud floors. The reserved suspicion of the men, until

my well-practiced air of deference and well-mannered charm dissolves them into loquaciousness. I will love listening to all of them, and I will be loved for listening.

It is then that my mother walks into the room. Her shoulders are squared, but not for combat. I have seen women with shoulders set like that when they are carrying heavy loads on their heads. Their matter-of-fact elegance always moves me. They are not over-thinking their burdens, but just doing what needs to be done with Zen-like simplicity. Chopping wood, carrying water, tending home fires, and one very wayward daughter.

"We called it off," she says quietly, reaching out with both hands to tuck my hair behind my ears. "We told them not to come." Wonder breaks over me like a wave. It is pulling me into an ocean. One that I have lived alongside all my life and am yet somehow surprised by. The curious feeling of sands shifting beneath my feet, a vast tug that I am powerless to stop. I am flooded by a sense of how small I am in my smugness. And how little I know of love's deep waters. A strange enthrallment settles over me like a spell.



Photograph by Rosemarie Taylor

A person is rappelling down a rope against a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds. The person is wearing a light-colored shirt, dark pants, and a hat. The rope is a thick chain-link style. The image is split vertically by a semi-transparent light blue bar on the left side.

new understanding

Photograph by Min Mon Kha

The Poetry of Fountain Pens

By Pavithra Mehta

The poetry of fountain pens is problematic and profound.
Anyone who grew up with fingertips stained by
the dark blood of a notoriously leaky nib and
who regularly employed the navy blue sash of
a school uniform as an ink blotter
knows this, knows too—

They would not trade in their memories for
all the ballpoint pens in modernity's spotless
kingdom of convenience, where everything
arrives disposable, a dozen to a pack and
distinctly lacking in romance.

Remember a rainswept morning when
late for the school bus you knelt
over the silken depths of a glossy well,
refilled a forest-green wand and
rose like a young magician,
capillary action propelling you
onto the day's blank page, to
write your flawed and
perfect story.

A Final Farewell

By Anonymous

It was out here, out on this flat, listless swath of land, where the two of us stood facing each other. We were the only figures, the only break in the sameness of this landscape at all. The unbroken, grey, stone ground was hard but smooth beneath my feet. Farther out, beyond where land meets water, the restless sea murmured, hushing all other sounds. Overhead, a flock of nine black crows flew by. I did not see where they came from, nor where they were going. I knew that she didn't, either. Together, we watched them fly away until they were mere specks in the sky, and then those, too, were gone. Slowly, I reoriented myself to face her.

Raindrops began to fall from the grey sky, slowly, softly against us. It was not yet dark, but there was no sun. It felt like a time to be crying, even though my face was free of tears and so was her's.

Drops of rain were landing on her hair, and on her eyebrows and eyelashes. This moment seemed so still.

I took a step closer to her and she did not shy away. This normally would be so bold, too bold, but the overwhelming heaviness weighing on both our hearts

left no room for embarrassment. No room for hesitation.

She was staring into my eyes and I into her's. Far away, across the sea, a breeze picked up and the rain began to fall with a slight slant. This could have been so perfect. I mourned for the lost hope of a happy ending that I used to hold so dear the could-have-beens and the should-have-beens.

There was none of that now. It was just the two of us in this lonely, forgotten beach in a lonely, forgotten corner of the world.

I let out a shaky breath. As if in response, the wind began to blow harder. A few strands of her dark hair blew across her face, but she didn't break her gaze.

Slowly, gently, and perfectly together, we leaned into each other and our lips brushed. Despite everything, my heart leapt. Such a soft, delicate kiss—that's what almost broke me.

This should have been so perfect.

Our faces remained close and around us, the rain started coming down harder. Her breath felt warm on my lips. Looking at her, I could see the pain in

her eyes. We just looked at each other.

Another flock of crows, this time only seven, flew past.

The watch-pendant, that cold, cursed piece of metal that hung from my neck, began ticking. It was a faint sound but out here, in this stillness, sound carries. I brushed my hand gently down her arm, just to say goodbye, because I knew I would not be able to get the words out. She took my hand in hers and squeezed it once, saying the same thing before slowly letting go.

Just for a moment longer we stood there, not speaking, just soaking up the other's presence one last time.

Eventually, without any fuss or hysterical farewells, we simply parted from each other and began walking away. Towards our own separate destinations.

I did not look back.

Photograph by **Andy Pascual**



The Blessing

By Connie Cummings

As the first scarlet rays burst over the inky ocean's edge,
a gold-tinged blush illuminates two upstretched arms.
From high on the *pali's* steep green ledge,
she dances her sacred blessing for the world,
while below the sunlight dazzles across azure waves.

A deep-throated chant raises praises to the sky,
her feet keeping time with *ipu* rhythms.
Adding voices in chorus, seagulls amplify
her prayer for the redemption of this world we live in,
echoed by the booming waves pounding rocks below.

The sun's warmth kisses her upturned face,
bronzed skin tickled by the morning breeze.
She breathes in the heady fragrance of the *lei pikake*
encircling her neck with soft coolness and peace.
She can taste the spray of the salty surf below.

Upward arms, funnel-like palms facing each other,
the boundless Father sky enters, filling her heart,
while up through her feet flows the power of the Mother.
Now hand movements impart from her heart to the world
this blessing of *aloha* like waves flowing outward,
witnessed on this newborn morning by the unflagging sea.

pali – Hawaiian word for cliff

ipu – A drum made from a dried bottle gourd

lei pikake – A garland made of Jasmine flowers

aloha – Hawaiian word for love, compassion, mercy and grace



Photograph by Qiyao Zheng

After Mac Miller

By Sacha 9

I can't keep on losing you

Over complications

Gone too soon

Wait, we was just hangin'

[REDACTED]

The people that know me best

[REDACTED] too soon

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] you leave

[REDACTED] I'm left with my hand in my face [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] looking at [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] a saint, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] heart like gold but it break like glass

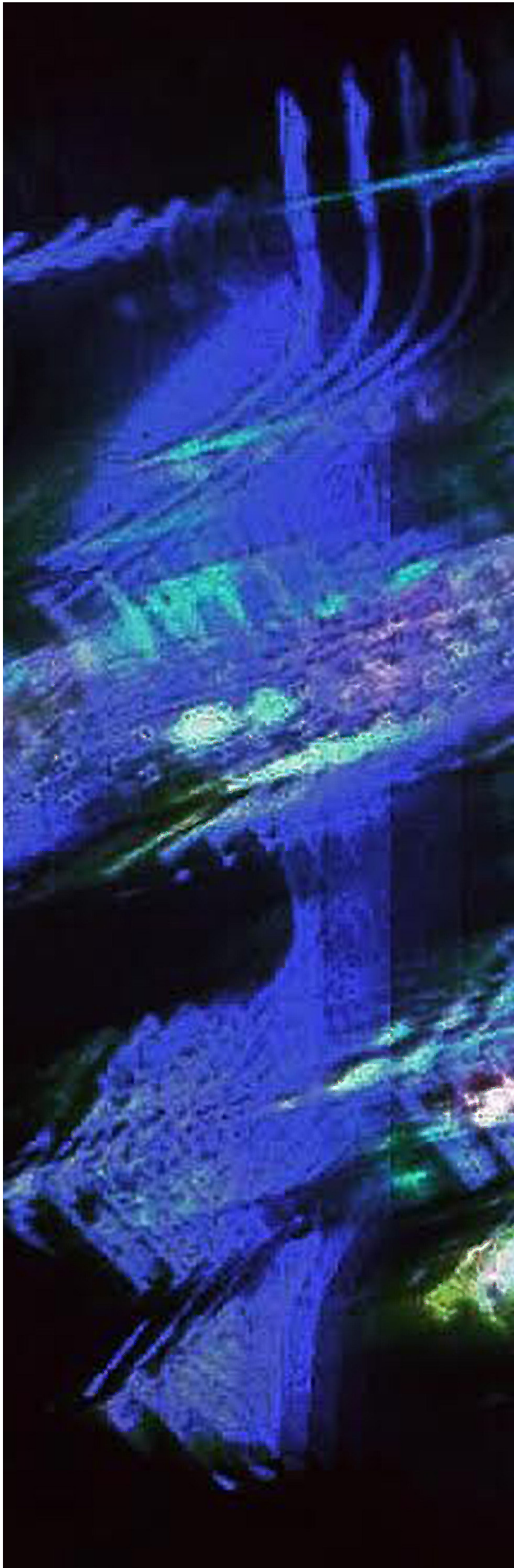
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] you [REDACTED] never had no sun

[REDACTED]

[redacted] when I get home I'mma [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted] give no fucks
[redacted]
Get home late and [redacted]
[redacted] way too drunk [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted] I keep [redacted]
[redacted] saying
[redacted] some bullshit:
[redacted]
Kiss me, [redacted] tease me, [redacted]
God, the devil [redacted]
Tryna get through to you because
I can't keep on losing [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
The people that know me best
[redacted] I won't forget, [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] you can't go away, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] other people [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] just eat [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] every bone in my body
Keep on holding on to [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] What a mess [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] keeping me up late
[REDACTED] you're [REDACTED] on my brain
[REDACTED] why the fuck [REDACTED] complain?
I just think that's ~~some~~ bullshit
[REDACTED] he's a titan
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]





Photograph by Sacha 9

[Redacted text block]

Gone too soon

[Redacted text block]

I guess I need to hold on

[Redacted text block]

Untold Story of My Suitcases

By Dilek Duygu Yavuz

The room was full of suitcases. I'd collected them over the years from many different places. None was similar to another. Some were as colorful as a rainbow, whereas others were simple and faded as could be. Some were made of heavy materials like steel; they were supposed to be unbreakable and long lasting. But others, as a matter of practicality, needed to be lighter. Old ones occupied lower shelves; lighter ones were placed closer to the ceiling. It seemed like everything was in a natural order.

As they sat there, each suitcase eagerly awaited its new destination. While attempting to hide their anxiety and excitement, they asked each other who would be the next to go on a journey. To be chosen was one thing, but once chosen, where would they head off to? A warmer, more exotic place with pearlescent sands and turquoise waters might be their future vista. But they were still frightened. What if the next place was miserably cold and cast in darkness?


In that tiny closet in which they were stacked, they were supposed to live happily until the day they would no

longer be useful to anyone. They were not like those sad, ragged suitcases that people easily forget in train stations. They were well-kept and taken care of. Most importantly, they had their own secrets; each one encased a hidden history that would only be revealed when unlocked by its rightful owner.

One day, after a long hesitation, I finally walked into the room with the suitcases. My footsteps were slow and silent. But the air was suffused with the smell of determination. I locked the door behind me. My suitcases immediately knew that they weren't about to go somewhere else. They knew I was there for another purpose.

I started with the suitcase which I had had the longest. It was almost as old as me. My mom had given it to me when I was a young child. I slowly opened it. Inside it, I could still see the fragile, quiet me of my childhood, though the image was beginning to crumble.

Next, a smell of rusty steel caught my attention. I picked another suitcase. It was only a little younger than the first. It had had a long and prosperous life. At first, I felt proud to have assured it a good life. But then, after cracking it open



only slightly, my two oldest friends came rushing out: loneliness and despair.

While the murmur of all suitcases was effusive, and the sounds in my head were beginning to overpower me, I kept going. One after another, the gesture became almost automatic. My lovely suitcases have never witnessed such commitment. When only a very few were left, I stopped. Silence engulfed me. I left the room and firmly locked the door. I made sure my suitcases of memories would not be able to escape.

I went into the back yard. It was a place where I had spent much of my childhood. Like the room of suitcases, every cranny was full of memories. The first time I stood on my two feet was in that garden. I'd contemplated every season from there. I had also first witnessed death in that place.

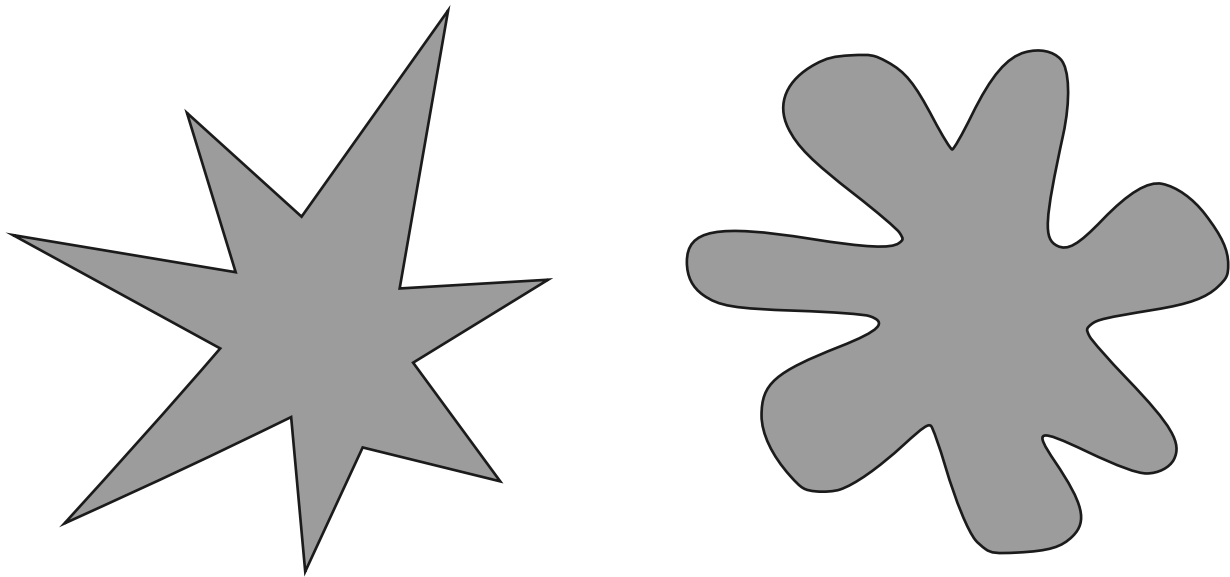
I made a fire, a fire dedicated to all my swirling memories. With a fierce resolve, I broke back into the room with the suitcases and dragged every last one of them out of the house. Their murmurs turned into screams so that I could finally fully hear them. They were yelling. *"You don't have to do that, there is nothing more meaningful than your attachment to your past, and this is who you are."*

I remember that day as the day where there was nothing left from my past, except the ashes and bones of my suitcases. This was how all ended. The following day, I began a new story with a brand-new suitcase.

The Emotional Significance of Phonemes

By Maya Riley

Figure 1



By Monochrome version 1 June 2007 by BendžVectorized with Inkscape--Qef
(talk) 21:21, 23 June 2008 (UTC) - Drawn by Andrew Dunn, 1 October 2004.
Originally uploaded to En Wiki - 07:23, 1 October 2004.

Imagine you are asked to match each of the shapes in Figure 1 with each of the following names: *Bouba* or *Kiki*. At first, you would wonder how you would be able to identify an unfamiliar shape with an unfamiliar name, but will soon be surprised at how easily you can match the name *Kiki* as belonging to the spiked shape, and *Bouba* as belonging to the squiggly shape. In fact, the vast majority of people asked to match these names to these shapes are able to do so correctly. This psychological effect is called the Bouba-Kiki effect, and it demonstrates the non-arbitrary mapping between sound and resulting instinctive thoughts. In other words, the consonant sounds—known as *phonemes*—we hear in the names *Bouba* and *Kiki*, *b* and *k*, carry a sustained emotional connotation that we as humans can naturally comprehend, regardless of the language we speak. This simple image is significant in that it suggests there is more to phonemes than we may have initially thought, and that there may be a link between the creation of language and the various emotional impacts of different phonemes. The Bouba-Kiki effect is the foundation on which I base my thesis, which is that the specific sounds chosen to be included in words in language was not random, but actually deliberate and non-arbitrary.

In the case of the Bouba-Kiki effect, we are able to identify *Kiki* as the spiked shape, and *Bouba* as the squiggly shape because our brains recognize the clear difference between phonemes *k* and *b*: although they are both a bilabial stop, meaning a sound created by the entrapment of air in the vocal apparatus (lungs and vocal cords) followed by the release of the air between two lips, one phoneme (*b*) is voiced and one (*k*) is voiceless. Voiced phonemes are made by vibrating the vocal cord, and the vocal cord is not vibrated when a voiceless phoneme is pronounced. Voiced phonemes like *b* and *g* generally sound duller and heavier; meanwhile, voiceless phonemes like *k* and *p* sound sharper and lighter. This explains why we immediately associate *Kiki* with the spiked shape, because of the sharpness, swiftness, and lack of weight that the *k* sound implies. Meanwhile, we associate *Bouba* with more weight and delay. The shapes visually represent the way in which our minds perceive *k* and *b*: *Kiki* sounds sharp and curt, while *Bouba* is dull and extended, with no sharpness whatsoever.

This link between phonemes and specific ideas is a natural part of the Japanese language. In Japanese ideophones—words that evoke vivid mental pictures of specific ideas—subtle differences can

significantly alter the mentally generated concept. For example, the ideophone *korokoro* paints the mental picture of a small pebble or a small, round object rolling down a hill. However, if the voiceless bilabial stop *k* is replaced with the voiced bilabial stop *g*, and the ideophone becomes *gorogoro*, what was once a small pebble becomes a boulder, or a heavy, round object. Another example is *pokipoki*, which describes a thin cylindrical object such as a branch snapping in half, versus *bokiboki*, which describes a larger, tougher cylindrical object such as a bone breaking in half. The rule that switching phonemes alters mental concepts applies to all ideophones in Japanese—speakers often swap voiceless phonemes in ideophones with voiced phonemes in order to convey more drama and power. As another hypothetical example, if the voiced phonemes *r* and *j* in the classic Shakespeare novel *Romeo and Juliet* were replaced with voiceless phonemes *c* and *k*, and in turn became *Corey and Katelyn*, the end result would not have had the dramatic weight. This instance and Japanese ideophones indicate that voiced phonemes connote more weight and drama compared to voiceless phonemes, and that one subtle phonemic difference in a word can alter what we picture in our mind upon hearing it. Because we all share the same nat-

ural emotional reactions in response to specific phonemes regardless of culture or language, this psychological phenomenon likely played a part in the creation of words, and the decision-making in regards to what sounds would be included in words.

There are many areas of life in which phonemes influence our thought processes. One example we can all relate to is buying products. Although most of us are not aware of the phenomenon that phonemes have an emotional effect, businesses are. Businesses take advantage of the fact that phonemes evoke emotions or mental concepts, and construct brand names or product names based on the impression they want to deliver. In the article “Strawberry is no Blackberry: Building Brands Using Sound” by Sharon Begley, Begley explains how brands like Blackberry deliberately decided to utilize voiced phonemes in their brand name rather than voiceless phonemes like *s*, which is present in the brand name Strawberry: “But ‘-berry’ was good... people associate the *b* sound with reliability... another syllable with a *b* and a short vowel would nail it...” (Begley). The foundation on which Blackberry decided on their brand name parallels the essence of the Bouba-Kiki effect and ideophones: when people hear phonemes, whether

they can control it or not, an unshakeable mental concept is formed.

In another case, Christmas shoppers were inclined to purchase a “bundle” of Christmas goodies, rather than a “package” of Christmas goodies, due to the aforementioned sharpness and curtness of the *k* sound, compared to the calming bluntness of the *b* sound. In a sense, hearing the name of a brand or product for the first time is like meeting a stranger. When meeting a stranger, you analyze his or her appearance and clothing to make assumptions about his or her personality and lifestyle, and decide whether he or she is worth getting to know. Similarly, upon hearing a brand name, whether the phonemes are voiced or voiceless lets us determine several things: whether the designers were going for a powerful or a subtle concept, helps us assume its function and purpose, and decide whether or not it is worth the purchase.

In both of the above cases, the small piece of information given at the very beginning creates a first impression that leads to further assumptions about the product. Because phonemes have a significant influence on our first impressions of commercial products and whether or not they are worth buying, one could argue that we are subconsciously controlled by phonemes in our

financial decisions, and ultimately, our preferences are shaped by what we buy as a result of our mental reactions to the phonemes in product names. Furthermore, one could even say that phonemes influence all aspects of our lives. After all, we cannot thrive without advanced communication, and with both written and spoken communication comes phonemes. As an example, we subconsciously perceive the body language of crossed arms as closed off and aloof, while perceiving freed arms as open and engaged. Similarly, we subconsciously perceive voiceless phonemes as light and sharp, while perceiving voiced phonemes as blunt and conveying more power, drama, or weight.

Past linguistics research suggests that the creation of language was arbitrary, according to the article "Inherent Emotional Quality of Human Speech Sounds" by Myers-Schulz. However, recent research suggests that language is actually non-arbitrary, due to the evidence suggesting the emotional valence of phonemes, with the help of the data surrounding the Buba-Kiki effect.

Spoken and written communication is vital to human advancement. Without spoken and written communication, which includes the branch of phonemes, humans would never have been able to achieve the completion of

complex architectural and technological creations, or the organization of a civil society. A collective understanding of linguistics and the ways in which phonemes subliminally influence our thoughts will build stronger and more effective communication skills between countries, and as a result, faster advancements in technology and civilization on a global scale.

Works Cited

Begley, S. (2002, August 26). Strawberry Is No BlackBerry: Building Brands Using Sound.

Retrieved from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB1030310730179474675>

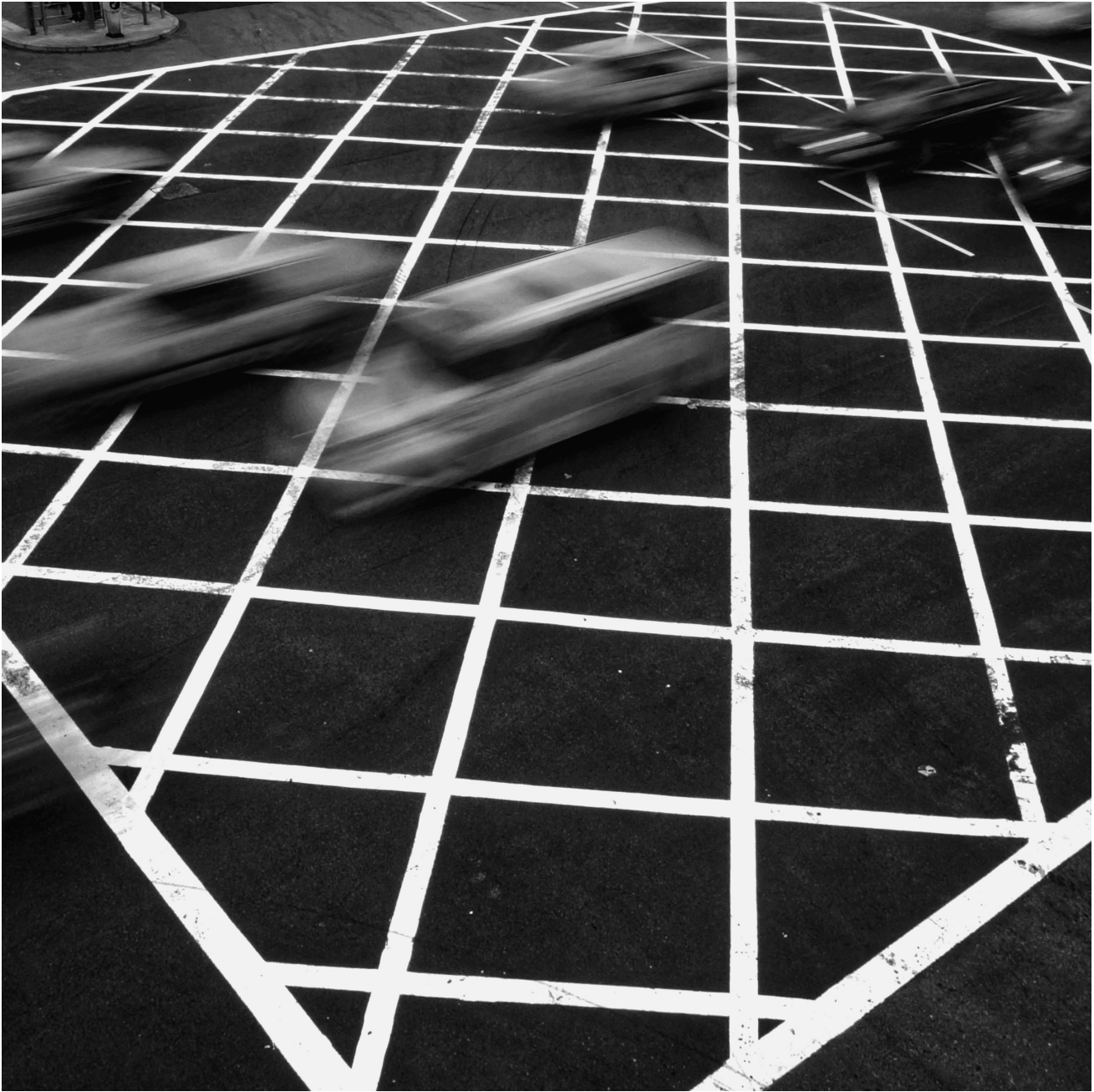
Menon, G., & Yorkston, E. (2004). A Sound Idea: Phonetic Effects of Brand Names on Consumer Judgments. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31(1), 43-51. doi:10.1086/383422

Monaghan, P., Shillcock, R. C., Christiansen, M. H., & Kirby, S. (2014). How Arbitrary is Language? *The Royal Society*, 369(1651). doi:10.1098/rstb.2013.0299

Myers-Schulz, B., Pujara, M., Wolf, R. C., & Koenigs, M. (2013). Inherent Emotional Quality of Human Speech Sounds. *Cognition & Emotion*, 27(6), 1105-1113. doi:10.1080/02699931.2012.754739

Ramachandran, V. (2007, October 23). 3 Clues to Understanding Your Brain.

Retrieved September 28, 2018, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rl2LwnaUA-k&t=1297s>



Art by Yueying Wu



Photograph by Qiyao Zheng



Get Published

Illustrations
Digital Art
Photography
Poetry
Creative Nonfiction
Short Stories
Academic Papers

Submissions open to all SMCCCD students

<https://labyrinth.submittable.com/submit>

