AAPI Women Voices: Untold Stories Through Poetry
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CREATED BY MEGAN ROBERTO

Introduction

TEOFANNY SARAGI

The Personal is Political

What does it mean to be an Asian American or Pacific Islander (AAPI) individual? Many of us struggle to understand what our culture and background means to us. Oftentimes, we feel different when all we want is just to fit in. These themes of internal conflict and self-discovery run throughout the personal narratives of the women featured in this story entitled “AAPI Women Voices: Untold Stories through Poetry.” Through this story, we will explore ideas of family, community history, and change. We will discover how these AAPI women work through their struggles by engaging in reflection and writing. These women have faced discrimination and isolation as a result of their race, ethnicity, economic class, culture, the model minority myth, sexual orientation, and gender identity. In facing this, they realize that the personal is political. They work to contribute to society in the fight for social justice.

Bringing Forward the Marginalized

The creative work of the AAPI women featured in this story bring forward the experiences of the communities of color, working-class, immigrants, LGBTQ individuals, and indigenous people. Though the narratives that dominate history often do not reflect the lived realities of many marginalized individuals, these women’s voices are among the perspectives of those who provide the contrary. They are committed to diversity and representation, whether it is, in the non-profit world as activists, in the creative world as performers, in the academic world as scholars or business world as entrepreneurs.

The Journey Continues

What does it mean to be an Asian American or Pacific Islander individual? According to these women, it means many things. While these women are accomplished and successful, they are still on the same journey of introspection that many of us share. While they come from a diversity of backgrounds and experiences, the creative work that they produce demonstrates that AAPI culture is relevant and that our histories are important. Though we may be unique, that is what makes us strong. Through their work, they are helping others realize that we have the individual power to shape a popular culture that is reflective of our personal experiences, and to bring about greater self-awareness and social consciousness, a foundation for social change. AAPI women’s voices have the power to transform. We have the power to transform.
MONICA FERRELL was born and raised in New Delhi, India. As a child, Ferrell enjoyed reading myths and fairytales, calling herself a “history geek”. Accordingly, her writing reflects similar imagery and obscurity, and Ferrell has explained that she considers such pieces of writing, though they are not necessarily about her daily life, important reflections of her life and feelings. Speaking on her writing style and method, Ferrell stated she is more likely to write about something that she does not know everything about, “following the trail” of her curiosity. The role of uncertainty and curiosity is significant, with Ferrell stating she sees poetry as “uncovering” rather than as invention. Ferrell has also discussed challenging herself to remove the barrier between her normal consciousness and way of thinking or speaking and the more refined form of self that is presented in her writing. Regarding her poems, Ferrell states she hopes to “embody a wild diversity of perspective, voice, and style” in an effort to surprise her audience.

Ferrell earned a BA at Harvard University and an MFA at Columbia University. Her novel, *The Answer is Always Yes*, was named one of Booklist’s Top Ten Debut Novels of 2008. Her collection of poems, *Beasts for the Chase*, won the Kathryn A. Morton Prize. She teaches in the creative writing program at State University of New York at Purchase.

Jessica Hagedorn was born in Manila, Philippines and moved to the United States as a teenager, at the age of thirteen. While in San Francisco, she enrolled in acting classes, which led to an interest in performing arts and eventually her engagement in multimedia work. Her ethnic background includes Spanish, Chinese, Filipino, and Scotch-Irish-French.

Hagedorn’s work includes novels, poems, plays, and anthologies and incorporates songs, spoken word, and music. She is known as an experimental artist, addressing various issues and topics through innovative combinations of different mediums, like switching from a narrative to newspaper articles or a radio play. Hagedorn explains this choice by explaining that, in certain contexts, a traditional narrative structure would not do the topic justice, as in the case of presenting Filipino culture. In regard to her writing style, Hagedorn states she enjoys creating complex, complicated characters, and as a “naturally curious person”, she sometimes reimagines parts of real-life events and events in different contexts and time periods to create stories.

Hagedorn is the author of five books and the editor of three Asian-American literature anthologies. She has won numerous awards including the American Book Award. She works in music and performing arts.
Filipino Boogie*

JESSICA HAGEDORN

1 Under a ceiling-high Christmas tree
   I pose
   in my Japanese kimono
   My mother hands me a Dale Evans cowgirl skirt
   and baby cowgirl boots

2 Mommy and daddy split
   No one else is home
   I take some rusty scissors and cut the skirt up
   in little pieces

3 Mommy and daddy split
   No one else is home
   I take my baby cowgirl boots and flush them down the toilet

4 I seen the Indian Fighter
   Too many times dug on Sitting Bull before Donald Duck
   In my infant dream
   These warriors weaved a magic spell more blessed than Tinker Bell
   (Kirk Douglas rubs his chin and slays Minnehaha by the campfire)

5 Mommy and daddy split
   There ain’t no one else home
   I climb a mango tree and wait for Mohawk drums
   (Mama—World War II is over . . . why you cryin’?)
   Is this San Francisco?
   Is this San Francisco?
   Is this Amerika?
   buy me Nestle’s Crunch
   buy me Pepsi in a can
   Ladies’ Home Journal and Bonanza

6 I seen Little Joe in Tokyo
   I seen Little Joe in Manila
   I seen Laramie in Hong Kong
   I seen Yul Brynner in San Diego
   and the bloated ghost of Desi Arnaz dancing in Tijuana

7 Rip-off synthetic ivory to send the natives back home
   and North Beach boredom escapes the barber shops on Kearny street where they spit out red tobacco patiently waiting in 1930s suits

   and in another dream
   I climb a mango tree and Saturday afternoon Jack Palance bazookas the krauts and the YELLOW PERIL bombs Pearl Harbor

* Filipino Boogie by Jessica Hagedorn is taken from her collection of poetry and prose titled Danger and Beauty. Copyright 1993 by Jessica Hagedorn. Reproduced by permission of Jessica Hagedorn and her agents, Harold Schmidt Literary Agency.
Shadab Zeest Hashmi was born and raised in Peshawar, Pakistan until she migrated to the United States at the age of eighteen to attend Reed College. Although Hashmi grew up studying renowned British and Urdu poets while attending boarding schools in Pakistan, she did not get serious about poetry until attending Reed. Growing up in post-colonial Pakistan, Hashmi experienced Pakistan developing and finding its own identity after its independence from British colonial rule and partition from India. Similarly, Hashmi has focused on the theme of identity, the making of it and the “between-ness” that emerges with different parts of one’s identity. She has written two books, Baker of Tarifa and Kohl & Chalk. In both books Hashmi often uses a female narrator, explaining this choice by stating that the “female historian” had been “suppressed thus far” and that it is “her time now, for the benefit of all”. Accordingly, Hashmi’s Kohl & Chalk includes poems that range from Hashmi’s experience as an immigrant in the United States for college to becoming an American citizen and balancing her roles as a mother and as a poet who is trying to create new work. By discussing such issues, Hashmi helps others like her explore the different and connecting areas of their identity and cultures.

Hashmi graduated from Reed College with a BA in 1995 and received her MFA from Warren Wilson College. She received the San Diego Book Award for Baker of Tarifa and Kohl & Chalk. She is an editor for MahMag World Literature (magazine) and a columnist for 3 Quarks Daily (blog and magazine).

Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner is a journalist, writer, performance artist, and poet who was born in the Marshall Islands and moved to Hawai‘i at the age of 7. When Jetnil-Kijiner moved back to the Marshall Islands at the age of 25, she came face-to-face with climate change. After being gone for 18 years, she hadn’t focused too much of her time on the issue—it was just something she heard about. Moving back brought her to realize how vulnerable the Marshallese people were, how close the ocean was, and how large the ocean was in comparison to the islands. This scared her and she found that it scared the community as well. Jetnil-Kijiner worked to address the issue of climate change through the lens of Marshallese humanity, history, ways of life, and loss. She wrote poetry that focused on raising awareness surrounding nuclear testing, militarism, the rising sea level, forced migration, and racism. This included the fact that from 1946 to 1958, the United States conducted 67 nuclear tests in the Marshall Islands. This equals 1.6 Hiroshima-size explosions per day, creating a devastating lasting impact on the community. Jetnil-Kijiner was selected to represent the civil society at the UN Climate Leaders Summit. She addressed the Opening Ceremony of the UN Secretary-General’s Climate Summit on 23 September 2014. Jetnil-Kijiner has also created performance-based poetry, competing in slam poetry competitions and performing at open mics, showcases, conferences, and literature readings. Her hope is that by widely sharing the threats that arise from climate change, she can influence communities and government leaders to work toward positive change. Through her work, she demonstrates that the Marshallese culture is intimately tied to their lands. As climate change slowly eliminates their lands, they simultaneously face the threat of losing their culture, history, identity, and sense of place and belonging. On the side, Jetnil-Kijiner utilizes journalism to promote the achievements of the Marshallese people; she publishes her articles online and in The Marshall Islands Journal. Jetnil-Kijiner graduated with an MA in Pacific Islands Studies from University of Hawai‘i Mānoa.

Guantanamo*

Shadab Zeest Hashmi

1 A guard forces you to urinate on yourself
   Another barks out louder than his dog
   the names of your sisters
   who live in the delicate nest
   of a ruby-throated hummingbird
   Each will be a skeleton he says

2 Was there someone who gave you
   seven almonds for memory,
   a teaspoon of honey every morning?
   Cardamom tea before bed?
   Someone who starched your shirts
   in rice water, then ironed them?

3 You’re tied to a metal coil
   And memory
   is a burnt wire.

**2 Degrees**

KATHY JETNIL-KIJINER

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>Today LiPeinam is feeling better she bobs around our backyard drops pebbles and leaves into a plastic bucket before emptying the bucket out and dropping pebbles in again</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>We wrestled with a thermometer that read 99.8 degrees the doctor says technically 100.4 is a fever but I can see her flushed face how she dances across my lap, listless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>LiPeinam is usually a wobbly walking toddler all chunks and duck footed shaky knees stomping squeaky yellow light up shoes across the edge of the reef</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>And I think what a difference a few degrees can make</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Scientists say if humans warm the world more than 2 degrees then catastrophe will hit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Imagine North American wildfires increasing by 400% animal extinction rising by 30% fresh water declining by 20% thousands, millions displaced left wandering wondering what happened?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>At a climate change conference a colleague tells me 2 degrees is an estimate I tell him for my islands 2 degrees is a gamble at 2 degrees my islands, the Marshall Islands will already be under water this is why our leaders push for 1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Seems small like 0.5 degrees shouldn't matter like 0.5 degrees are just crumbs like the Marshall Islands must look on a map just crumbs you dust off the table, wipe your hands clean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>The other night my 1-year-old was a fever pressed against my chest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>As I watch I think about futility I think about the world making the same mistakes since the industrial revolution since 1977 when a scientist said 2 degrees was the estimate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>On Kili atoll the tides were underestimated patients with a nuclear history threaded into their bloodlines, sleeping in the only clinic on island woke to a wild water world a rushing rapid of salt closing in around them a sewage of syringes and gauze</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Later they wheeled their hospital beds out let them rest in the sun they must be stained rusted our people creaking brackish from salt spray and radiation blasts so so tired, wandering wondering if the world will wheel us out to rest in the sun or will they just dust their hands of us, wipe them clean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>My father told me that idik – when the tide is nearest an equilibrium is the best time for fishing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Maybe I'm fishing for recognition writing the tide towards an equilibrium willing the world to find its balance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>So that people remember that beyond the discussions are faces all the way out here that there is a toddler stomping squeaky yellow light up shoes walking wobbly on the edge of the reef not yet under water</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Source: [https://kathyjetnilkijiner.com/2015/06/30/poem-2-degrees/](https://kathyjetnilkijiner.com/2015/06/30/poem-2-degrees/)
Tell Them *

KATHY JETNIL-KIJNER

1 I prepared the package
for my friends in the states
the dangling earrings woven
into half moons black pearls glinting
like an eye in a storm of tight spirals
the baskets
sturdy, also woven
brown cowry shells shiny
intricate mandalas
shaped by calloused fingers
Inside the basket
a message:

tell them we are dusty rubber slippers
swiped
from concrete doorsteps
we are the ripped seams
and the broken door handles of taxis
we are sweaty hands shaking another
sweaty hand in heat
tell them
we are days
and nights hotter
than anything you can imagine
tell them we are little girls with braids
cartwheeling beneath the rain
we are shards of broken beer bottles
burrowed beneath fine white sand
we are children flinging
like rubber bands
across a road clogged with chugging cars
tell them
we only have one road

2 Wear these earrings
to parties
to your classes and meetings
to the grocery store, the corner store
and while riding the bus
Store jewelry, incense, copper coins
and curling letters like this one
in this basket
and when others ask you
where you got this
you tell them

they’re from the Marshall Islands

3 and after all this
tell them about the water
how we have seen it rising
flooding across our cemeteries
gushing over the sea walls
and crashing against our homes
tell them what it’s like
to see the entire ocean__level__with the
land
tell them
we are afraid
tell them we don't know
of the politics
or the science
but tell them we see
what is in our own backyard
tell them that some of us
are old fishermen who believe that God
made us a promise
some of us
are more skeptical of God
but most importantly tell them
we don't want to leave
we've never wanted to leave
and that we
are nothing without our islands.

4 show them where it is on a map
tell them we are a proud people
toasted dark brown as the carved ribs
of a tree stump
tell them we are descendents
of the finest navigators in the world
tell them our islands were dropped
from a basket
carried by a giant
tell them we are the hollow hulls
of canoes as fast as the wind
slicing through the pacific sea
we are wood shavings
and drying pandanus leaves
and sticky bwiros at kemems
tell them we are sweet harmonies
of grandmothers mothers aunties and sisters
songs late into night
tell them we are whispered prayers
the breath of God
a crown of fushia flowers encircling
auntie mary's white sea foam hair
tell them we are styrofoam cups of koolaid red
waiting patiently for the ilomij
tell them we are papaya golden sunsets bleeding
into a glittering open sea
we are skies uncluttered
majestic in their sweeping landscape
we are the ocean
terrifying and regal in its power

5 * Source: https://kathyjetnilkijiner.com/2011/04/13/tell-them/
Vandan Hanna was born in New Delhi, India and immigrated to the U.S. with her family at a young age. Raised most of her life in Falls Church, Virginia, Khanna’s life path represents the way her heritage and family roots shape her creative vision. Her award-winning books *Afternoon Masala* and *Train to Agra* incorporate South Asian influences. In these books, Khanna shares poems about the struggle of searching for a place to call home when migrating from one country to another. The poems spotlight the challenging shift from childhood to womanhood and immigrant to American. She portrays the shared struggle of youth who scramble to find their place in a world that makes them choose between different parts of their identity. Her words reflect the difficulties youth face when they are ridiculed or bullied for a part of their background that is important to them. Khanna's poems are powerful in the representation that they bring to the world of poetry, centering South Asian narratives and perspectives in a realm that often lacks diversity. Her work has appeared in the anthologies *Asian American Poetry: The Next Generation* and *Indivisible: An Anthology of Contemporary South Asian American Poetry*.

Khanna graduated from the University of Virginia with her Bachelor of Arts and later went on to earn her Master of Fine Arts from Indiana University. Khanna has served as an instructor of English and Creative Writing at institutions of higher education throughout the nation, including Indiana University, Pitzer College, and the University of Southern California.

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**Evening Prayer**

**Vandana Khanna**

1 Two Gods: the one in the closet and the one from school days and both are not mine. I opened the door on God at dusk and closed

2 him the rest of the day. He perched on the ledge above my father's shirts and wool suits, a mandir in every Hindu house, ours smelling of starch, surrounded by ties and old suitcases. I was the ghost at school, sat on the pew and watched as other girls held God under their tongues. My lips remember the prayer my parents taught me those evenings with their bedroom closet open—Ganesh carved in metal, Krishna blue in a frame. I don't remember the translation, never sure I really knew it. I got mixed up sometimes,

3 taught me those evenings with their bedroom closet open—Ganesh carved in metal, Krishna blue in a frame. I don't remember the translation, never sure I really knew it. I got mixed up sometimes,

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5 said a section of the “Our Father” in the middle of the arti, ending in Amen when I meant *Krishna, Krishna*, not sure when to kneel and when to touch someone's feet with my hands.

6 My name means it all—holiness, God, evenings praying to a closet. My mother says before I was born, I was an ache in the back of her throat, wind rushing past her ear, that my father prayed

7 every evening, closet door open, for a daughter. And so I am evening prayer, sunset and mantra. At school, I longed for a name that was smooth on the backs of my teeth, no trick getting it out.

8 Easy on the mouth, a Lisa or a Julie—brown hair and freckles, not skin the color of settling dusk, a name you could press your lips to, press lips against, American names of backyard swings, meat loaf

9 in the oven, not of one-room apartments overlooking parking lots, the smell of curry in a pot, food that lined the hallways with its memory for days. I watched the hair on my legs

10 grow dark and hated it. I longed to disappear, to turn the red that sheened on the other girls in school, rejecting the sun, burning with spite. In the mirror, I called myself another, practicing—

11 the names, the prayers, fitting words into my mouth as if they belonged: *Ram, Ram* and alleluia, *bhagvan*, God the Father, thy will be done *Om shanti, shanti, shanti.*

**Blue Madonna***

**VANDANA KHANNA**

1 Back before color threaded the world, when everything was in black-and-white, I was the only pagan at school, hiding my breath with its curry and accent, mouthing words to prayers I didn't understand. I wondered why there were always holy men but so few holy women. I wanted to be enchanted, to steal the baby Jesus from the Christmas play and keep him hidden in my closet, pull him out when I needed to be saved. I wanted to be the blue Madonna holding all the pieces of her son together.

2 Half a world away, girls my age came as close to God as anyone could.

**Learning to love America***

**SHIRLEY GEOK-LIN LIM**

1 because it has no pure products

2 because the Pacific Ocean sweeps along the coastline because the water of the ocean is cold and because land is better than ocean

3 because I say we rather than they

4 because I live in California I have eaten fresh artichokes and jacaranda bloom in April and May

5 because my senses have caught up with my body my breath with the air it swallows my hunger with my mouth

6 because I walk barefoot in my house

7 because I have nursed my son at my breast because he is a strong American boy because I have seen his eyes redden when he is asked who he is because he answers I don't know

8 because to have a son is to have a country because my son will bury me here because countries are in our blood and we bleed them

9 because it is late and too late to change my mind because it is time.

Source: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/46551
JANICE MIRIKITANI was born and raised in Stockton, California. She is an Asian-American activist, poet, and community organizer. She and her family were incarcerated in the Rohwer, Arkansas, concentration camp during the mass internment of 120,000 Japanese Americans during World War II. When Mirikitani was young, she envied white people because those were the only images of beauty she saw. She later realized those standards are “cooked up.” After becoming involved in activist movements of the 1960s, she proclaimed, “we, marginalized people, became stronger in our own voices, and stronger without walls amongst ourselves.” She writes about major issues of Japanese American experience, identity, ethnic stereotyping, and the subordination of women. She offers compassion and healing and inspires solidarity by bridging local and global struggles.

Mirikitani helps serve the needs of the marginalized in San Francisco after GLIDE Memorial Church helped her heal from years of childhood abuse. She is now the co-founder and President of the Glide Foundation. In partnership with her husband, Reverend Cecil Williams, the foundation empowers San Francisco’s poor and marginalized communities to make meaningful changes in their lives to break the cycle of poverty and dependence.

Mirikitani received her bachelor’s degree from UCLA, teaching credential from UC Berkeley, and went to San Francisco State University for her graduate studies. She is the author of Out of the Dust, Awake in the River; Shedding Silence; We, the Dangerous; and Love Works, all of which are book collections of her poems. In 2000, Mirikitani was named San Francisco’s second Poet Laureate for her powerfully inspiring body of work.

Bad Women*

JANICE MIRIKITANI

1 Bad women
can cook
create a miracle in a pot
create something out of chicken feet, pigs feet, cornmeal,
hogmaw, fisheads, ribs, roots, soy or red beans

2 Bad women celebrate themselves
dark as plums and coffee
light as cream and butter
gold as sun on lemons, red as cinnamon
brown as kola.
plump as mangos, skinny as tallow.

3 Bad women flaunt themselves,
fingerpopping, hipshaking, big laughed, smart thinking, wise-speaking
soft syllabled,
tangerine lipstick queens,
small and full breasted women,
fat kneeed, thin-ankled women
who dance without warning
wrap their men or their women around their waist
and boogey to the edge of dawn.

4 Bad women resist war,
poverty, violent love affairs,
child abuse, and unsafe sex.

Bad women know how to stir
our tears into cups of compassion
add some hot sauce, wasabe, five spices, jalapenos
the salt of memory
stoke the fires of history
simmer in resilience
make it taste like home.

5 Bad women can burn.

**Desert Flowers II**

**JANICE MIRIKITANI**

1. Bamboo, mimosa, eucalyptus seed. 
   Resilience, strength, courage.
   What are you
   Where are you really from?
   Go back to where you belong
   What are you?

2. I am the wind that shaves mountains,
   twisted barbed wire of Amache Gate, Poston, Manzanar, Rohwer,
   Tule Lake
   I am memory hurling us into history.

3. I am the fist of sand that pushed my mother against a wall of silence.
   I am the camp mess-hall meal of potatoes and stale crackers,
   dry as the desert floor.

4. I am the ten infants buried at Tule Lake,
   incarcerated for their own good?
   interned into the dust.

5. I am
   Bamboo, pine, plum
   Resilience, strength, beauty.
   I grow despite the freeze of winter,
   racism, drought, injustice.

6. I am a river whose tributaries
   converge and touch your shores,
   enter your pores,
   Living water that slakes your thirst.

7. I am my mother’s song
   rising from the silence
   to America’s ear…
   I am camellias that bloom
   at your door,
   The infants who live again,
   cry from out of the dust:
   Matsubara baby, Testuno, Yamamoto, Okada, Nishizaki babies,
   Shigemi, Chiyko, Ichi, Minoru… resurrected in memory.

8. I am the dream for justice that reaches
   to kiss your eyes…
   Bamboo, pine, plum
   We will not be plucked out again.

9. Inside our soil, like a river of roots, we spread, connect, grow.
   Inside our voices, thunder builds under its nest,
   These camps will not contain us again,
   Not here, not us, not anyone again.

10. So when they ask What Am I?
    I tell them,
    and shake the dust from my hands.

**Sing with Your Body†**

for my daughter, Tianne Tsukiko

JANICE MIRIKITANI

We love with great difficulty
spinning in one place
afraid to create

spaces
new rhythm

the beat of a child
dangled by her own inner ear
takes Aretha with her

upstairs, somewhere

go quickly, Tsukiko,

into your circled dance

go quickly
before your steps are
halted by who you are not

go quickly
to learn the mixed
sounds of your tongue.

go quickly
to who you are

before

your mother swallows
what she has lost.


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SAHRA VANG NGUYEN was born in Boston, Massachusetts. She is a trailblazer and role model for all creative minds. She was inspired by the entrepreneurship of her parents who came to the United States as Vietnamese refugees. She pursued her passions in poetry, paint, and film and became an artist, creative producer, and entrepreneur. She worked to amplify underrepresented voices like that of her Vietnamese American family, and her creative pursuits were the foundation of her commitment to social justice. After writing and performing poetry nationally, she implemented a youth literacy program at Artists for Humanity in Boston; she then became the Director of the Writing Success Program at the University of California, Los Angeles. She also published a poetry e-book called “One Ounce Gold” that explores race in America. She has collaborated with COACH and exhibited with a roster of renowned street and graffiti artists.

Nguyen founded her own production company, One Ounce Gold, through which she created and filmed 14 documentaries, “Maker’s Lane”, featuring unconventional entrepreneurs. NBC News recruited Nguyen to create an original series, Self-Starters, featuring diverse Asian-American trailblazers throughout the nation who challenge norms and carve their own paths in fashion, alternative energy, technology, art, food, and social enterprise. In 2014, Nguyen was honored with the May Takayanagi Making Waves Award by social justice leaders. Nguyen graduated from the University of California, Los Angeles with a double major in Asian American Studies and World Arts & Cultures.

**Idolize*‡**

SAHRA VANG NGUYEN

Praise until empty
Raise him on a pedestal
Fallen off your throne

As a scholar, Jamaica studies and writes about the intersections of literature, race, gender, class, sexuality, colonialism and occupation as it relates to her home in Hawai‘i and aboard. Ultimately Jamaica’s artistic, activist, and scholarly work is pursued towards the de-occupation and decolonization of her home and in an effort towards Kanaka Maoli nation building.

Jamaica is a three-time national slam poetry champion, a widely published poet and professional performer. She has shared her poetry throughout Oceania, on 5 of the 7 continents, and at the American Whitehouse by invitation of President Obama. In her free time, Jamaica facilitates poetry workshops for Kanaka Maoli and local youth in Hawai‘i and is a board member of the award winning organization, Pacific Tongues.

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JA·MA·IC·A HE·OLI·ME·LE·I·KA·LA·NI O·SO·RIO is a bilingual Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) activist, poet, musician, educator, and a PhD candidate in English at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. Jamaica was born and raised in Pālolo valley on the island of O‘ahu and spent her formative years fighting side by side with her lāhui (nation) in the contemporary Hawaiian sovereignty movement. Jamaica’s introduction to formal education began in her one hānau, Pālolo, at the Hawaiian language immersion school, Ke Kula Ka‘iapuni o ‘Anuenue where she first fostered her aloha for ʻōlelo (Hawaiian language) and ʻike Hawai‘i (Hawaiian Knowledge).
Letter to a Bilingual Poet*
JAMAICA HEOLIMELEIKALANI OSORIO

1  I know girls like you
    The kind to run when seeing stacks of words on top of each other
    I know the way it makes every part of your body stutter, shake and shatter
    How the insecurity you think you've locked under your skin
    Comes flying past the surface

2  I know how the repeating consonants remind you of bars
    And walls
    Scratch against the back of your throat
    Like dry chalk
    How you will cramp and cram your tongue into itself
    Just to make the sounds seem like they fit falling through your lips

3  I know how you will write
    Write
    Write
    And not know why
    Not understand the ocean of water falling out
    Because you will refuse
    To let a single word under light

4  Because you are second language
    Second chance
    You are back of the classroom
    Without a hand
    You are broken body
    And beaten tongue

5  You are poems
    On poems
    On poems
    Because the thought of punctuation makes you want to crawl inside of yourself
    Makes you remember

6  You dumb
    You worthless child
    With words no worth
    Illiterate
    They say
    Illiterate you believe
    Because your vocabulary don't stretch far enough to understand
    The way the attempt at that insult is laughable
7 No one understands
Not even yourself
Cant even communicate right
Got twice the number of words 4 times the feelings circling in your mind
Dont make no sense
The ease of the other kids language
Only have one world they need to find fitting into their mouth
You
Clawing at broken century tongue
And colonial empire
It is a miracle you havent torn yourself completely to pieces just yet

8 So many things you dont know
Cant understand
Can barely see from inside
That cage they built with the rules of their words
Make you believe they own your tongue
And all the fire your saliva spits
They dont know how youve severed all their language in half to make it stable
To make it mean
How bright that light of you shines
Who would have thought your future would be in words

9 Not you,
I know
And because you were the last to learn of your brilliance
It will be your job to remember
The fractures of beginning
The way you built your own fortress from nothing
Took those words they called broken
And misused
And lined the whitest of Houses with your dirty brown speech

10 Dont let their walls, cages, rules and commas name you anything other than genius
Than strong
Than beauty
Because you are transformation embodied
Evolution acquired
You are two worlds
In one throat
The closest thing to coexisting
That survives

11 You are Jamaica Heolimeleikalani Osorio
A chant sung to the heavens
You are made of words
Built of language
And the last thing you should be afraid of
Is yourself

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LEHUA M. TAITANO is an indigenous Chamorro from the Pacific Island of Yigo, Guåhán (Guam), the largest of the Mariana Islands. Born to a Chamorro mother and a Euro-American father, her family migrated to the Appalachian mountains in North Carolina when she was four years old. After migrating, she moved around many times throughout the United States, and she now resides in Sonoma County, California. She is the author of a volume of poetry, *A Bell Made of Stones*, a book of short fiction, *appalachiapacific*, and a short book of poetry, *Sonoma*. Taitano’s first collection of poetry, *A Bell Made of Stones*, explores the reconstruction of home amidst migration, identity as a mixed-race individual, and queer sexuality. The poems spotlight the fragmented feeling of being different and not fitting into society’s categories—being neither this nor that and somewhere in-between. Through poetry, writing, and art, Taitano speaks to the struggle of finding a distinctive voice while trying to make sense of different parts of one’s identity.

Taitano graduated from Appalachian State University with her Bachelor of Arts in English and Education and later went on to earn her Master of Fine Arts from the University of Montana. Taitano’s award-winning creative work has appeared in many collections, including *The Poetry Magazine* and *Tinfish Journal*. Currently, she is the Community Outreach Coordinator on the Executive Board of the Thinking Its Presence: Race, Literary, and Interdisciplinary Studies Conference.

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**One Kind of Hunger**

LEHUA M. TAITANO

The Seneca carry stories in satchels.

They are made of pounded corn and a grandmother’s throat.

The right boy will approach the dampness of a forest with a sling, a modest twining wreath for the bodies of birds. A liquid eye.

When ruffed from leaves, the breath of flight is dissolute.

What else, the moment of weightlessness before a great plunge?

In a lost place, a stone will find the boy.

Give me your birds, she will say, and I will tell you a story.

A stone, too, admits hunger.

The boy is willing. Loses all his beaks.

What necklace will his grandmother make now.

The sun has given the stone a mouth. With it, she sings of what has been lost.

She sings and sings and sings.

The boy listens, forgets, remembers. Becomes distracted.

The necklace will be heavy, impossible to wear.

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