

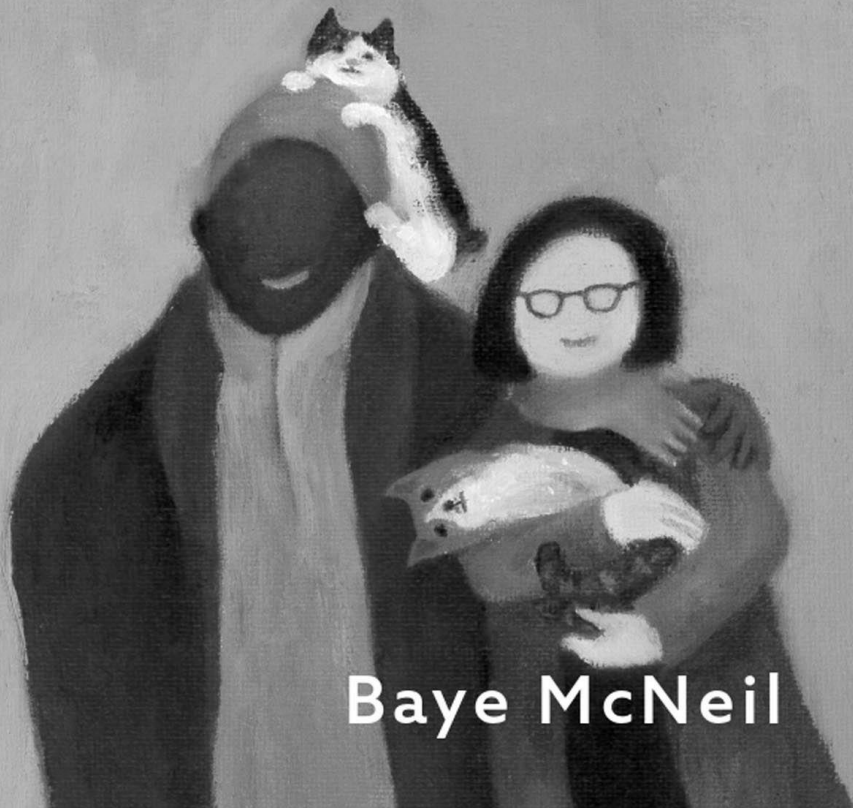
Words

by Baye,

Art

by Miki

Crafting a Life Together with Affection,
Creativity, and Resilience



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Trust Miki

—

It was November 3rd, the day *before* the day I'd been both looking forward to eagerly and praying would never come. I jauntily strode out to center stage, brimming with bravado, stood in the spotlight on that spotless red carpet, and began reciting the talk I'd been rigorously preparing to give for several weeks.

The first impression onlookers had of me, I'm sure, was of a person who spoke publicly often enough to be as comfortable before an audience of hundreds as he would be in front of a handful of friends in his living room, and skilled enough to collect attaboys from famed orators like Jesse Jackson and Barack Obama. I even managed to get out the first couple of paragraphs like I was a sage and seasoned guru. I could envision myself – and had on numerous occasions – setting the TED talk world ablaze, *my* talk being *the* talk of TEDizens worldwide.

IGOT this!

No sooner had I had that thought than it started.

This betrayal orchestrated, no doubt, by my vivid imagination, must have been planned weeks, maybe months or years in advance, because it was executed flawlessly despite its many moving parts.

First, my mind commanded my eyes to comb the room, and, as

instructed, they took in what should have come as no surprise: that every seat in the joint was aimed at the object every spotlight directed them to focus on: me, up on that dais. But instead of processing the scene as a safe space replete with hungry intellects eager to gorge on the delectable ideas I was serving up (as my TED coaches had all but convinced me would be the case), all I could make out was a firing squad anxious to unload their ammo at the lone spot-lit target. My fear filled the seats with Japanophilic critics, Haterade-sipping trolls, and discerning TEDizens undressing my composure with their excessively astute eyes, seeing right through my bravado for the fraud I've been perpetrating for years!

They know I'm not as confident as I let on, I'm terrified of public speaking, and I have no right to be up here. They ALL know! Oh. My. God.

The gravity of what I'd gotten myself into suddenly slammed into me like one of those Acme anvils dropped from a cliff in the old Roadrunner cartoons, leaving me feeling accordioned like the coyote. My head, big enough as it is, felt like it was swelling, increasing in density, soon to become too heavy for my neck and frame to bear. My traitorous knees threatened to buckle at any moment.

Like the rat it is, my confidence took the first opportunity to flee this sinking ship of a speech. Its skedaddling had a predictable effect on my volume, tone, and articulation until I'm sure my well-rehearsed discourse sounded more like it was being recited by an offbrand AI voice generator favored by low-budget YouTubers—a feminine one, at that.

Next, my memory, halfway through the third paragraph, took off after my confidence, not wanting to miss the last lifeboat to safety. But somehow, this felt charitable, like I had been tossed a lifebuoy, because I no longer remembered who the fuck I was trying to pass myself off as TED-talking to anyone about anything, or why the hell I agreed to do this, knowing full well I had this *choke*-ability within me. Fuck is wrong with me??? Before I could finish the third paragraph, I was spewing gibberish all over the audience. I didn't even attempt the fourth. I just tapped out mid-word and faded out like a human ellipsis.

But it was just my imagination, running away with me. (Shout out to The Temptations)

This wasn't the real thing. Thank you, Jesus, I said to myself, feeling more religious fervor at that moment than any agnostic had the right to feel. It was just a practice run. The rehearsal from hell, to be sure, but a rehearsal nonetheless, given before an audience of 2,500 largely empty seats.

The only witnesses to this abject failure were TEDx Kyoto staffers and crew, and most of them paid me no mind at all. At that point, making sure I knew my letdown would be amazingly lit and that the microphone inches from my lips captured my prattle so that every person in every corner of the facility could hear my failure clearly was of more concern to the crew than the quality of my performance. And the other speakers, out there in the dark, awaiting their turn to rehearse, were probably too busy throttling their own demons to admire the spectacle mine had just put on. At least, I tried to convince myself of that.

The event organizer was one of the exceptions. He had been glued to my every utterance. He was seated in the front row, smiling a smile he might give a little leaguer that had just dropped the pop fly that would have meant victory but instead cost the team the game. Shame rocked me, and my humiliation became a tight knot in my gut. Maybe he sensed this, for his smile transformed into one that same coach might employ to keep that child from swearing off competitive sports for the rest of their life.

One of my TED coaches sat beside him, unable to mask his astonishment. My choking came as quite a surprise to him. I'd demonstrated marked improvement over the previous few weeks. They'd whipped me into shape until we all began to believe I could do well; hell, I could be sensational! They'd had high expectations. Expectations I'd just dashed against the Kyoto International Conference Center event hall's cavernous walls.

I felt vile, my legs increasingly unsteady, as I descended the steps from the stage. I stopped at the landing and used what little pride I had left to hoist my head erect. I hate to disappoint people counting

on me, but I refused to look defeated. I took a deep breath and regrouped before approaching the two men.

“I’ll be ready by tomorrow,” I promised midway through their relatively positive feedback, trying to reassure them that my spasm of imposter syndrome was just a mild case of butterflies in the belly and take some of the sting out of this unmitigated disaster. “That’s what this test run was for, right? Don’t sweat it. I’m just tired.”

I couldn’t hold their eyes, though. Was I lying? I felt like I was lying for some reason. So, instead, I scanned the sea of mostly empty seats till I found the one person I didn’t want to disappoint the most, the only person whose judgment I’d have to live with. Literally.

She was seated in row 7 or 8, looking as lovely as possible, which is considerable. Miki rarely left the house looking otherwise. Hair freshly blackened and pageboy bobbed, makeup peerless, outfit coordinated so flawlessly even Diane Keaton – one of her fashion role models – would’ve nodded and sang, “Well, la-di-da la-di-da-la-la.” All of this, however, was obscured by the broad smile she was wearing.

Uh-oh.

Her joyful façade was not for me. It was for the public or anyone who might be spying on her reaction to the washout I’d just had on stage. But I could see right through the pretense to the genuine Miki poised like a snake beneath it. We’d been together several years by then, so we could hide little from one another. Her true face, concealed beneath the cheery veneer, all but shouted things she would never cry publicly. If she were me, those things better left unsaid would sound something like: “What’s with this Mickey Mouse shit!?! I’ve listened to you rehearse this goddamn thing a hundred times. We’ve trimmed the timing to get it just right a dozen times. We honed and sculpted this bad boy into a talk to set the TEDiverse on its ear.

“You’re in the best possible position you could be in. So, what’s the matter? Is that Dashiki too tight or something? Let’s have some action! Let’s have some titties jiggling, some asses wiggling! I want some perfection!”

(Shout out to Morris Day!)

I half-listened to the concerns of the TEDx organizer, as he explained that this type of showing in a rehearsal isn't rare – the first time rattles many people– and by no means is it a preview of tomorrow's performance. After a few more encouraging tips and some soothing platitudes, I begged off, blaming exhaustion, and braced myself as I approached where Miki was seated. I fell into the seat beside her and leaned my head on her shoulder.

"Are you OK?" she asked.

"I panicked," I replied. "Seriously. What the fuck am I doing here?"

Da fuuuuuuq

right

"えええええ," she sang, turning on me. "A TED talk, でしょう?"

Supposedly but fuck me

"そうだけど..." I whined. "Babe, I don't know if I can do this. It's too, I dunno, permanent."

What does THAT mean

"Perm...? なにそれ ?"

"It's forever," I explained. "If I fuck it up, it'll be on YouTube long after I'm dead and buried."

"And you realized that just now!?" she said, smiling, but the smile kept stretching until she laughed out loud. Miki's laughter is delightful, like sunshine on a cloudy day in a country where gloom is the norm. I couldn't help but feel lighter and laughed, too. I sho'nuff was a jabbering mess up there. Watching her, I remembered it was her laughter that had endeared her to me from the jump. She laughs with her whole being, like my mother laughs. We both quieted down once we realized we'd drawn attention and another presenter had mounted the stage to rehearse.

"You just need some rest," she said, catching her breath. "You've got too much stress."

"Hmmm," I sighed. "Maybe."



We returned to the room TED provided at the Prince Hotel across from the Conference Center. Before the door shut behind us, I had already kicked off my shoes and collapsed flat on the bed, splayed in exhaustion, ready to get that rest Miki prescribed. Even though the Shinkansen ride had only been a couple of hours and the rehearsal another hour, I felt like I'd put in a full day's work and then some.

But Miki wasn't having it.

"Stand up!" she commanded.

"What for?" I said into the pillow. "Gimme a few minutes to—"

"Just stand up," she persisted.

I rolled over on my back and looked at her. She was standing above me, grinning a grin betrayed by her tone. Her face said, *Awwwww, you're so cute when you're nervous.* But her tone said, *'You'll do this and do it well because you've worked hard on this, (taking no days off) and hard work pays off, goddammit! Otherwise, what's the point of working hard? And there's no way I will let you embarrass yourself and me tomorrow. No. Fucking. Way.'*

She was not kidding around. So, I got up.

"Now, do your speech!"

"Now?"

"Now!"

"OK," I said, trying to shake off my fatigue. "Alright."

"Do it!"

"OK! Damn, gimme a sec," I said. Then I began. "Wherever we journey, we tend to bring along two types of belongings. In Japanese, they're referred to as *mono* and *koto*. Mono is..."

"OK. Sit!" She snapped about 15 minutes later when I finished.

"I'm not a dog," I growled but sat.

"Do your speech."

"Again?"

"Yes, again!"

"Wherever we journey, we tend to bring along two types of belongings. In Japanese, they're referred to as *mono* and *koto*..."

Her eyes never left mine as I recited—laser intensity. Once I finished, she pointed towards a corner of the room by the window.

"Go over there and do it again."

I did as she instructed, figuring she was putting me through some ancient Japanese ritual for removing one's head from one's ass. I was open to anything to alleviate my anxiety after crashing and burning during the rehearsal.

"Don't look at me; look out there!"

I did as I was told. The view of Kyoto from the hotel was majestic, so lush, green, and manicured, that it might have been a private park or garden. I admired it as if it were the masterful work of an artist like Robert S. Duncanson or Kehinde Wiley. Once again, I gave my speech to the captive audience filled with the critics from hell that lived in my skull. Only this time, shockingly, they were kinda feeling me. Or was I projecting that? I could almost see a faded, transparent reflection of myself in the window. Like an apparition, my spirit, hovering over the natural beauty of Kyoto. My airborne audience, aping and egging me on.

"Now stand over there," Miki said, gesturing toward the opposite corner. "Look at the wall."

"The wall? Really?"

Just do it," she pleaded, grinning. "Trust me."

I did. And, to that hotel wall, I hauled off and gave the finest recitation of this 20-minute monologue I would ever give, even finer than I would the following day before 100s of captive onlookers and a half-dozen cameras recording it for thousands to experience at their leisure. Even the wall wanted more.

I turned to her and said, “You know what? I’m ready!”

“Yep,” she replied, blinking away welling tears. “You sure are.”

Not only did I know I would nail the talk the following day, but I also felt a surge of empowerment and a readiness to take on the challenges that were sure to follow in the years to come. I wouldn’t go as far as to say I felt invincible, but I damn sure felt formidable AF. And it was Miki, standing there looking more than a little pleased with herself, who had fortified me. I didn’t know how to thank her appropriately for this windfall right then and there. Words wouldn’t make the grade. However, I knew I wouldn’t let her out of my clutches until I had.

That night, I decided I would trust Miki, if she’d have me, for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, ‘til death...and, you know, all that jazz.

Unpacking Koto

The following is the original text of the talk Miki helped me perfect that I gave November 4th at TEDx Kyoto.

—

Wherever we journey, we tend to bring along two types of belongings. In Japanese, they’re referred to as *mono* and *koto*. Mono is used for physical, tangible things like clothes, deoderant, toothpaste, and other essentials. In contrast, koto is used for intangibles like ideas, experiences, and feelings. One type we pack on purpose, while the other we often lug around unintentionally. Once you’ve arrived at your destination, now it’s time to unpack.



Unpacking mono is a fairly straightforward process: You open your suitcase, remove the items inside, and sort them out. Shirts here, skirts there, undergarments over there, toiletries in there, move on to the next piece of luggage and repeat as necessary.

Unpacking koto, however, is a more complicated, more involved process. Plus, there's a hitch: There's a good chance that the person you are when you enter into this unpacking process may be very different from the person who emerges from it. In other words, the process has left people in an altered state.

I have a friend who believes that human beings, for the most part, don't change much, especially not adults. And I suppose he's right, to a certain extent. For instance, if a person – voluntarily or otherwise – never has the chance to examine and question their core beliefs about the world and, more importantly, about themselves, chances are their mindset likely won't undergo any major transformations.

But let's say you choose to or find yourself for reasons beyond your control, obliged to tread upon a vastly different path, one your

experience could not prepare you for, like long-term residence in a profoundly foreign environment where you're forced to confront deeply embedded and elusive thoughts and feelings. Undertaking something of that magnitude, I believe, makes change not only possible but imperative.

Once we've ventured out of our spheres of comfort and familiarity, that's when the need to unpack koto becomes more insistent. Otherwise, we won't pay much attention to it.

For example, on occasion, you might have heard yourself say, "Phew, glad I packed my hat, muffler and mittens! It's cold as hell out there!" But I bet you've never heard yourself say, "Phew, glad I packed my moral superiority, homophobia and misogyny!"

Well, let's hope you haven't, anyway.

We've been collecting this koto ever since we were children. We carry it around with us all day, every day, to the point where we don't even notice its weight.

Do you notice the weight of your liver or your gluteus maximus? Probably not. That is, unless you like pizza and beer as much as I do, then you might.

We keep most of this koto in our hearts, in our minds, and in our souls. You probably got some of it stashed away in your glutes, too. But the point is, the weight is dispersed in such a way that we usually don't notice it until we unpack it!

And trust me, once you have, you'll feel like your soul has had an enema!

Case in point: I only planned to stay for a year when I first came to Japan. But years flew by, and friends back home shifted from asking when I would return to the US to if I would ever return. (Later, it would swing to: "Yo B, looks like getting outta here was the best thing you ever did for yourself!") The point is, it wasn't long before I began to think of Japan as my home base indefinitely.

It was then that one of those intangibles decided to make an appearance.

At the time, I was an instructor at a big franchise English school in Tokyo. In the school, there was this room we called the Voice Room,

where students came to speak freely with instructors on just about any topic. We weren't supposed to venture into sensitive subjects like politics, religion, or sex, but I'd let the students break the rules if they pushed the issue.

Okyakusama Kamisama, right? That means the customer is God!

One day, it was me and three Japanese students I'd taught several times before. Three habitual rule breakers, they were. These guys loved to talk about the differences between Japan and America, the cultures and the people. Many students did. However, these three students' opinions usually got political. I'd indulge them, though, for no other reason than to break up the monotony.

I mean, many students only wanted to talk about safe topics like Disneyland, shrines and sushi, or would try to confirm their stereotypes about black people or Americans. Not a fan of those convos, I gotta tell ya. I wasn't a huge fan of where the three guys liked to go, either. Mainly because their opinions seldom reflected the America I grew up in. Yet, they had the audacity to assert these beliefs with authority like they were canon, at me! The only American in the room! What Hollywood or Jollywood (Japanese media) told them about me held as much weight with them as what I had to say. And this day was no different, at first. These three had quite a bit to say about the US, and some of it, as usual, was unmistakably critical, disparaging even.

Up until that point, whenever students got openly judgmental about my country, I'd hear them out, nod and smile, and even join in occasionally. Lord knows, I have my grievances. But that was before I decided that Japan would likely be home until further notice.

This decision was critical because, until then, I had no real skin in the game. Japan was still an amusement park, and I was still *very* much amused. But as I settled into life as a so-called ex-pat, it gradually became clear that I was no longer a patron at that amusement park. It dawned on me that I was, in fact, one of the amusements. Or, at least, mistaken for one. And not just me but the country that birthed me, as well.

And, as you might imagine, I was no longer easily amused.

I knew that the next critical remark that came out of these students' mouths about *my country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty*, would be met with—well, put it this way: my nodding and smiling days were done.

Okyakusama kamisama, my ass!

This feeling, this intangible, this *koto*, wasn't nationalism or patriotism, though. If I had suddenly become a nationalist or a patriot, that realization would have caused a short circuit of my nervous system or a brain hemorrhage, for sure.

That's not to say I hate America. I don't. Far from it. I only left for an attitude realignment. I wanted to gain a fresh perspective in a fresh environment and see what the rest of the world had to offer, not out of hate. Indeed, up until that point in my life, the strongest feeling I had for America that I was conscious of was disappointment.

This *koto* that got unpacked just then was not disappointment, though.

Not exactly.

It was closer to how you might feel about your child when you learn that, without a doubt, your child's the biggest bully at his school. He beats the crap out of the boys in his class on the regular, grabs the girls by their private parts, throws textbooks at the teachers, and steals anything that isn't nailed down. He's a bad seed. Rotten. You cuss him out and punish him regularly, but to no avail.

You're the problem parent of a problem child.

But that's *your* problem child, *your* flesh and blood, right? And you still hold on to the belief, to the unfounded faith, that someday, someday, your child will grow up to be a fine human being. That buried underneath all that anger and contempt and violence and bloodshed, racism, and hypocrisy, there's genuine greatness just waiting to be excavated.

So, naturally, if anyone outside the family criticizes or mistreats your child, you're going to take issue with it. And, God forbid, if an adult raises their hand to your child, you're ready to go to the mattresses! Am I right?

So, yeah, I think it's safe to say that the first intangible I unpacked

was the shocking discovery that I harbored a proprietary and paternal, er, *partiality* for America. One that would not sit still for even mild reproach from non-Americans, let alone three Japanese students who've never traveled closer to America than Guam.

This discovery shocked the shit out of me! It got me wondering what other intangible contraband had stowed away in my heart over the years.

You know?

Anyway, now that you've unpacked this koto and laid it out before you in all its gory glory, what will you do with it?

If you were a tourist, you could ignore it. But you're not a tourist. You're an ex-pat (an immigrant, an exile, a foreigner, an alien, a Displaced Person, an outlander, a gaijin, a *gaikokujin*, or what have you). No matter how you self-identify (or find yourself labeled), you're a human being striving to build meaningful relationships you hope to sustain, trying to hone a mindset that will behoove you, benefit you, and position you to succeed in your new environment. You are part of a new community now, immersing yourself in a foreign language and culture, paying your dues, paying your taxes, and paying careful attention. And it's all demanding, seriously complicated stuff.

Fun and games are over. The amusement park is closed!

You're playing for keeps now.

In my case, I knew. I just KNEW I couldn't traipse through my new life in Japan with this volatile koto on the loose and this American chip on my shoulder. I had already been living here several years prior to deciding to stay, and in that time, I had already gotten a sense of what life is like here in Japan. And those three students? They were just the tip of the iceberg. I knew that here, more so than in America, I would be judged, first and foremost, by my nationality and by my skin color. And that any presumptions and stereotypes floating around about either would be applied to me without a second thought.

So, I knew that the key to my success, to thriving and surviving in Japan, was the management of this Koto. I had to make peace with the

American in me to make way for the person I was becoming by virtue of wrenching myself free from America's overwhelming influence over my thoughts, feelings, and behavior. In the truest sense of the term, I had to cease to be a mere American and become a global citizen, which has much more to do with what's going on in your heart than what it says on your passport.

That's the importance of unpacking koto!

Whether you're going off to college, starting a new job, moving to a new neighborhood, or, like myself, making a go of it in another country, most of us, at some point, are going to find ourselves on unfamiliar turf. And it's in strange settings that koto is prone to make an appearance.

Koto isn't always bad news, though. So, if it reveals itself to have been your secret ally for years, you should naturally store it away with the other helpful koto you keep in a sock drawer in your soul. But if it turns out that it has been quietly undermining your efforts to achieve your highest potential, it turns out we all have the capacity to liberate ourselves of it.

There's no *one-size-fits-all* way to do this, however.

Some people do it creatively. They paint, draw, write, do photography, make music, and DJ; there are all kinds of creative outlets. Creativity is a salve for some souls. Others turn to spirituality. They meditate, pray, do yoga, recite mantras, and sacrifice chickens and goats—faith in a higher power often imbues the faithful with the resilience to put koto in its proper place.

And yet others grab hold of an idea or find a cause or a community that inspires and empowers them.

Unpacking koto is a personal journey that no guru can teach you to navigate.

I can tell you my journey, which has taken me from English teacher to blogger, to author, to columnist, to activist, to a prominent voice of African descent here in Asia, began years ago with this idea:

What kind of impact would it have on the negative perception of blackness in Japan if I used my energy and gifts to bring black excellence to Japanese attention?

And once I set myself on that path, I could feel the lessening of the load I'd been lugging around most of my life.

Even my glutes felt lighter and tighter.

At the same time, my mind became more open to an abundance of opportunities that the American in me – distracted by the things that Americans find too difficult to ignore – would have been too preoccupied to notice.

Over the years, I've tackled some of the other problematic koto that reside within me, like racial sensitivity, an intellectual inferiority complex, a pompous belief in NY exceptionalism, and black American cultural superiority. I've even glimpsed some misogyny and homophobia peeking out of a valise in my heart.

Unpacking koto is a lifelong process. Locating and recognizing these hitchers is an exercise in self-discovery. Once you've identified it, then it's time to get busy! While the process isn't easy, it is simple and almost as straightforward as it is with the tangibles.

First, you've got to unpack it, and then you've got to evaluate every item and decide whether it's in your best interest to retain or discard it, and repeat as necessary. Thank you!

[END OF EXCERPT]

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And, of course, you could buy "Words by Baye, Art by Miki" [here](#). Thanks again for reading my excerpt. I can't wait to hear your thoughts once you've read the rest of it. **Love, Miki and Baye**

