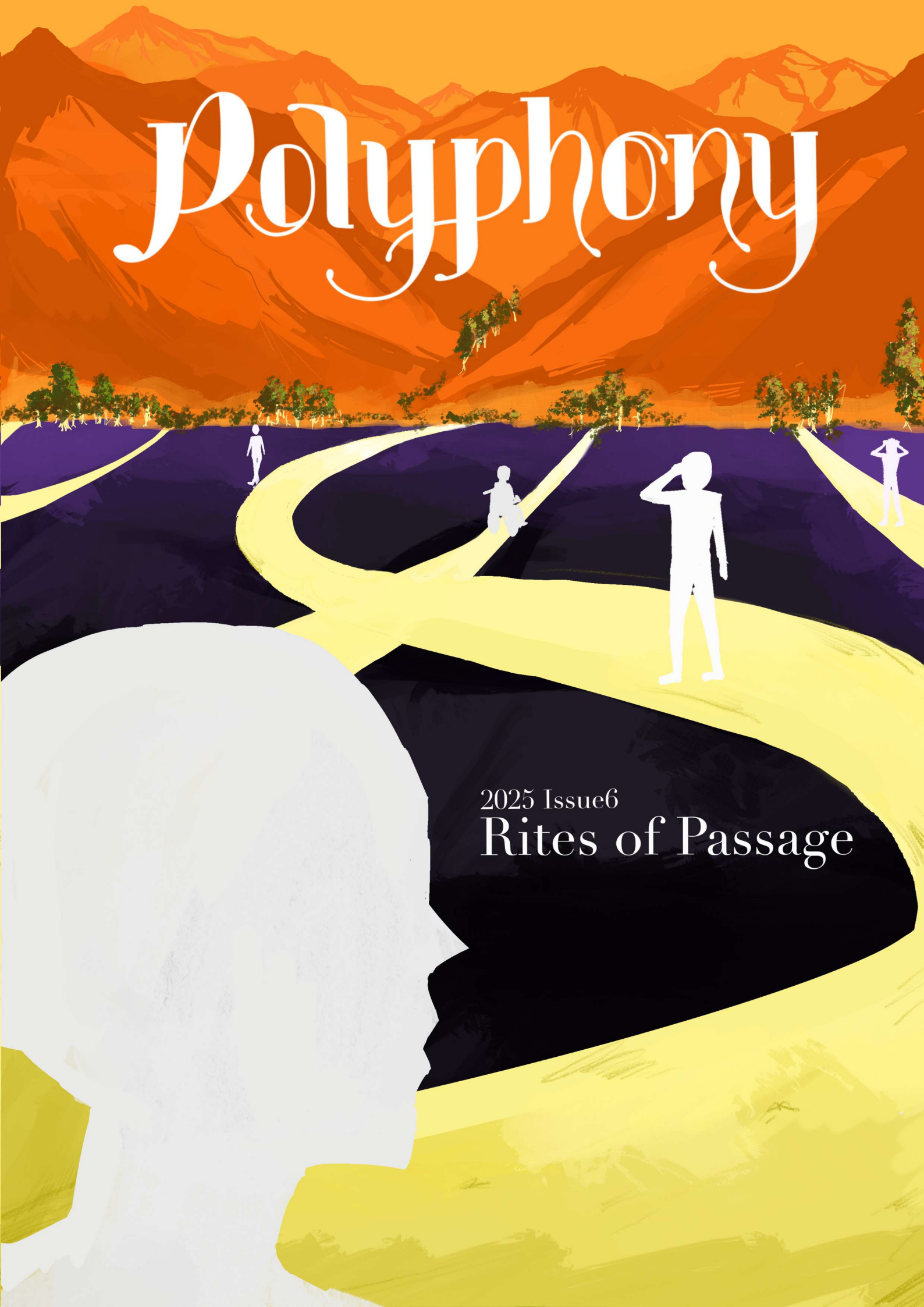
Polyphony



2025 Issue6

Rites of Passage

Cover by **Hana Nagatani**

A Letter from the Editors

Co-written by Aisyah & Snow

Hey readers!

How have you been? Please take a moment to reflect on the current stage.

Aisyah: I am not quite sure every time I have to write a letter. A simple thing but a big decision what to write and what not to write. In sooth, I always faced these options in every step, whether by personal agency or by force. Messiness of paths, excessive options, overinformations, and forth animates us, or at least me, in the continuing everyday lives. This always makes me overthink, what if I get stuck in this situation? How can I get through these shifts? How do I adulting? How will my life be after graduation? But I also reflect, how have I gotten through the transitions in my life so far?

Snow: When I was younger, I imagined rites of passage as big, clear moments, like flipping a switch and suddenly knowing how to be an adult. In reality, it feels more like moving slowly through small changes, with some stops and surprises here and there, like little pauses to reset and unexpected turns you didn't see coming. Adulting, as people like to call it, isn't one big test. It's more about learning how to handle the everyday things like paying bills, making choices, and figuring out what matters, while still feeling like you're improvising half the time. Maybe chaos isn't always a problem to solve. Sometimes it's just the background noise of moving from one stage of life to another. Perhaps that's what makes these transitions meaningful. They're not

Aisyah and Snow: Transitions often leave us in a kind of in-between space, where it's not always easy to tell what counts as "before" and what counts as "after." Rites of passage don't always feel like clean breaks. They can be messy, slow, and uncertain. That's why in Polyphony Issue 6, we chose to focus on "Rites of Passage," a theme that touches on so many of our lives: from birth to coming of age, from death to the smaller everyday shifts that shape who we are. But these passages aren't just personal. They also connect to larger political, social, and cultural changes, which feel especially present in our global and often unpredictable times.

We hope that as you read, you'll recognize moments of transition in your own life and perhaps find some reassurance that we're all learning our way through them together. Here's to all of us still figuring it out, one step at a time.

These celebrations would not be possible without Polyphony members, Jia Xuan Chok, Hana Nagatani, Hanami Enshoiwa, Shan Min Kha, Puspadewi Adiseputra, Mori Kento, and all of the contributors to harmonize our collaborations to tell narratives.

Let this bundle be a table for feasts!

Aisyah & Snow

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Photo by Nayaka Ichiro

So, here goes nothing...

What are we?

Polyglossy was born to be a sanctuary for the unfinished, the raw, and the value-able—a space where ideas could be molded, voices could be uplifted, and silence could be given sound.

Polyphony began not just as a student magazine but as a dream, an idea that came alive through a literal dream of Professor Tak Uesugi. He imagined a table seated with four students, cigars hanging at the corner of their mouths, who seemed to be discussing something suspicious. Outside of the dream, these four students are, in fact, passionate individuals, each carrying words unspoken, stories half-formed, and attitudes to shape the world through writing. It was never meant to be merely a collection of polished essays and poems. Instead, Polyphony was born to be a sanctuary for the unfinished, the raw, and the vulnerable—a space where ideas could be molded, voices could be uplifted, and silence could be given sound. It was a way to capture the heartbeat of the Global Discovery Program (GDP), where students from all corners of the world converge to study, create, and debate within the halls of Okayama University.

As ex-editor-in-chief Jia Xuan Chok reflects in the 2024 issue, life as a GDP student is a lesson in engaging with "unexpected messiness." This spirit permeates Polyphony's pages, where the chaos of our era becomes the backdrop for thought-provoking explorations. The world outside is turbulent—marked by conflict, environmental crises, and social upheavals—but rather than retreating from this reality, the writers and editors of Polyphony dive headfirst into it. The magazine pulses with questions that resist simple answers, grappling with themes of survival, solidarity, and collective imagination. It embodies the very essence of a community that strives to stay emotionally and intellectually alive, especially in a country where not speaking the dominant language asks for a more creative solidarity.

Here, traditional academic boundaries dissolve, giving way to transdisciplinary conversations. In the pages of Polyphony, a philosophical essay on subjectivity in science fiction films finds its place alongside deeply personal reflections on cultural identity. As we explore themes like memory, nostalgia, and the human-machine divide, taking inspiration from class materials and discussions, we turn academic concepts into art that can stir, provoke, and resonate.

Yet, Polyphony is not only about lofty ideas. It is also grounded in the intensely personal journeys of its editors and writers. Wakaba Saito, another general editor, describes it as an "extracurricular writing platform," a space where students bring their backgrounds and experiences to the forefront. This spirit of collaboration is essential; Hana Nagatani's cover design for Issue 5 is a visual testament to this ethos, interweaving the aesthetics and contributions of her peers to create a tapestry of vision and experiences lived and shared. Snow, who manages social media, finds Polyphony personally challenging yet profoundly fulfilling—a way to construct her sense of self amid the academic and social pressures of university life.

> "Polyphony was born to be a sanctuary for the unfinished, the raw, and the vulnerable."

Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake, a novel for our Sociological Imagination class, tells the story of Gogol Ganguli, a boy struggling with dual identities and his experience of cultural dissonance. Similarly, many GDP students who contribute to Polyphony grapple with questions of belonging, as articulated by editor Puspa. Reading and editing the magazine's submissions often becomes a lifeline, making her feel less alone as a "loner ryugakusei" (international student) trying to navigate the complexities of being far from home. Polyphony is a space that embraces this vulnerability, where writers can express feelings of isolation and the search for connection, turning them into pieces that echo across cultures and languages.

What makes Polyphony truly unique is its ability to be "moving-with-the-times," as described by Chok. In a world of constant change, the magazine is a living entity, adapting and responding to current global realities. Inspired by the activism that once shaped student journalism during critical moments in history, Polyphony's latest issue confronts the anxieties of our present: from the devastating impact of climate change to the humanitarian crises

unfolding in places like Palestine and Myanmar. The pieces do not merely observe these crises; they challenge readers to engage, to think, and to act. The urgency of now is palpable, as each story and essay reflects a desire to rupture the status quo and envision alternative futures—from the devastating impact of climate change to the humanitarian crises unfolding in places like Palestine and Myanmar. The pieces do not merely observe these crises; they challenge readers to engage, to think, and to act. The urgency of now is palpable, as each story and essay reflects a desire to rupture the status quo and envision alternative futures.

As Polyphony grows, it continues to draw strength from the Global Discovery Program's academic environment, which is rich in diversity and intellectual debate. Here, students are not passive learners but active participants in shaping their education and their world. GDP's interdisciplinary nature—spanning fields from anthropology to environmental science—infuses the magazine with a distinct academic rigor. But it is never dry or detached. Instead, Polyphony's pages vibrate with the tension between knowledge and feeling, between global events and personal experiences.

Yet, beyond its academic roots, Polyphony is a community project. The work is collective and sometimes chaotic, as Chok humorously notes in her letter, describing how the team keeps the magazine "half-alive (if not dead!) yet breathtaking in its limbo state." This spirit of collective effort is what makes Polyphony more than a publication—it is a movement, a gathering place for people and ideas, a testament to the belief that stories can transform the way we see ourselves and each other. In a world that so often seems divided, Polyphony insists on the power of stories to connect, challenge, and heal.

The question remains, however, as posed by authors like Orwell and Shafak: what difference can writing make in a world that seems to be unraveling? Polyphony's answer is clear. In an age when apathy is our greatest threat, words become acts of defiance. The art of storytelling becomes a way to keep caring, to keep imagining, and to keep building bridges where there are divisions. It is a reminder that even in the face of overwhelming uncertainty, the simple act of putting pen to paper—or voice to words—can be revolutionary.

So here it stands Polyphony,

a symphony of voices diverse and nuanced, where each piece, be it academic or creative, contributes to a more extensive, ongoing dialogue. It is a magazine that refuses to be passive or merely reflective. Instead, it dares to be active, ever-evolving, and deeply human. And as long as there are words left unsaid, stories still waiting to be shared, Polyphony will remain a place for those voices, singing in harmony and sometimes in discord, but always alive.

Woven by Shan Min Kha,
Words by the Polyphony Team
Illustration by Hana Nagatani

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Check out more content from us on our blog and Instagram account:

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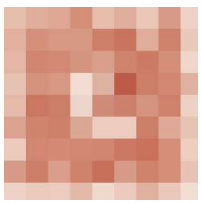
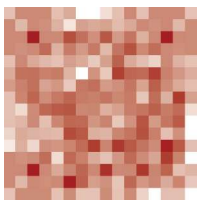




If you are a student of GDP or Okayama University, feel free to submit your work to be considered for publication at polyphonygdp@gmail.com. We are also open to collaborations with magazines and journal organizations beyond our program and university. Email us to collaborate!

Sitting in a Small Circle: Reflections on "Transitions"

Words from Polyphony Reading Club: Read 4 Fun (R4F)
Edited by Snow Myo Myat Hnin & Aisyah Shobrina

R4F, or Read for Fun, started out as a Polyphony-run reading club open to all GDP students. After experimenting with different reading activities—from reading classical and whimsical academic articles to discussing our favorite literary quotes, the club has transformed into a space for sharing vulnerabilities and cultivating creativity. Now, we don't just read, but also hold scrapbooking sessions, poetry experimentation workshops, and even thematic roundtable discussions. You can join us every alternate Thursdays. Simply keep an eye on the notification board at the entrance of G-lounge!

In one roundtable session, we asked participants to pause and recollect those little and big moments when life nudges you into something unfamiliar. What made you realize you were changing? How did your path shift, your ideas shift, and your "self" shift? To help the thoughts flow, everyone scribbled reflections on the whiteboard. The goal wasn't just to share stories but to notice feelings, insights, and unexpected discoveries along the way.

This curated collage is an excerpt that aims to offer a glimpse into that open and thoughtful exploration of transitions, the ways GDP students notice change, grow, and adapt as they move through different stages of their lives that are their very own yet not entirely shaped by themselves.

Yamake: Should I start? Well, I have been interested in learning English, in using English, since high school. But since I was in a traditional local school, I did not have many opportunities to learn other subjects in English. It was always just "learning English" itself, and there were no classes where we used English to learn something I was interested in. But in GDP, we can choose what we want to learn. For example, if you are in the Discovery program, there are many clusters, good professors, and interesting classes. And if you decide to take courses from other faculties, you can do that too.

Also, meeting with other GDP students has been fascinating. Everyone has different stories, different ideas, and different ways of thinking. They are so great. Before entering GDP and after entering GDP feels like two different chapters of my life. The people I have met here are so different from what I had experienced before. It was truly life changing, maybe the best life change I have had.

Eri: For me, I cannot really separate my gap years from entering GDP, because they are strongly connected. I think GG mentioned this a little, but before I had my gap years, I did not feel like I was changing much. I just felt like I was the same old me. I often feel like I was just five years old yesterday, and I had not changed a bit. I was kind of stubborn in a way. But throughout my gap years, I learned so many things, both internally and externally.

I realized the world is so big. Even if I want to do so many things, I cannot. Teenagers have this kind of unique passion for doing things quickly, or feeling like they are at the top of the world. But I realized that it is nearly impossible. Actually, it is impossible to do everything. You have to be a lifelong learner, and that is what I realized after my gap years.

After entering GDP, it is a little off topic, but even my MBTI changed. I had never changed from INFP. I was always introverted, an extreme introvert. I could communicate with people, but I was not fully confident in myself. After entering GDP, somehow, I do not know how, I became an extreme extrovert. Maybe it is because I experienced a great failure, and from that I learned how to face my problems and even people I used to avoid. I learned to accept myself, and that is probably how I improved. That was something I never had when I was still introverted. That was a big change for me.

Aisyah: But do you think that some people say entering GDP is such a life-changing experience, while for others it might not be? Maybe for some of us it is only one part of life, not everything. Do you think there are cases where actually nothing really changes? Like, you come here, but you still feel like it is just you, the same person, only now inside GDP? Anyone?

Miyo: Yes, of course. I feel like I myself did not really change, but how people reacted to me changed. I was more accepted in a way, and that felt different. I think that part changed, but I did not change, though. It makes me wonder how you even measure change. I grew up in the Japanese education system, and there is always some kind of hierarchy among teenagers, like popularity or who is gossiped about. But in university, you do not have that anymore. You are just either a good person or a bad person, or you are the subject of gossip or not. The hierarchy from before disappears. So in that sense, how people treat you changes, but it does not mean I have changed.

Chiyu: For me, language itself became part of that change. When I was in the US, my kindergarten teacher helped me so much with English. At first, it felt impossible because English and Japanese are so different. But little by little, I began to think differently in each language. Now I notice how each language carries its own context, and switching between them lets me understand myself in new ways.

Eri: Right. When we hear the word change, we tend to imagine we have been completely replaced by something new. But in my opinion, I have not changed drastically. There are some changes, but it feels more like I am constantly adding new things to myself. Sometimes I put some things aside as well. Maybe after ten years, if I look back, I will see a big change. But in only a few months or a few years, I do not think we will see that much. I feel like I have changed only when I compare myself to who I was one or two years ago. That is how I recognize change.

GG: So when we are talking about change, do you mean growth, or just change in general?

Eri: It could mean either. It does not necessarily have to be a good change. It could also be negative. I might only realize if it was good or bad when I face trouble later on. Until then, the change is just something I made for myself. It is a choice. You do not have to accept all changes as positive. It is up to you.

GG: But do you not think sometimes you are changed by the environment, not by your own decision? For example, entering GDP changed you because you were exposed to new people, new ideas, and new ways to deal with situations. You did not make those changes voluntarily, but the exposure changed you.

Aisyah: Yes, that is interesting. There is the feeling of change we create ourselves, but there is also the change that comes from outside. Sometimes it is not that we willingly change, but that the environment shapes us.

Neo: For me, I have had many rites of passage, even within GDP. But the latest one is more abstract. It is the moment when you have something in mind, like a theory, but you cannot put it into action. There is always this barrier between thought and action, and the consequences of action. When you finally cross that barrier, that is when I think you have truly grown. For example, people say, "I do not care what others think of me." You can say it and believe it, but if your actions show otherwise, then it has not really happened. It only happens when you act according to what you believe, even if others dislike you. When you cross that gap and realize the fear was only in your head, then you are truly free. That is one of my rites of passage.

Chok: What triggered that for you in 2018, when you say it was like a turning point?(recounting from their previous conversation outside the roundtable)

Neo: I call it my renaissance. In French, renaissance means rebirth. What triggered it was my cousins visiting me. They were so cool, so modern and mature, and I wanted to be like them. I thought about myself and realized I was always overthinking. That was when I started to change. Before, I was introverted and pessimistic. I even remember in ninth grade, when my classmates invited me to a barbecue, I lied and said I was busy because I did not want to go. Afterward, I felt horrible and sad. But in 2018, something shifted. I became more optimistic, more open minded, and more social. The version of me you see now really comes from that point.

Eri: For me, I feel like I change when I find answers to questions I keep asking myself. For example, why can I not make a practical plan? Why can I not do group projects more effectively? Why can I not be a better facilitator? These are small questions, but when I think about them both subjectively and objectively, and finally find one answer, I feel like I have crossed a line. It may not be the final answer, but having even a temporary answer feels like change. At that point, I am no longer just wandering around in doubt. I think that is similar to Neo's example. It is like arriving at a place where I can answer my own questions. That is when I feel I have changed.

GG: For me, change also meant questioning my relationship with culture. My parents used to ask me why I listened to Burmese music. They said, "We sent you to English schools on weekends, you should be listening to English songs." For a while, I thought they were right. But later, when I was exposed to ideas of decolonization, I started to ask myself what I was losing by rejecting my own culture. Now I am trying to reconnect with my language and heritage. There is even an exclusive gay community in Myanmar that has its own language. That made me realize how culture, queerness, and language can overlap in powerful ways.

Alex: Do you think you have restored what you lost?

GG: I am not sure. Maybe I do not even know exactly what I lost.

Snow: Yes, and when we talk about rites of passage, I also think they are not always linear. Sometimes you build yourself step by step, like stacking blocks, and then one block falls down. You feel like you have gone backward. But then you pick it up, change the formation, and put it back again. It is not always steady progress. There can be setbacks, and that is also part of the passage.

GG: When we say "rites of passage," what exactly are we talking about?

Chok: Usually, in the conventional sense, rites of passage are ceremonies like graduation, funerals, religious rituals, or coming-of-age ceremonies. These are organized life stages. But we are using the term more broadly to mean transitions in life. It could be about identity, relationships, family, creativity, or even political awareness.

GG: So it is like the moment when you mark a point in time, when you realize change is happening. You feel disoriented, and then you start to reorient yourself.

Aisyah: But sometimes there is no clear end. Change can just keep going. It may start, but it never ends.

Chok: Yes. I think people often want a beginning and an end because it helps make sense of things. They connect events to explain why something happened. But not everyone lives that way. For some people, it is ongoing.

Aisyah: This reminds me of tomorrow's reading about homeless people. Their lives are described as day-to-day experiences with no clear endpoint. It is about experiencing life without knowing when or how it will change.

Alex: I had a similar experience when I went back to the Philippines three years ago. I thought I would feel nostalgic, but when I stepped into the airport, it felt confusing. I did not belong anymore. The infrastructure had changed, and the people I knew treated me differently. I even visited a memorial monument of a Japanese prison, and the way people there talked about it made me feel like an outsider. That trip made me realize the Philippines is not home for me anymore. Japan does not feel like home either. Home is not a place. Home is me. It is where I feel comfortable, and right now that comfort is inside myself.

Aisyah: I felt something similar when I tried to reconnect with Saitama. I grew up hearing stories about the city from my family, so when I came back, I expected familiarity. But when I walked its streets, I realized I knew nothing about the place. I only knew the stories, not the reality. It felt like the place itself rejected me. I was searching for home but not finding it.

Chok: That type of memory can be called borrowed memory. It's when you remember things because people around you remember them and have told you to remember them, not because you experienced them directly.

—

Change might not be something that is chosen. Sometimes, it arrives from outside, through the environment, family expectations, or maybe the strangeness of returning to a place that is supposed to be your "home". And even where there is an essence of change, the footprints of the past remain, in Neo's words. There's no final chapter here, no neat ending. Just moments of crossing a line, figuring things out, and realizing that home, growth, and identity are always a little messy, a little surprising, but not always entirely our own.

Speacial thanks to all friends who joined: Alex, Eri, GG, Neo, Miyo, V, Xafari, Kento, Pika, Yamake

When I was 6 months old, I fell out of bed
That is how I learned falling gives you pain

When I was 2, I got burned with hot water
That is when I knew I should stay away from the electric pot

When I was 3, a newborn came to my house
That is when I knew I was not the only one to be cared for

When I was 6, I entered elementary school
That is when I realized how loud and crazy boys are

When I was 7, I moved to Japan
That is when I noticed that so many snacks in Korea were from Japan

When I was 9, I started going to a local Japanese school
That is when I was taught not to sit cross-legged because I was a girl

When I was 12, I got bullied because of who I was
That is when I learned that not all people have reasons for their cruelty

When I was 13, I moved to another country
That is when I knew the inconvenience of being an outsider

When I was 14, I lived in a village
I lost myself and thought I was doing great, just because I had a little more experience than others

When I was 15, I faced my first entrance exam
That is when I deeply understood how my experience and English are important to me

When I was 17, I felt lonely
That is when I thought I did not have a place to fit in

When I was 18, I was still alone
That is when I knew that I was my only ally

When I was 20, I did not know where I was
"I'll go with the flow". That is probably what I thought

When I was 20 and a half, I got accepted to GDP
That is when I felt relief for having a spot in society

When I was on my spring break, my grandpa passed away
That is when I knew from the heart that life is just once

On my way back to Japan, tears silently came out of my eyes
That is when I said goodbye to my youth

And now, when I go into the lounge every day to see so many smiles and genuine kindness, and hear experiences that I could not imagine from my perspective, that is when I know that the world is still full of wonder, and I am not alone

Onward

Words by Eri Asakura

"Kashgar," Photo by Susan Li Ying Jiao →

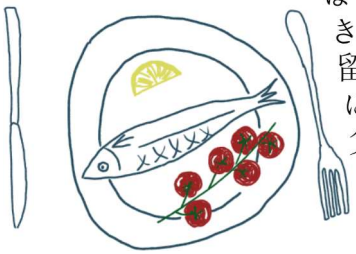
家族をつくり続ける

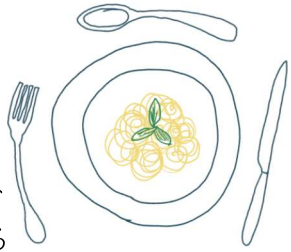
Keep Making A Family

Words by Hana Nagatani

私がはじめて家族と離れて過ごしたのはいつだっただろうか。自分が覚えている限りでは、私が小学校一年生のころだ。学校でもらったチラシに書いてあったサマーキャンプに行きたくて、両親に頼んで一人で参加させてもらったとき。1日目はさすがにホームシックになって泣いてしまったが、5日後の最終日にはすっかりキャンプが楽しくなっており、むしろ帰りたくないとまで言ったことを覚えている。まだキャンプがしたいと解散場所の駅で泣きじゃくったためか、はたまた夏休み期間も仕事が忙しく、そのうえ一人っ子で遊び相手のいない私を心配していた両親の希望だったのか、結局私はこのサマーキャンプに八年間も通った。

キャンプ以来、私と父母は不思議と離れてばかりの生活を送ってきた。たとえば、父が単身赴任に行ったとき。さらに、寮のある学校に入ったとき。これらによって私は両親とほぼ顔を合わせない生活を送ることとなった。平日は寮に行き、週末帰ってきても母の仕事が忙しく留守番をしたりほかの家に預けられたり。さらに父は二〜三ヶ月に一回しか帰って来ず、





滞在するのも数日ほどだった。忙しい母と過ごせるのは夜だけで、家族の寝室でひとり眠るのが寂しかったことをよく覚えている。三人のために作られたはずのベッドに私ひとりで寝転がっていると、隣がやけに広くて落ち着かなかった。まだまだ子供だった私はそれが怖くて、壁に向かって何も見えないようにして眠っていた。

その後、さらに衝撃的な別れが私に降りかかった。やっと父が帰ってきたと思ったら、なんと両親が別居の継続を決めてしまったのだ。正直うすうす予想していたことではあったのだが、それでもこのことはわだかまりになってしばらく私の心に残り続けた。そのうえ父が転勤したことにより、私は今度は彼に着いてさらに遠い場所へ引っ越す羽目になってしまった。さすがにこの頃になると住む場所や人を変えるのにも慣れていたので平気だったが、今度は母と会うのが三月に一回になってしまったというわけだ。父母は別にお互いをそこまで嫌いあってはいなかったようで（どうやら生活スタイルが合わなかったことが主な原因だったらしい）、私の誕生日などにはたまに三人で集まり、食事をすることなどもあったが、離れ離れの生活は依然続いていた。結局その後もあちこち転々として、一年前に大学進学のために岡山に来て今がある。

こうして離れて暮らした時間は、私にとって家族としての関係性に迷い、苦しみ続けた期間だった。同じ家に住みながら家族でいるのと、離れて暮らしながら家族でいるのには別々の技術が必要だ。生活を共有していないということには、生活習慣に関するいざこざが少ないなど楽な面もあるが、同時に距離が遠いなかでの信頼関係の構築といった大変な面もある。

実際、中学から高校までの私はどこかで両親を自分とは遠く離れた他人のように感じており、「気を使わせたくないし連絡も取りたくない」「もっと距離の近い友達や先生の方が信頼できる」と思っていた。また、「ともに暮らしていない家族」の話は日本ではあまり一般に知られていないため、自分たちの家族は本当に「家族」として認められるのか、という不安も常にあった。私は「お母さんと離れて寂しかったでしょう」「大変だね」「連絡を取り合っているだけで会わないなんてドライだね」というようなことを言われるたび反論していたのだが、一方で「家族一緒に仲良く暮らすのが一番」で、私たちの家族は「不完全」なのだ、という考えにもとらわれ続けていた。きっとそれは父や母も同じだっただろう。

では、そのあいだはただ苦しかっただけの期間で、私たちの家族は完全に「壊れてしまった」のか、と言われるとそれは違う。確かに私と家族との関係はぎこちなかったが、このような生活は重要な「通過儀礼」でもあったのではないだろうかと私は考えている。文化人類学的にいえば、「通過儀礼」は人がある社会的な属性から別の属性へと移行する際の儀礼、たとえば成人式や葬儀などのことを指す。通過儀礼には大きく分けて3段階の過程がある。儀礼の主役となる人々が元の社会（日常）から一時的に分離される段階、非日常的な場で行われる移行の段階、そして別の社会的存在として新たな日常に再統合される段階だ。拡大解釈かもしれないが、私たち家族が離れて、そして別々のコミュニティの中で暮らした期間は通過儀礼の1〜2段階目、分離から移行の期間だったともいえないだろうか。私たちは仕事や生活スタイルの変化によってもともとの日常から分離され、それぞれのコミュニティで生活しながらも連絡を取り合ったり、会って食事をしたり喧嘩したりしながら、また別のかたちの「家族」へと変貌していった。つまり、私たちの家族は「完全な家族」だったのが「不完全な家族」になったのではなく、もともとの社会的な形から、分離〜移行の期間を通してまた別の存在になっているのだ。

『私たちの家族は「完全な家族」だったのが「不完全な家族」になったのではなく、もともとの社会的な形から、分離〜移行の期間を通してまた別の存在になっているのだ。』

今や、私たち家族はさらに遠く離れて暮らしている。私は大学に通うために岡山で一人暮らしをしているし、父と母もそれぞれ個別に居を構えて生活しているという状態で、私たちが全員で顔を合わせるのは一年に一回あるかないかだ。しかし、食べたご飯の写真を送ったり、たまに電話がかかってきたり、それぞれの家に泊まったりすることの一つ一つによって、私たちは「家族」をつくり続けている。最近、私は父母に思い切って「なんで誕生日には三人で食事するの？私は楽しかったけど、わざわざ別に暮らしてる人と会うのって嫌じゃないの？」と聞いてみた。私は答えによっては絶縁しかねないと思っていたのだが、父母はうーん、と顔を見合わせたあと、「でも、私たちみんな美味しいもの食べるの好きじゃない？」とあっけらかんと笑っていた。家族とは、血縁関係によって自動的にできるものではない。家族関係にはそれぞれの社会で異なる条件や認識があり、またさまざまな形が存在しているらしい。それはときには「美味しいご飯を一緒に食べる」ということなのかもしれない。

I Loved a Lady Remastered (Language)
Op. 4 Arr.

Music by [illegible]
Poem by [illegible]
Electronics by [illegible]

In [illegible]
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Away in Snowy Solitude

Words and Visuals by Neo Sayavong

This photo (the photo on the train tracks with forests on both sides) was taken on the first day of the new year, 2025, at a remote train station about 50 minutes north of Hakodate, Hokkaido. The location and remoteness of this station Akaigawa (赤井川駅, *akaigawa-eki*), cannot fully be comprehended by merely looking at a map. On a map, the station appears to have paved roads and restaurants, but it is deceiving, for those roads are not of stone, but of tire tracks on the ground, and the distances of those stores are not nearby at all—made harder by the thick layer of fresh Hokkaido snow (though proceed with utmost caution). I could stand on top of the railroad tracks and take a scenic photo; there were only so many trains arriving once within a few hours. But why here? Why in the middle of snowy and rural Hokkaido during a festive time? The answer lies not in the photo; it can be found only when you turn off this screen and see your own reflection staring back at you. It's something many of us need, but rarely acquired—solitude.

But how does one get to solitude? This photo is only a part of a long journey that started a week prior, taking many local trains (and a ferry) all the way from Okayama to Hokodate. I did not take any Shinkansen (bullet trains) on my way there. Nay. It was all slow trains, taking more than 30 hours over a 5 day-span. Sitting in the Shinkansen is quick and easy; however, it did not pose a challenge to the journey. On normal trains, you have to strategically plan many connections and consider risks, and take into account even a few minutes of delay—it gives an element of excitement—not to mention sharpening your patience, but it was there, among train seats, where even though my body was strapped/stuck to those seats, my mind could not have been more free. It was there where I could walk back from all the stress and mind-numbing content to take a moment and enjoy the surroundings while reflecting on 2024. It was like hopping on a hot air balloon to see things from a different angle—far from what you are so used to and far from vain distractions—then descending from the carriage after a breath of fresher air and seeing what truly is bigger than it seems.

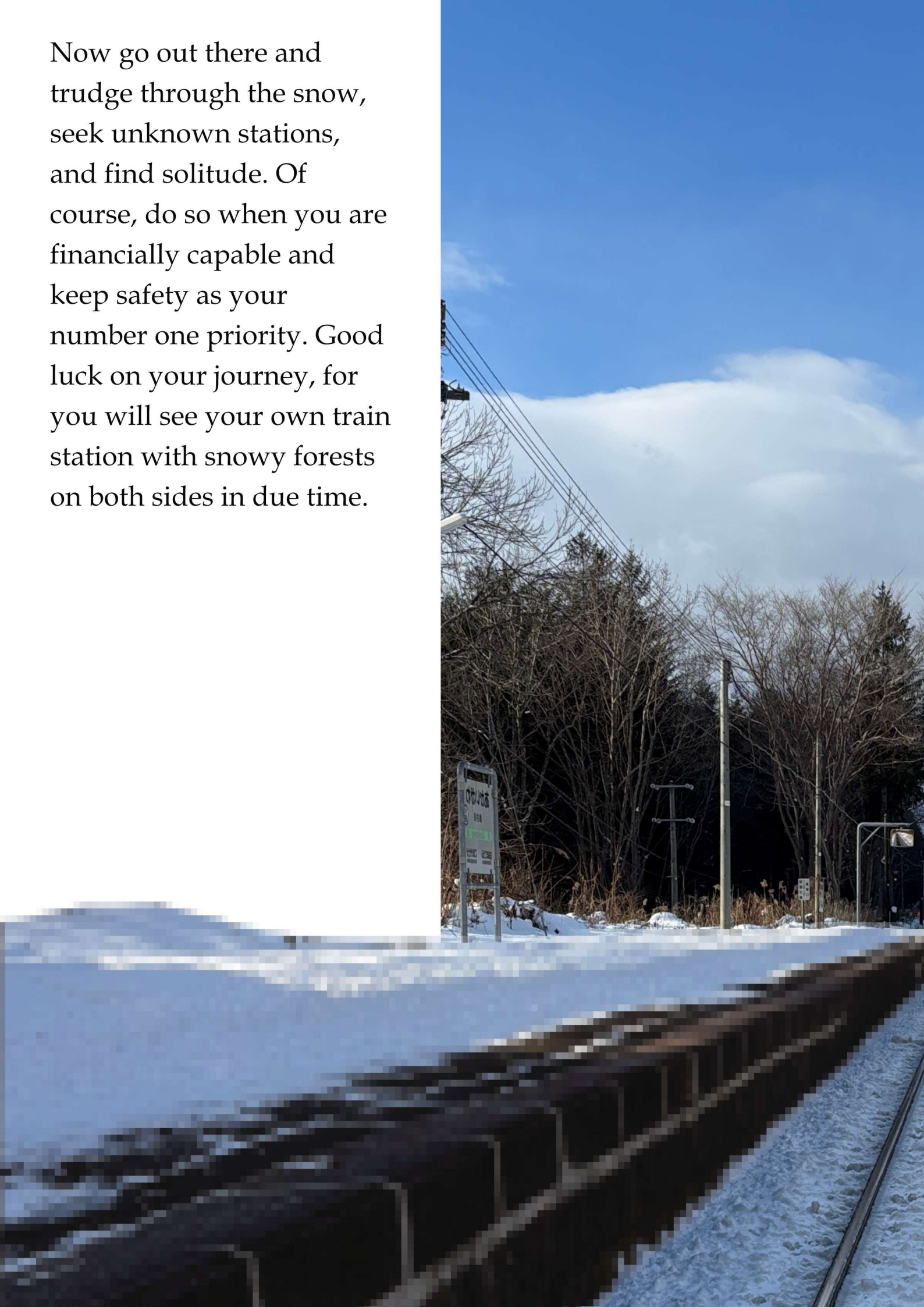
Out there, there is nothing but you and your consciousness. There are certainly no giant advertisement boards, nor flashy vices to be found. But that is not the main detractor of today, is it? No, we have grown inseparable from our screens and the constant need for easy stimulation, not allowing ourselves to walk back from those screens and take a deep breath of fresh air, allowing ourselves to understand our essence. But no one here is to blame. I am in no better position to criticize, for it is in our nature to want to know the news and what's going around us, to see if there is a danger to our surroundings.

The difference is that information nowadays, whether true or false, is easy to obtain and due to the availability of technology today. The societal structure, ranging from our private life to work, requires a diligent duty to be connected at all times; we cannot leave our homes without our phones, and we cannot engage in the world without a device that connects to the internet. We can seek entertainment, anger, and pleasure from our fingertips, a way to stuff our yearning brains with easily digestible and processed food; but we cannot get one important thing: lasting joy, for that comes from ourselves and an understanding of one's own self. We've known this for at least 2400 years, for Socrates and Plato of ancient Greece discussed it in their own times.

This is not a spiritual go-get-it motivation; I am not inclined toward that. Nor am I suggesting that you live far away from civilization right this moment. Nay. It is a suggestion of balance, to get away from our information addiction and mind-numbing scrolls on screens from time to time, at one's own pace and one's own steps. Set your mind free and let it wander, for that journey will show a mirror to you, and you will see your blemishes, but also your fair skin. Fear not solitude. It will provide you with a blank canvas for which you can build when you look from within.

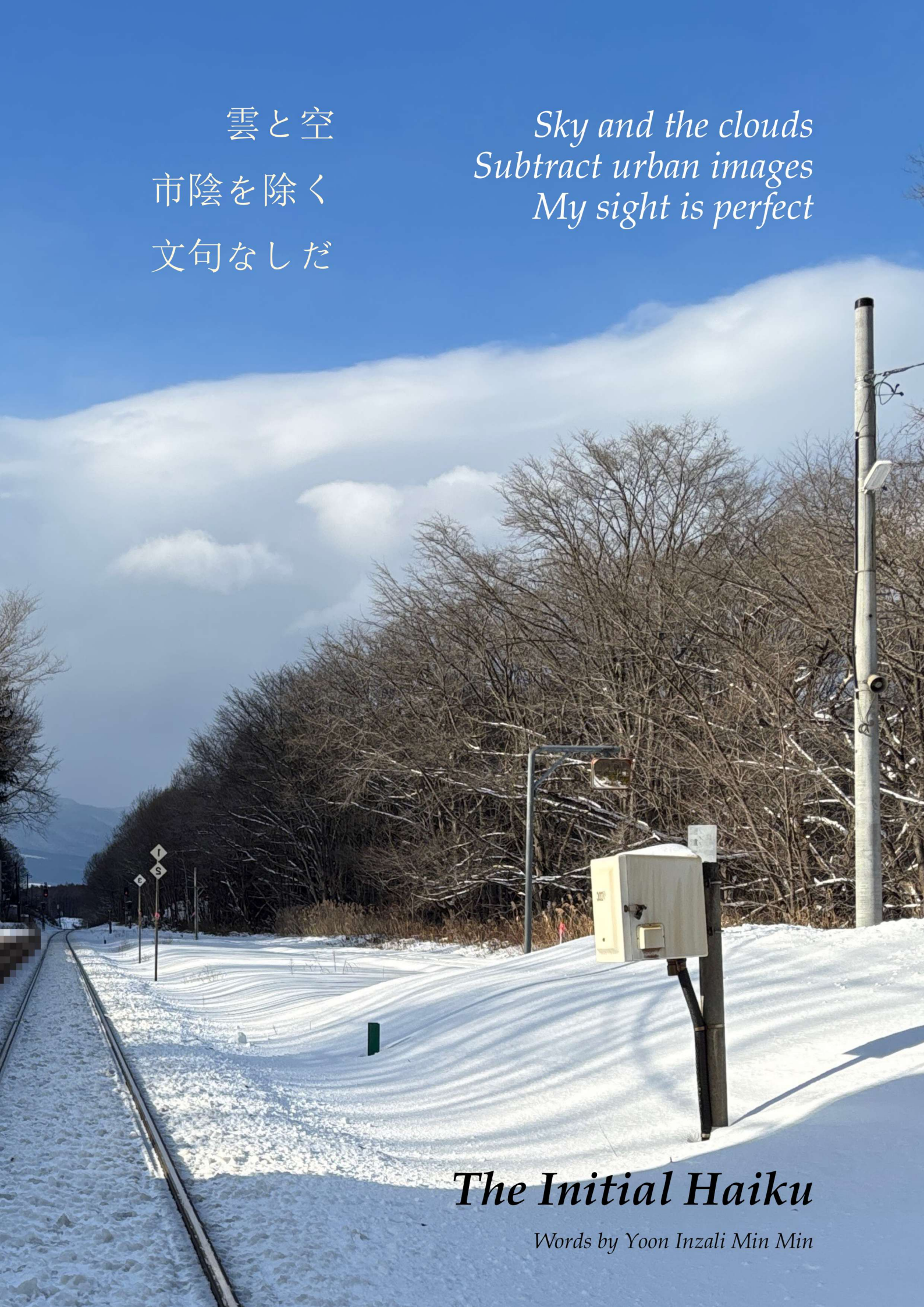
However, I also advise you to explore beyond what many others tend to imagine as a solo journey. Trudge through snow that is untouched, especially alongside a brand new year symbolizing an exciting new page in this book we call life. When you trudge through snow that has not borne any footprints, you need bold and brave steps, and you do not know if the next step will collapse further down or not. But it is not too difficult, and once people see that there is a path through that snow, they will use and expand the path, pushing the snow down more and more. Do be cautious, though. Paths where so many people have pushed and compressed the snow on the ground tend to be slippery; and when you fall, there are no fresh snow to cushion you. Consider your own interpretation and how that can fit in your life. As for my interpretation, I see the compressed snow as a path many have successfully walked, so when I cannot walk the same path, what stops others from assuming I could never do it? So why not go create a new path where only you can judge your successful steps?

Now go out there and trudge through the snow, seek unknown stations, and find solitude. Of course, do so when you are financially capable and keep safety as your number one priority. Good luck on your journey, for you will see your own train station with snowy forests on both sides in due time.



雲と空
市陰を除く
文句なしだ

Sky and the clouds
Subtract urban images
My sight is perfect



The Initial Haiku

Words by Yoon Inzali Min Min

A THING FALL APART:

Living in the Half-End of the Story

Words by Aisyah Shobrina

The wind pulled me up and dragged me far away, falling into the massive education center surrounded by walls. What does it look like from the outside? Did we even realize how different the lives of people outside the walls are? We only care about how it feels to be confined to the world's cycle and yet overlooking the land we lived in. I was reminded about that as I read Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart. Rather than centering the story on our own, let's imagine what happened long before the building we lived in was built, before the chair we are seating in class, before the screen and blackboard have things to learn for. It was us who came to conquer; don't you think so?

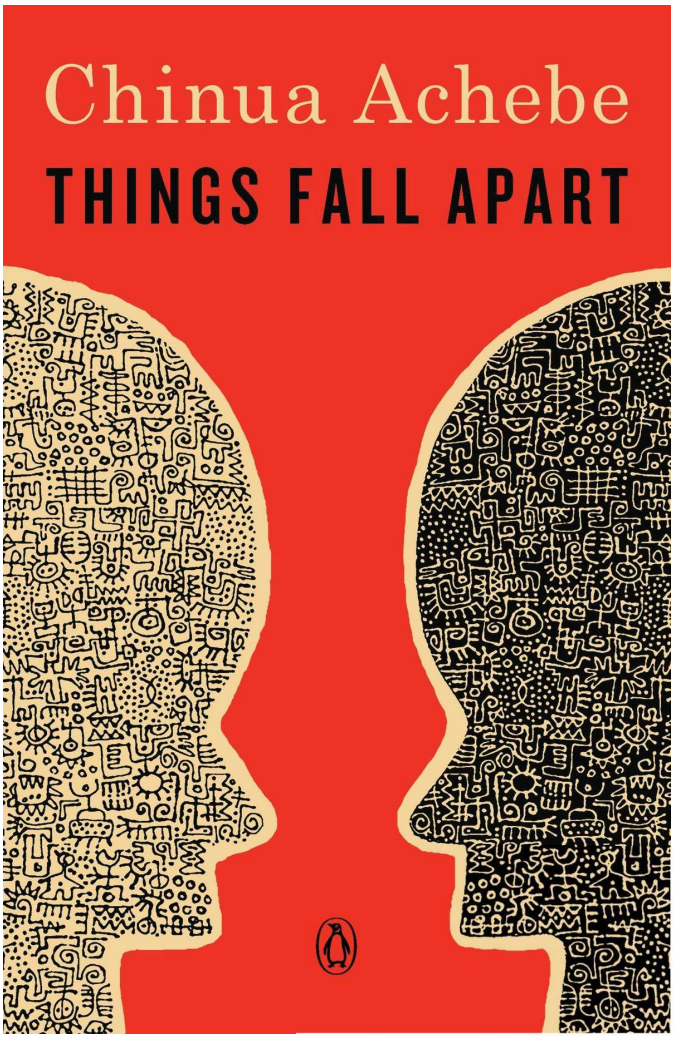
The book narrates how a cultural life takes place in Igbo ethnicity, Africa as the author's background. By centering the story on Okonkwo and his family as fictional character, the first half of the story is spent on the local life narratives: shared leadership through title giving for strong men, customs of patriarchal marriages and households, food production, and even more details as small as a respected person will throw Kola seeds in a meeting. I was trapped in this universe with no expectations of what would happen in the future. Pathetic but true, the arrival of the British colonizers with their Christian missionary work disturbed the village values.

The world has no end, and what is good among one people is an abomination with others.

Uchendu

Reading the latter part, I clearly realized that all this time I had forgotten what had happened in the past of my life. I didn't realize that someone had a strong culture that happened a long time ago. In other words, I live in the last part of the book, the part where cultural conflict occurs when strangers come and change the local order, furthering the assimilation that has been embedded in society after.

We lived inside a tall structured cement, surrounded with walls, a transparent one, you can see but can not pass the wall, with security guards in front hoping not one's run inside and cause trouble. From the upper side, I can see a dense forest that I didn't even know what it was. Engulfed by the white mists when the skies were unwelcoming, it felt like a demon was ravaging the mountain. Perhaps It was as if the Evil Forest was a place of unaccepted villagers or churches and schools that become the place for slaves and lazy children. In a way, it may be a place where someone who is no longer wanted by their group or perhaps as Mr. Brown said, "the leaders of the land in the future would be men and women who had learned to read and write".



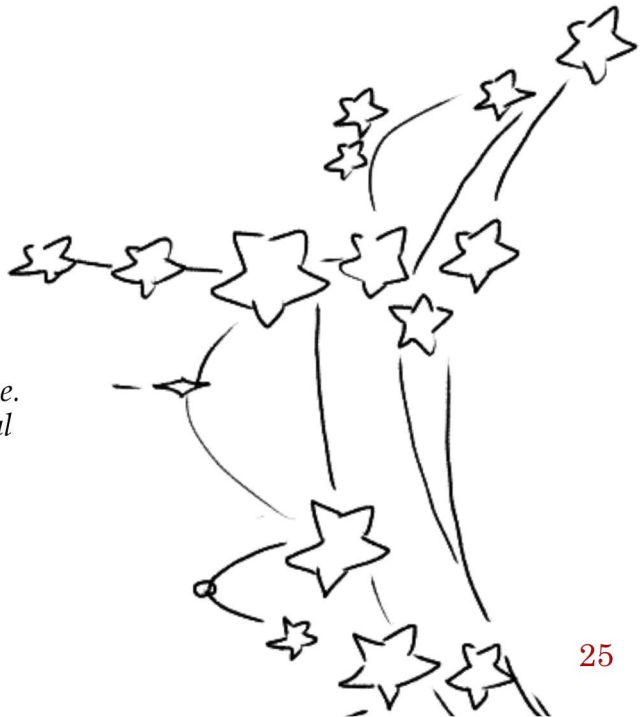
Book cover of Things Fall Apart by Penguin Books.

This book gave me a new perspective on what we forgot during these three years here. It's true that we are an outsider where we were expected to get an academic education, but it's also true that we were exploring a land that didn't belong to us, living as we pleased without knowing the origin of the land. I took advice from Uchendu, "Do you not think that they came to our clan by mistake, that they have strayed from their way to a land where everybody is like them?"I felt reading this book makes me position myself to the missionaries, Mr. Brown and Mr. Smith as an outsider coming to a different world with their "education and saved by god". I am reflecting on how I'm going around the world bringing my prior identity could change someone's lives as Okonkwo's decision in the end of the book.

As we live in the latter part, the beginning story would be missing, knowing "there is no story that is not true" then looking from the first page is worth looking at.

Even so, by armoring ourselves with an 'education' title, mostly we cared about life in the outside world. I know we must think outwardly–looking into what the west is doing, their thinking, their practice, their masked souls. We were so obsessed with the outside world that we never wanted to know about the land we live in. The reality is that we who have come from afar have changed the order of life as described in Okonkwo's story, yet we focus on the goals of education, and worse, focus more on the central lives.

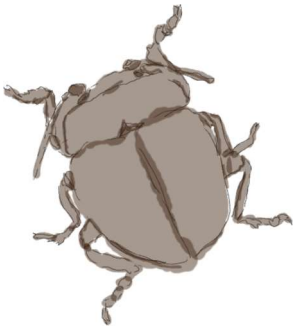
A book refelction of Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe. Originally written for DCUL327 History of Social Thought (2024).



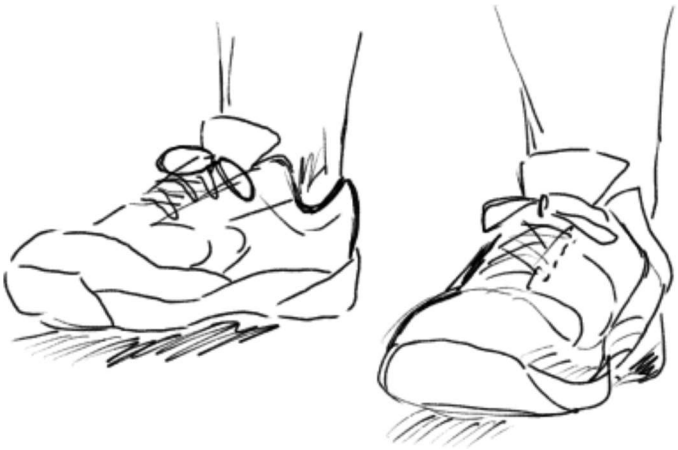
Beetles in Takeokoa

Words by Mori Kento

The sun shining brightly to the east, highlighting the big blue sky. I walked to the park, looking at a dragonfly, as the cicadas sang,
shin shin shin



I go into the woods, trying to find a rhinoceros beetle. I see an array of insects—all beautifully disgusting and cool.

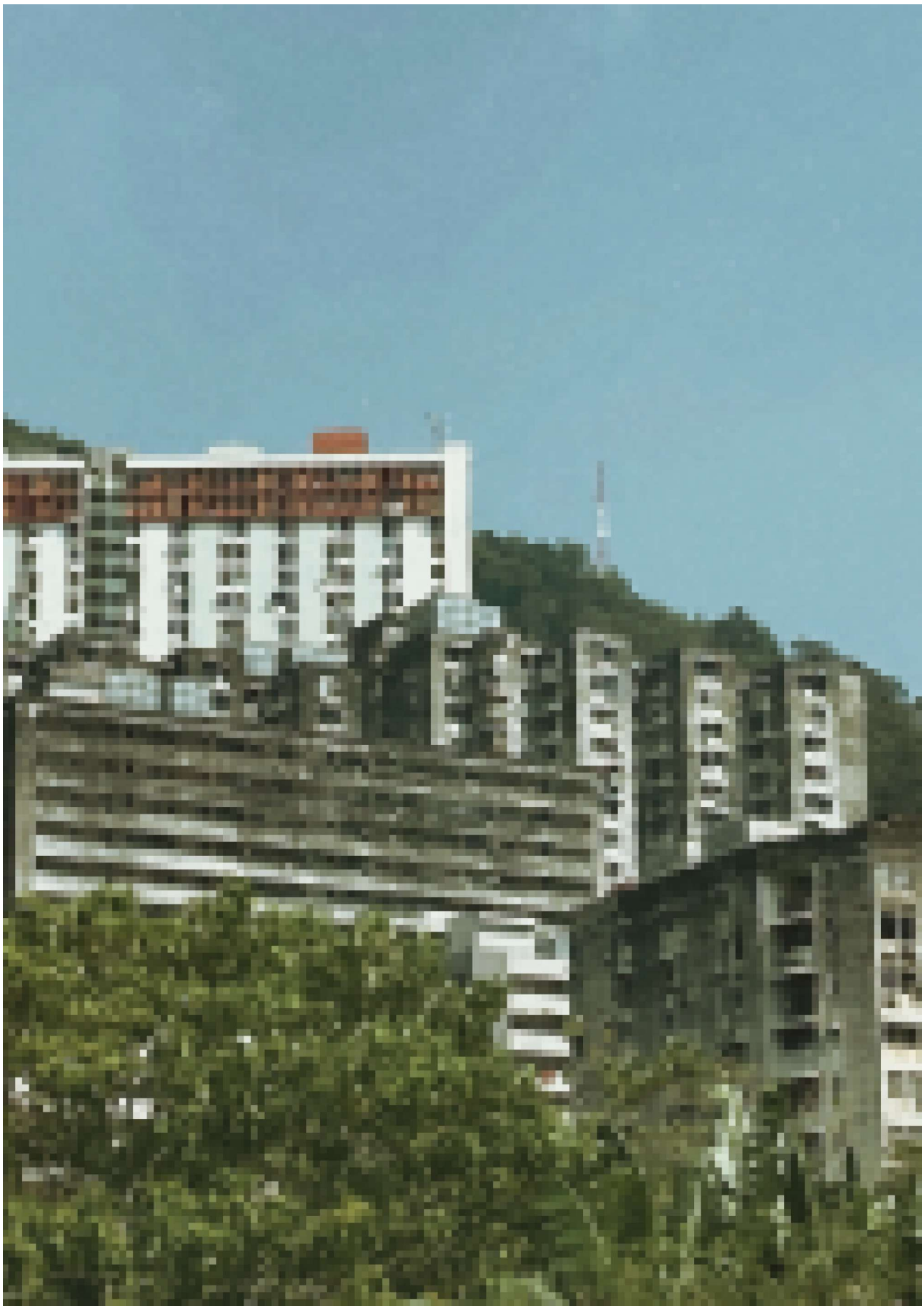


As the cicadas sang,
shin shin shin
I check my insect book to find out what I see. There are spiders with legs like towers and butterflies with wingspans as large as an eagle. But there is still no sign of my rhinoceros beetle.

As the cicadas sang,
shin shin shin
after a long crusade, I finally found my rhinoceros beetle. I took out my net—still and lethal, like a tiger in the brush. But before I could catch it, the beetle flew away with elegance, like a Russian ballerina.

"Flip it anyways!" I was fit to burst, so I was.

As the cicadas sang, *shin shin shin*,
I went home disappointed, wanting rolling and winning. But I copped myself on. All I could say to myself is, "Ah well, better luck next time."



A space on the roadside of Penang Island
Photo by Jia Xuan Chok

MULTIPLICITY

What does it mean to say that someone has died?

In the sterile corridors of a hospital, a physician announces the time of death of the patient. A number is written, a form is signed, and a life is declared officially over. Yet in the field of Science and Technology Studies, this declaration is more than a recognition of biological finality; it is an act —a social, legal, and technological performance that enacts death within particular frameworks of knowledge and authority. Death, despite its appearance as an objective biological endpoint, is a negotiated outcome, shaped by layered processes of classification, inscription, and institutional coordination.

This coordination is most visible in objects like the death certificate. Signed by medical professionals and required by bureaucracies, the certificate transforms a medical judgment into a legally and socially actionable event. As Star and Griesemer (1989) describe, such forms act as "boundary objects"—entities that allow different professional worlds to communicate without needing complete agreement. The certificate facilitates coordination between hospitals, courts, insurance companies, and families. Yet its very stability masks the contested and contingent practices that lie beneath the surface of declaring someone dead.

At the heart of this process is the role of inscription devices, i.e., technologies that make death legible. In hospitals, machines like ECGs and apnea monitors inscribe traces of life or its absence, translating bodily states into data that can be acted upon (Latour, 1986). These devices do not simply detect death; they participate in its construction. Their outputs such as flatlines, graphs, numbers are what allow clinicians to speak authoritatively about death. Over time, these devices become "black boxes,", their internal complexity hidden behind routineized outputs (Latour, 1986). Yet these black boxes are not impenetrable. In cases of conflict, such as malpractice disputes or contested end-of-life decisions, courts intervene. As Jasanoff (1997) illustrates, legal proceedings can "unbox" these technologies, exposing the interpretive work embedded in what are often treated as objective facts.

This interplay between medicine and law reveals that death is not a singular event but a multiplicity of enactments. Mol's (2002) ethnography of atherosclerosis introduces the notion of the "body multiple"—a body that is differently "enacted" depending on the practices and tools that engage it. Death, too, is enacted through different logics: the neurologist's brain scan, the family's memory of a living person, the judge's demand for legal clarity. Each produces a slightly different version of death, and these versions may coexist or clash depending on the context. Rather than assuming death to be self-evident, Mol asks us to pay attention to how it is "enacted", situated within webs of relations, practices, and negotiations.

This multiplicity is nowhere more evident than in the landmark right-to-die court cases of In re Quinlan (1976) and Cruzan v. Director (1990). In the Quinlan case, the court was asked to authorize the withdrawal of life-sustaining ventilation from a woman in a persistent vegetative state. Using the Frye standard, the court relied on the general acceptance of neurological criteria for brain death. In doing so, it did more than validate a medical decision; it redefined death as a

Y OF DEATH

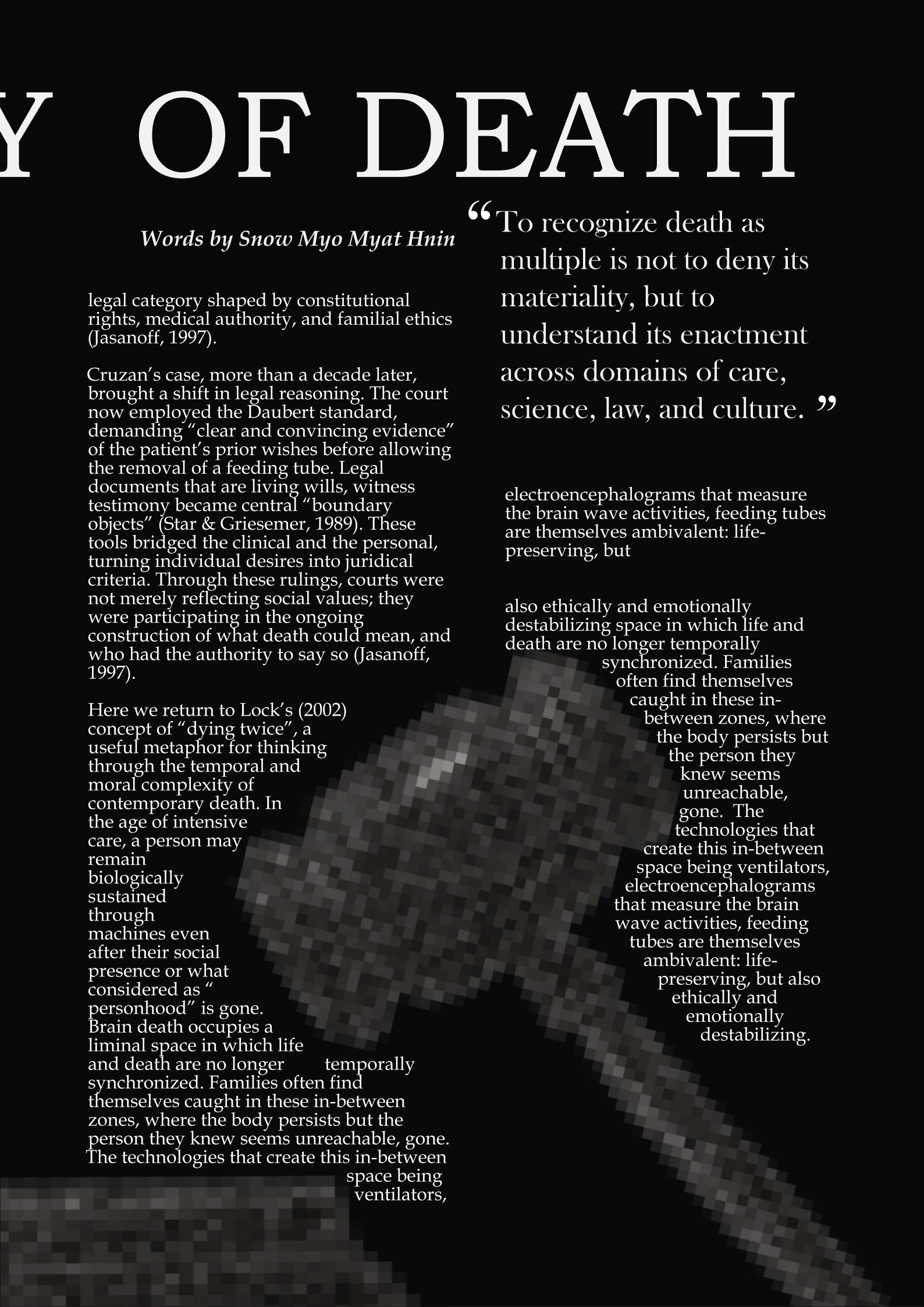
Words by Snow Myo Myat Hnin

> “To recognize death as multiple is not to deny its materiality, but to understand its enactment across domains of care, science, law, and culture. ”

legal category shaped by constitutional rights, medical authority, and familial ethics (Jasanoff, 1997).

Cruzan’s case, more than a decade later, brought a shift in legal reasoning. The court now employed the Daubert standard, demanding “clear and convincing evidence” of the patient’s prior wishes before allowing the removal of a feeding tube. Legal documents that are living wills, witness testimony became central “boundary objects” (Star & Griesemer, 1989). These tools bridged the clinical and the personal, turning individual desires into juridical criteria. Through these rulings, courts were not merely reflecting social values; they were participating in the ongoing construction of what death could mean, and who had the authority to say so (Jasanoff, 1997).

Here we return to Lock’s (2002) concept of “dying twice”, a useful metaphor for thinking through the temporal and moral complexity of contemporary death. In the age of intensive care, a person may remain biologically sustained through machines even after their social presence or what considered as “ personhood” is gone. Brain death occupies a liminal space in which life and death are no longer temporally synchronized. Families often find themselves caught in these in-between zones, where the body persists but the person they knew seems unreachable, gone. The technologies that create this in-between space being ventilators, electroencephalograms that measure the brain wave activities, feeding tubes are themselves ambivalent: life-preserving, but



also ethically and emotionally destabilizing space in which life and death are no longer temporally synchronized. Families often find themselves caught in these in-between zones, where the body persists but the person they knew seems unreachable, gone. The technologies that create this in-between space being ventilators, electroencephalograms that measure the brain wave activities, feeding tubes are themselves ambivalent: life-preserving, but also ethically and emotionally destabilizing.

Latour (1999) helps us see how the authority of these technologies is naturalized. As inscription devices, they shape what is visible and actionable. Yet their readings are never neutral; they are embedded in protocols, institutional expectations, and the professional judgments of clinicians. When legal actors interrogate these outputs, they expose the social life of scientific facts. They reveal that death, like other medical categories, is the product of negotiation, standardization, and contestation (Jasanoff, 1997).

The implications of these institutional enactments extend beyond hospitals and courtrooms. Stevenson's (2014) ethnography of Inuit communities during the Canadian tuberculosis epidemics offers a haunting portrait of what happens when bureaucratic regimes displace relational care. Families were often separated from their dying kin, and death occurred in distant hospitals with minimal communication or ceremony. The emotional weight of these deaths was never fully acknowledged by the institutions that managed them. This form of "anonymous care", Stevenson observed, continues today through the suicide hotline systems and standardized interventions that prioritize bodily survival while eliding social meaning and affective labor.

"Families often find themselves caught in these in-between zones, where the body persists but the person they knew seems unreachable, gone."

To recognize death as multiple is not to deny its materiality, but to understand its enactment across domains of care, science, law, and culture. Mol's (2002) "logic of care" offers a way forward: an approach that embraces coordination without coercion and allows for ethical deliberation in spaces of ambiguity. Instead of seeking singular definitions, institutions might better serve the dying and their families by holding space for plurality; by acknowledging that death does not arrive the same way for everyone, nor does it mean the same thing across contexts.

In this light, death is not simply a moment to be recorded. It is an unfolding, often contested, co-produced and enacted through the converging actions of machines, doctors, judges, documents, and kin. The anthropology of death, in engaging with these processes, reminds us that even our most "natural" categories are deeply social and that the end of life is never just biological. It is also bureaucratic, ethical, emotional, and always, in some way, plural.

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This paper was submitted as the final term paper for DCUL435 Anthropology of Science

Well,
I am,
We are
disgusted

Words by a model, a black cat, and a guy possessed by Jashi

Kiss babies, make
their fathers
carry your load
Remunerate? I kissed
your baby that
should satiate

Have you a shred of
shame you'd make
sure there's more
than a name on that
stone that grew,
nourished by the
sweat of the nameless

For Fame, agendas
and games you'd
play
"Uno" you'd say
making sure it's your
name that people say
who laid the card
that wins

Politician
He saw you
She watched you
I know you
One day they'll catch
you

And that day may the
torch and the fork
bring justice to the
omitted

CHILD MARRIAGES IN VIETNAM:

Cultural Legacies and Economic Pressures in a Cycle of Vulnerability

Words by Linh Le

Marriage is an important milestone in every lifetime. It is the occasion when people can choose a lifelong partner, and more only, parents for their children. Yet, in the remote Northern part of Vietnam, marriage unveils a naked reality, particularly for young girls. In these communities, the practice of child marriage exposes the grassroots issues behind poverty, rigid social norms, and gender inequality. Rather than a hopeful beginning, it becomes a nightmare, erasing the dreams and potential of girls who are forced into adulthood before age. This tradition is deeply rooted in long-standing cultural practices passed down through generations, with marriage taking on many forms, from voluntary to forced ones, reflecting the complex and sometimes oppressive nature of these social norms. The first national survey on the socio-economic conditions of 53 ethnic minority groups, conducted by the Committee on Ethnic Minority Affairs (CEMA), revealed an average child marriage rate of 26.6% among these communities, with some groups seeing rates as high as 50-70%. Nguyen Thi Tu, Director of CEMA's Ethnic Minority Department, stated at a conference that child marriage occurs across all ethnic communities in

Vietnam and continues to rise each year. Particularly concerning is the high rate of child marriage in the northern mountainous regions, Central Highlands, and Mekong Delta, areas of Vietnam that are classified as being below the poverty line, where the issue remains a pressing problem (Vietnamnews, 2017).

Child marriage can take various forms, often driven by social and economic pressures. In family-arranged marriages, it is seen as a tradition, particularly in poorer families where children are married off to contribute to the family workforce, such as domestic or agricultural labor. In these cases, a "bride price" may be paid by the groom's family to compensate for the loss of labor. Love marriages, on the other hand, may involve young couples dropping out of school to marry or cohabit without formal registration, often to avoid fines. Early pregnancies also contribute to child marriages, as they are seen as a way to resolve the shame associated with premarital sex. In some extreme cases, girls are abducted or trafficked for marriage, with instances of girls being kidnapped and even sold into forced marriages, including trafficking across borders, such as in China. Whether voluntary or obligatory, the practice of marriage under the age of 18 in Vietnam violates the country's legal framework and highlights deep-rooted social issues that have yet to be addressed at the grassroots level.

> "Every child deserves the opportunity to reach their full potential and navigate their future confidently and independently."

Poverty, the Driving Force of Child Marriage

After enduring decades of external and internal conflict, Vietnam's adoption of the Doi Moi reforms in 1986 moved the economy from a centrally planned to a market-oriented system. This transition marked a milestone for Vietnamese economic performance, reducing the poverty rate from 61% in 1993 to 37% by 1998. However, while Doi Moi benefited the overall living standards, it also unintentionally widened the gap between the poor and the non-poor, with rural poverty remaining largely unchanged. As a result, the reforms deepened social inequalities, not only affecting adults but also trapping children in cycles of poverty from birth. Approximately 5.5 million

← Photo by Shan Min Kha

Vietnamese children experience at least two deprivations in education, health, nutrition, shelter, water and sanitation, or social inclusion (UNICEF). Exposures to these deprivations could be referred to as children's vulnerability, especially when they happen during the important phase of shaping children's physical and mental states, leading to numerous unexpected life-long consequences. One of them has been the rise in "child marriage", which is defined as the practice of marriage of children under 18, a social issue whose corollary extends far beyond the individual or family, affecting entire communities for generations to come.

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This challenge is particularly pronounced among Vietnam's ethnic minority populations, where poverty remains widespread and closely linked to high rates of child marriage. In remote regions such as the Northern Midlands, Mountains, and Central Highlands, which are areas
with the harshest living conditions, poverty drives much of this social problem. In 2014, 29% of ethnic minorities lived below the poverty line, with particularly high rates among the H'mong (61.5%) and Thai (38.9%) communities. When examining multidimensional child poverty, which includes factors such as education, shelter, child labor, water and sanitation, healthcare, and social inclusion, the prevalence of poverty among ethnic minority children is even more striking, with a staggering 81.1% living in poverty in 2012 (UNICEF et.al).

According to the United Nations, "children living in poverty suffer from lack of nutrition, water and sanitation, access to basic healthcare services, housing, education, participation, and registration.

> "Whether voluntary or obligatory, the practice of marriage under the age of 18 in Vietnam violates the country's legal framework and highlights deep-rooted social issues that have yet to be addressed at the grassroots level. "

Although poverty affects all members of a household, children are influenced the most, which prevents children from developing to their full potential, not only in the short term but also in the long term" (UNGA, 2006). Since children's thought is a social action that both constructs and is constructed by their surrounding reality, including social and cultural contexts, being raised in an environment where under the poverty line and lack the needs and wants could be a factor leading to a distorted understanding of marriage and poor decision-making, as the practice of early marriage is the prime evident.
making, as the practice of early marriage is the prime evident. This is particularly true for the Hmong, who, with a population of just over 1 million and located in the highland areas, are one of the largest ethnic minorities in Vietnam. They continue not only to suffer from poverty rates as high as 80% but also to have the lowest average age of marriage and a fertility rate more than double the national average. They are also the only ethnic group with a gender gap exceeding 10%, alongside a high school enrollment rate in the single digits (Jones, Nicola, et al.). Hmong adolescent girls, in particular, are constrained by not only the economic struggle but also deeply ingrained gender norms that limit their perceived value to traditional roles as wives and mothers.

From Tradition to Trafficking

As an Asian country, Vietnam has a long-standing tradition of children following their parents' arrangement, and marriage is not an exception. At the community level, traditional customs still preserve the norms that allow young girls to marry under the consent of their parents and other authorities. Although it is not officially legal, the practice of hai pu (bride kidnapping), where girls are abducted from their homes and forced into marriage, remains particularly prevalent among Hmong communities. While it is a cultural tradition that celebrates the beauty of ethnic minority customs, it can also

be a double-edged sword, contributing to the frequent occurrence of early marriage.

With its abundant and colorful cultural characteristics, bride-kidnapping was formed and has been preserved for a very long time, becoming a unique cultural value among the Hmong minorities. The kidnapping culture was primarily designed for those who could not afford the marriage rituals and the custom of demanding costly wedding presents to get married. Furthermore, this practice was seen as a way for girls to escape the pressure from their parents to marry wealthy men. Due to the traditional values placed on women, such as modesty, shyness, and the belief that a girl must adhere to her family's expectations, girls were unable to live with the men they chose before formal engagement. To address these challenges and give girls the freedom to decide their marriage, the Hmong community developed the practice of bride kidnapping. According to tradition, during spring festivals or fairs, young Hmong men and women wear their newest clothes not only to socialize and enjoy the festivities but also to find potential partners. Once a Hmong boy has chosen a girl he wishes to marry, he and his friends plan a "bride kidnapping" during a fair or festival. When the girl heads to the event, the boy rushes toward her, grabbing her hand with the help of his friends. The girl pretends to resist, fear, and reluctance, sometimes even crying and calling for help from her family and friends, while the boy and his friends do their best to pull her along. This dramatic act is meant to demonstrate the girl's virtue. If her family intervenes, the boy's friends will only help pull her away, not fight back. Once the girl is taken to the boy's home, she is cared for by a younger sister in the family. Half a day later, the boy's family visits the girl's household, bringing a pair of chickens and a large bottle of liquor as a marriage proposal gift. If the proposal is rejected, there will be no wedding. If accepted, both families proceed with the traditional marriage arrangements and select an auspicious day for the wedding (Minh Hieu et al., 2022) calling for help from her family and friends, while the boy and his friends do their best to pull her along. This dramatic act is meant to demonstrate the girl's virtue. If her family intervenes, the boy's friends will only help pull her away, not fight back. Once the girl is taken to the boy's home, she is cared for by a younger sister in the family. Half a day later, the boy's family visits the girl's household, bringing a pair of chickens and a large bottle of liquor as a marriage proposal gift. If the proposal is rejected, there will be no wedding. If accepted, both families proceed with the traditional marriage arrangements and select an auspicious day for the wedding (Minh Hieu et al., 2022)

> *"We are scared when we think that our daughters will elope if not married at an early age, and this will negatively affect our family's reputation. They elope and tarnish their self-image. Therefore, we have no choice but to arrange their marriages as early as possible to prevent this."*

However, in the present context, this valuable cultural tradition has been misused, leading to illegal practices such as kidnapping and trafficking. The Ministry of Public Security expressed concern that the practice of "bride kidnapping" undermines the "good values of the H'mong people." This came after an incident happened in 2022 in Ha Giang Province, where a 16-year-old H'mong girl was rescued by Captain Ly Ngoc Tuan, a police officer, when an 18-year-old youth attempted to kidnap her. While on patrol in Pa Vi Commune, Meo Vac District, Tuan witnessed the girl being dragged by the young man against her will, but she was unable to resist, and the locals did not intervene, considering it part of the "tradition." Tuan stepped in, saving the girl, who later confirmed that she was unwilling to marry him. Thao Minh Son, the chairman of Pa Vi, described the kidnapping custom as a distortion of the original elopement practice, which was meant to allow individuals to choose their partners freely (Viet Tuan, 2022).

Gender Inequality

Gender discrimination among women and girls in Vietnamese society is continually maintained and

even fostered by the patrilineal kinship system, which is historically practiced and has been laid as the foremost cause of gender inequality. Stereotyped gender-based roles and son preferences are still deeply entrenched in Vietnamese society. From the ancient period, women were seen as "low value". They were expected to marry at a young age, live with or near their husband's relatives, perform prescribed roles in the domestic sphere as wives and mothers, and daughters, and their status was closely related to these roles. Traditionally, daughters are considered temporary family members, typically having little control over family assets such as property and income. At the same time, sons are expected to be leaders of the family, community, and society. As a result, marriage is often seen as a means of securing financial stability and ensuring a girl's future. Sometimes, a marriage with impoverished men or older, wealthier individuals who can offer financial stability for their immediate and extended families is the greatest solution they could do (UNICEF & UNFPA, 2020). This view is reflected in the words of a mother from Nepal, who shares similar cultural values: "We are scared when we think that our daughters will elope if not married at an early age, and this will negatively affect our family's reputation. They elope and tarnish their self-image. Therefore, we have no choice but to arrange their marriages as early as possible to prevent this." Furthermore, even though there is little improvement in encouraging young girls' access to education, these strategies have not reached out to rural areas, particularly for H'mong girls who have significantly fewer opportunities to attend school than boys. Gender inequality continues to significantly hinder girls' access to education, sexual and reproductive health services, decision-making power, and control over resources. This inequality contributes to the high prevalence of child marriage. Deep-rooted cultural norms and practices, such as the patrilineal and patrilocal systems, reinforce traditional gender roles and perpetuate unequal power dynamics between men and women. These factors are key drivers of child marriage and early unions in Vietnam (UNICEF, 2018).

Child marriage remains a deeply entrenched issue that extends beyond individual circumstances, reflecting the broader societal and economic challenges of poverty, inequality, and limited access to education. It is not just a violation of the rights of young girls; it also perpetuates a cycle of poverty that affects entire communities and nations. By forcing girls into marriage at an early age, their chances for education, personal development, and economic independence are severely diminished, leaving them vulnerable to a lifetime of hardship. The second part of this essay will delve deeper into the consequences of child marriage and explore potential pathways for meaningful reform and empowerment.

> "You mention early marriage but I don't know what that is. "
>
> —Y Na

Read the continuation of this academic writing on the Polyphony blog (QR code available on p.9), where the story of Y Na is presented in the discussion of educational dilemmas amidst child marriage.

All references are available on the blog.

Entrants, Graduates, Alumni: All Always Discovering

Reflections from Class of 2029, 2028, 2025, and 2023

New Entrants

Q: How did you envision your university life and how is it going so far?

Yuzuki Takahashi
April 2025 Entrant
(Class of 2029)

As a high school student last year, I imagined university life would be full of freedom like joining clubs, working a part-time job, and hanging out with friends every day. However, I didn't expect how hard it would be to manage everything.
Once it started, I realized it's actually way more complicated. Every day has a different schedule, so I always have to check what class I have, what to wear, and what to bring. It's tough. Balancing everything is much harder than I expected.

To be honest, I'm pretty bad at keeping track of things. I often forget stuff or lose things. Just last week, I lost my commuter pass and spent three hours looking for it (lol).

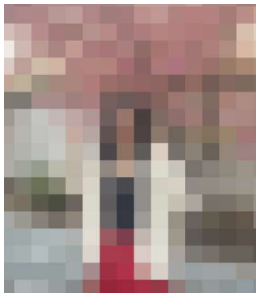
These small moments have made me realize how important time and schedule management really is. I'm still figuring things out, but I want to be more organized so I can enjoy both the busy and fun parts of university life. It's not exactly how I imagined, but it's definitely been a learning experience.

Miyo Yoshi
April 2024 Entrant
(Class of 2028)

When I entered university, I did so without any particular expectations, not out of disinterest, but simply because I hadn't formed a specific image of what it would be like. What I hoped for, however, was an environment that prioritized student agency over rigid institutional directives. So far, I believe that vision is being realized. I've been able to enroll in a diverse range of courses across multiple disciplines, which has broadened my perspective and deepened my understanding of how various systems operate in life.

Graduate

Q: How has life in Okayama been for you? How does it fit into your transition up to graduation?



Dieu Linh Khuong
October 2021 Entrant
(Class of 2025)

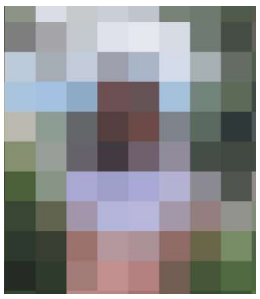
Throughout my time in the program, I've usually gone by the name Linh. It's a fairly common name among Vietnamese girls, considering there are actually at least three other Linhs currently enrolled in GDP. That said, I'm happy to say that I'll be the only Linh in the anthropology zemi by the time I graduate.

Most of my experience at Okayama has been surprisingly positive. I was able to adapt quickly and genuinely enjoy life here. What surprised me the most was that, instead of feeling lonely or overwhelmed by having to manage everything on my own, I found both the academic journey and independent living to be full of unexpected freedom. The freedom of having no one telling you exactly what to do, but only offering guidance, and the realization that your future is truly in your own hands, that every decision you make today shapes your path ahead, was something entirely new to me.

I think many people experience this kind of awakening when they enter university, but it's especially emphasized in our program, GDP, where even your major isn't fixed, you can even design your own academic path. I saw this not as a challenge, but as an opportunity. Through the choices I made and the time I spent navigating things on my own, I learned to be flexible. And I came to see that flexibility not as uncertainty, but as a form of freedom.

Alumnus

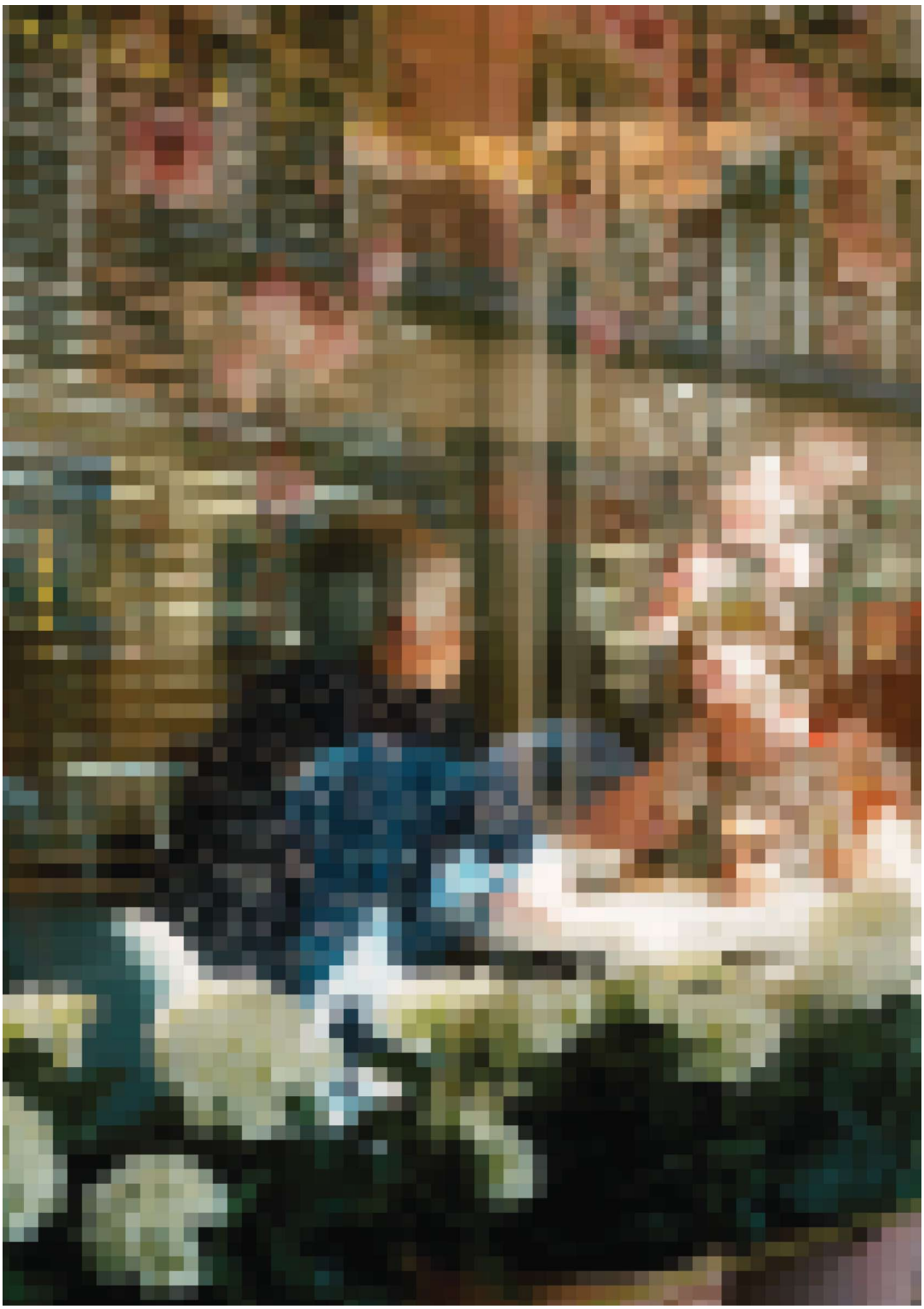
Q: How did you envision life after graduation? How is it going now?



Mattie Balagat
October 2019 Entrant
(Class of 2023)

I expected that I'd go back to the Philippines and work in an environmental NGO and hopefully, put into practice what I've learned from studying anthropology. It's been a wild ride since then of being an activist in an environmental NGO (there was reverse culture shock along the way!) I have since worked together with environmental defenders both locally and internationally on campaigns and events ranging from climate justice to the upholding of human rights. My days are a mix of every kind of work at NGOs: proposal writing, desk research, communications, project management, protests and community actions, network building, trainings and speaking engagements.

Though I am somewhat where I expected to be, I don't think I envisioned just how dynamic it would be to fully work in the political and social realities of fighting to change the system. When I did my Senior Project, I was outside looking in, and now as a full time activist, I'm both inside and outside trying to find ways to break all these figurative walls and build from common ground. There has been a lot of joy in building solidarity and waging struggles with so many different kinds of people who have the same dream of living in a better world (to put it simply).



But there is more,
I guess. No,
There is definitely more—
Things I cannot tell you.

Words and Photo by Shan Min Kha

October 2025