

FROM THE INSTRUCTOR

In her graphic memoir *Where the Mountain Gods Live*, Aurore drew inspiration from Craig Thompson's book-length graphic memoir, *Blankets*. At first it may appear that the two stories have little in common: one is set in snowy Wisconsin and the other in lush Japan; one is about a sexual and romantic relationship and the other is about a friendship. However, they both reflect on journeys of religious disillusionment, and both use rich natural imagery to communicate emotion.

As Aurore explains in her reflection, she was inspired by a formal element in *Blankets*: Thompson draws many meaningful blankets (his brother's bedclothes, a handmade quilt, a blanket of snow) to bind together disparate parts of his story. Aurore decided to use repeated images of incense to create a visual backbone to her own narrative, to great effect.

Our WR152 class spent about four weeks creating these graphic memoirs, moving through brainstorming, imitation, draft and revision steps. Students had prepared for the project since the beginning of the course through their detailed study of the graphic memoir genre and an independent research project on a memoir of their choosing. While Aurore is clearly a talented artist, her memoir is successful primarily because of elements that do not depend on a realistic or beautiful drawing style; it is successful because of her expert handling of time (in panel transitions and page layout, for example), her excellent visual and verbal repetition, and her ability to use quiet and absence.

Aurore's memoir is an excellent teaching model for anyone exploring imitation, adaptation, or graphic genres. To use Aurore's graphic memoir in your classroom, you might do the following:

A) Reverse-“Outline”. In writing instruction, we sometimes take a fully-formed paper draft and perform a reverse outline exercise to get a better sense of its organization. In this way, we can see how strong papers work or see possibilities to improve weaker ones. Students studying graphic genres could perform a similar exercise on selected pages of Aurore's memoir. Keeping the same panel layout and words, return Aurore's fully-formed imagery to its “sketch” version, made up only of stick figures and other simple shapes. Discuss what (if anything) is lost between the two versions. Is anything gained in the simpler version? Can students see the inner workings of the comic genre more clearly in its simpler form?

B) Taking Inspiration. Aurore was drawn to Thompson's religion experiences and his repetition, but in the process of creating her own memoir she brought in many new elements that were not central to Thompson's memoir, such as close friendship, the magic of nature, grief, and so on. As a creative exercise, students could take Aurore's short memoir as inspiration for their own adaptation. Working fairly quickly in or outside of class, students could sketch a graphic response to Aurore's memoir, in the form of their own true-life story or fiction. What did students take from Aurore's story? What did they borrow to transform into something new? Where did their imaginations take them that a reader couldn't have predicted from looking at Aurore's original? Answering questions like these will also help students prepare to write reflections on creative alternative genre pieces in any course level.

Jessica Kent

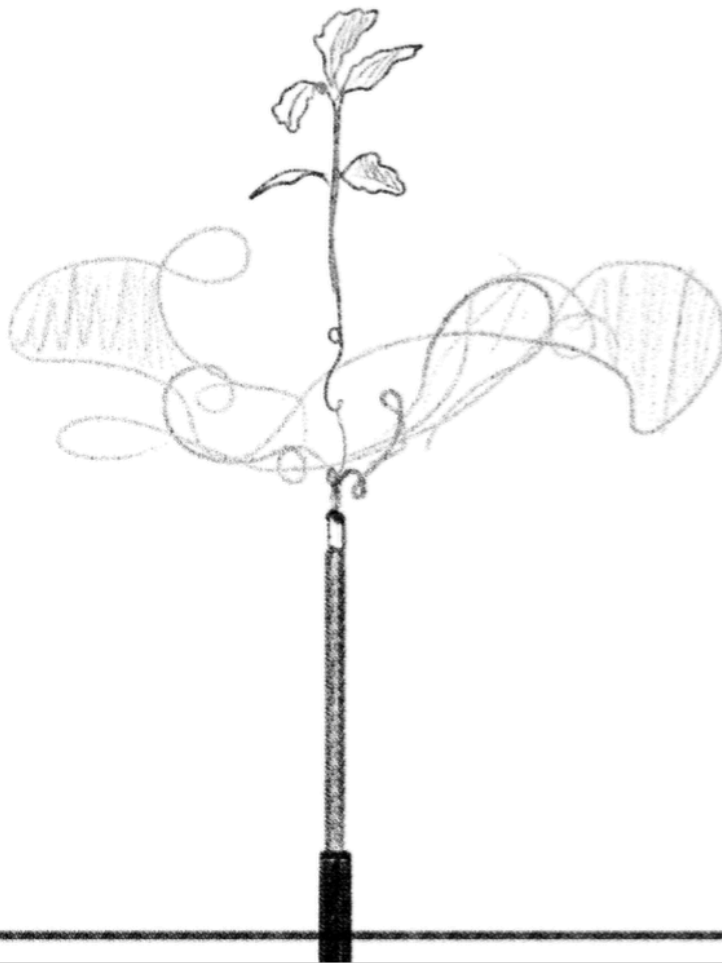
WR 152: Writing, Research, & Inquiry with Digital/Multimedia Expression

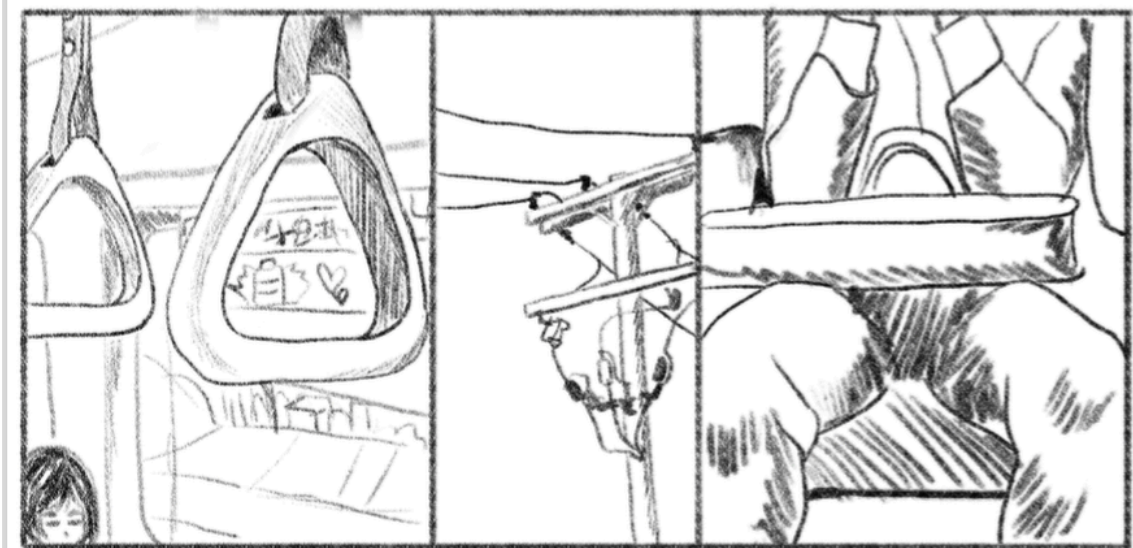
FROM THE WRITER

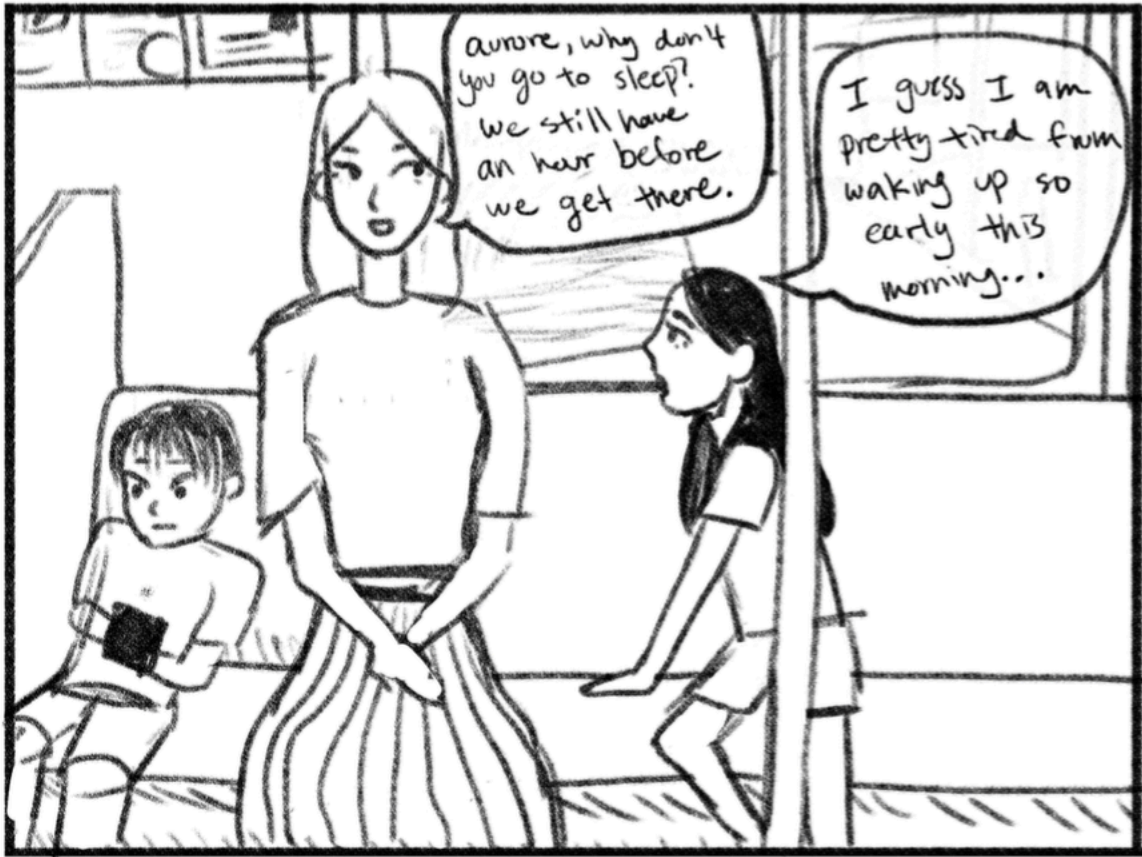
As I write this, I'm actually sitting in my grandmother's living room fighting the stifling Japanese summer heat with a dingy fan. It's nice being back. My first year in university and in the United States was fantastic, but once in a while something would remind me of home and hit me with deep nostalgia. I wrote and drew *where the mountain gods live* because I was homesick. The main plot served more as a vehicle for me to reminisce about my summers in Japan rather than to comment on my spirituality. While a spiritual story did come out of it, the graphic memoir was an unplanned product from my walk down memory lane.

AUORE ZHANG is a sophomore at Boston University's Sargent College, studying Human Physiology. She was born in Sapporo, Japan, and grew up in both Hong Kong and Tokyo. She would like to thank Professor Jessica Kent for her encouragement and redirection when Aurore didn't know how to move forward. She would also like to thank anyone who listened to her dramatically wistful monologues about Hong Kong or Japan.

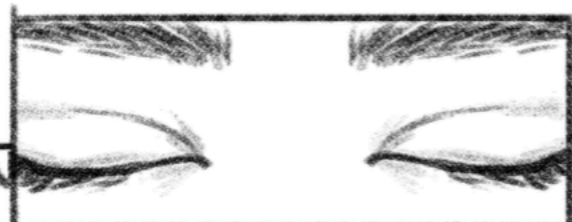
where the mountain gods live
by aurore zhang







I wonder if I'll find spirits this year...



When I was younger, I
spent most of my summers
at my obachan's* place.



*obachan means grandma in Japanese.



Is this too heavy?

Nepel!
I could carry more if you need me too.

WHY CAN'T I GO!





My grandmother would always task me with bringing daily offerings to the green shrine up the mountain.







One day, a girl was there

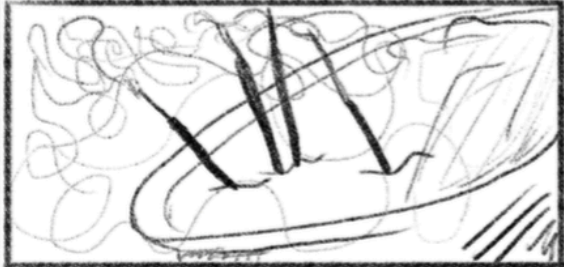


I had never seen a girl
my age for all the years
I've visited the town.

She had to have been new.



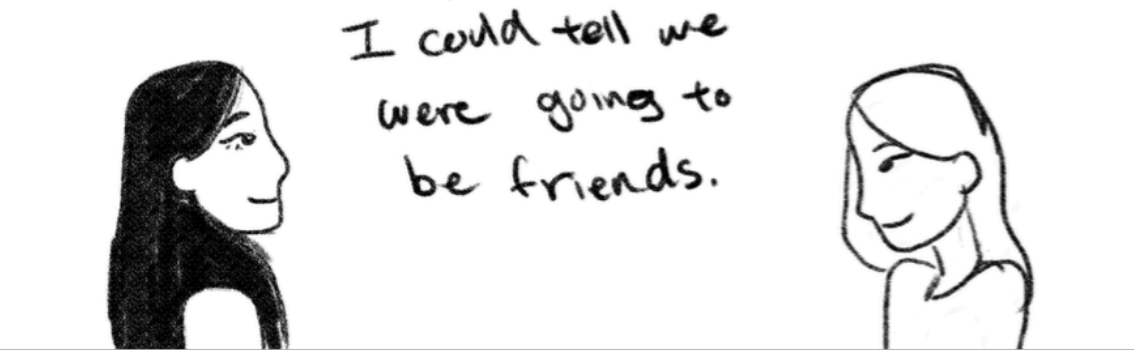
I could tell by the offerings and incense she had a serious prayer for the mountain



she seemed like a city girl. like me.



no, it's ok. I just finished.



I could tell we were going to be friends.

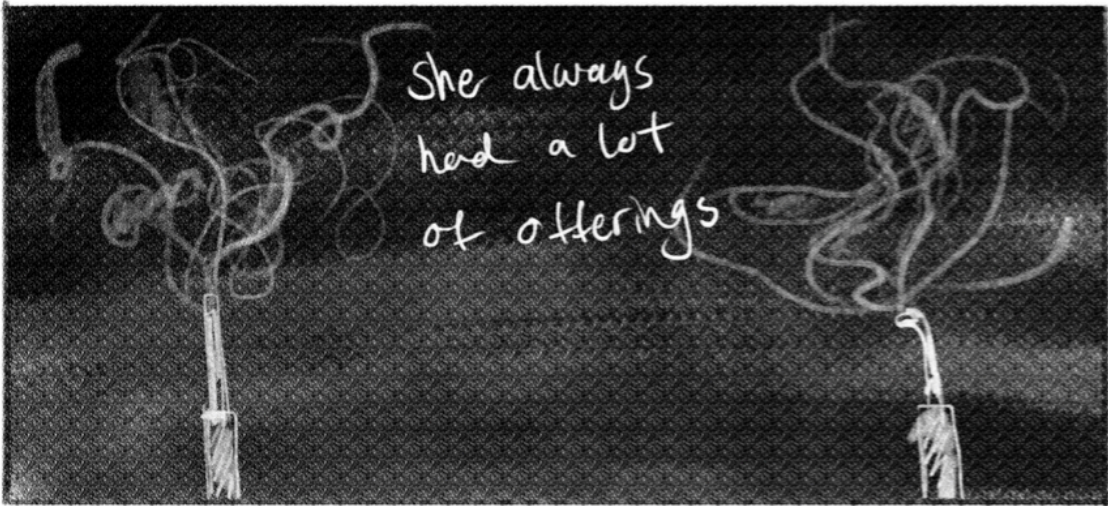
We hung out in the mountains every day.



meeting at the green shrine in the morning



She always
had a lot
of offerings



I was curious... but I never asked her why.



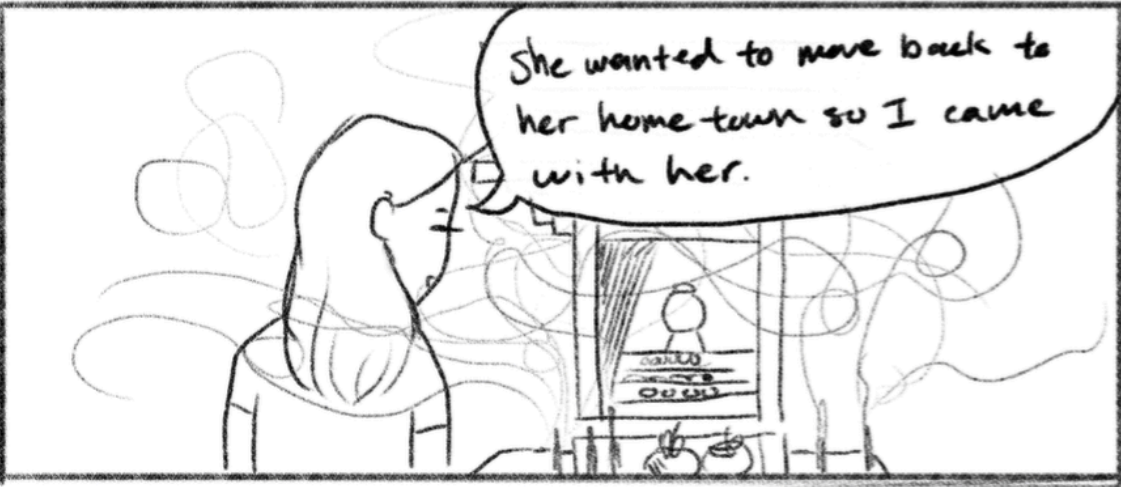
It's for my mom

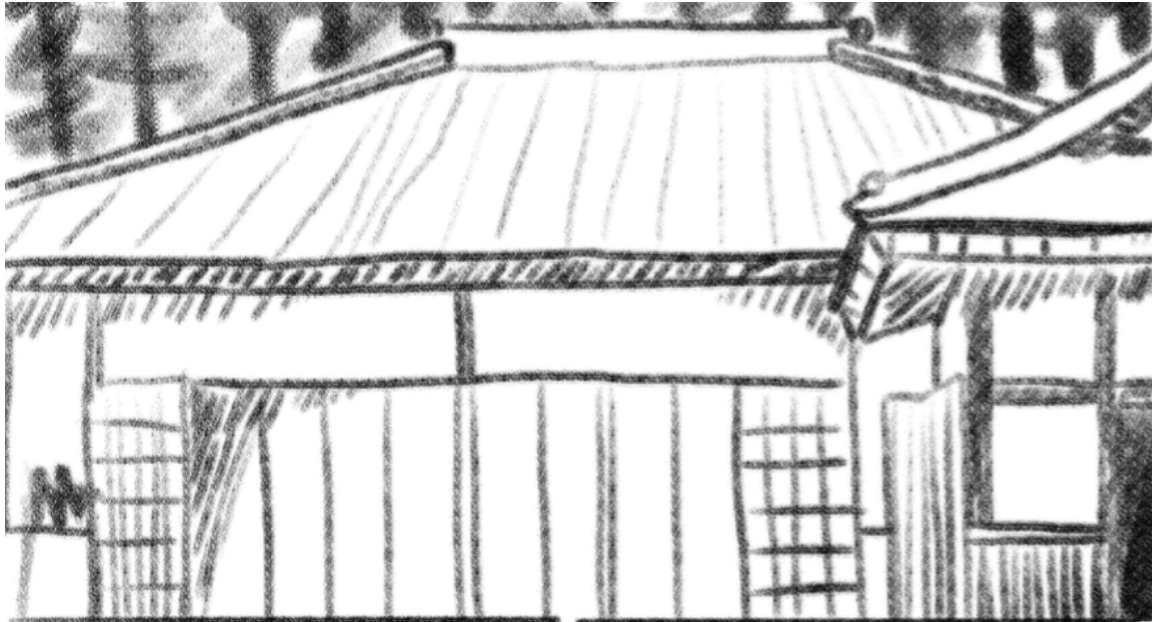
Oh... you don't have to tell -



she has cancer.







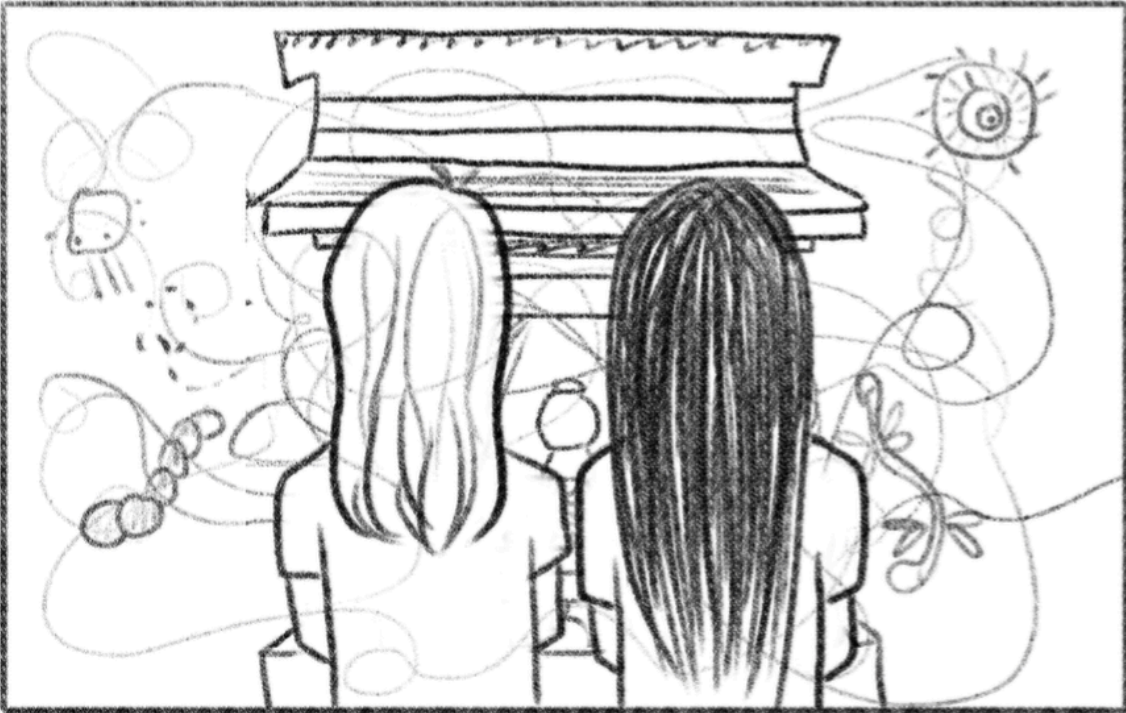
Obachan... can the mountain
heal people?

hmm... yes... but in
strange ways.

Strange?

They are
forces of
nature, they
have a
personality
that can be
difficult to
handle.







I just had
to know
whether they
cared about
us.



I'm ready to
go whenever
you are!

ok, just give
me a sec.



because
I loved
the
main + ain



and I would be
So heartbroken
if it didn't love
me too.



The next morning...



did you hear?
Miyazaki-san
passed away
last night

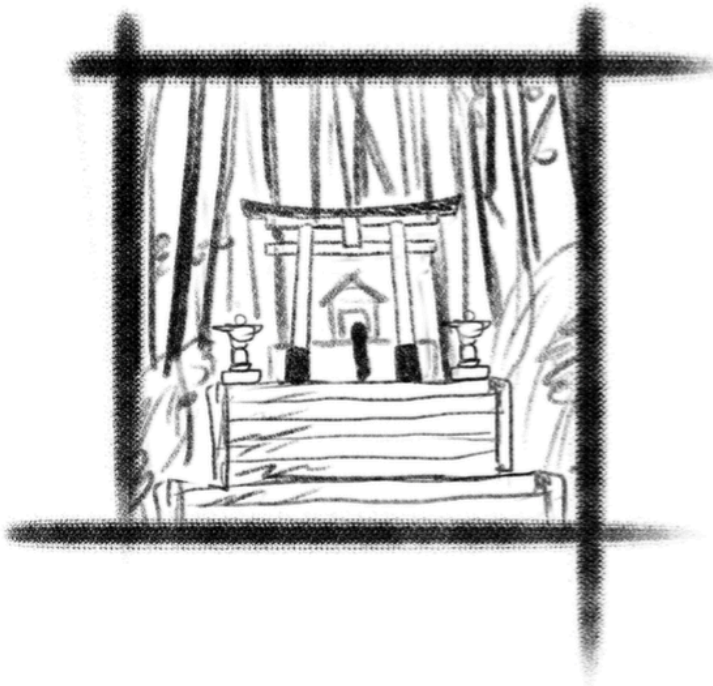
I heard... The family
went back to Tokyo this
morning. It's absolutely
heartbreaking

word spreads quickly
in a small town



aurora... the daughter's
your friend, isn't she? You
both go to the green
shrine everyday.





The mountain staged beautiful



but the shrine seemed pointless

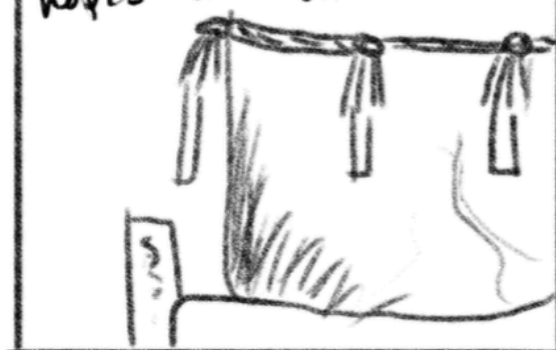
I still went to the green shrine
every day



but I stopped asking
for favors.



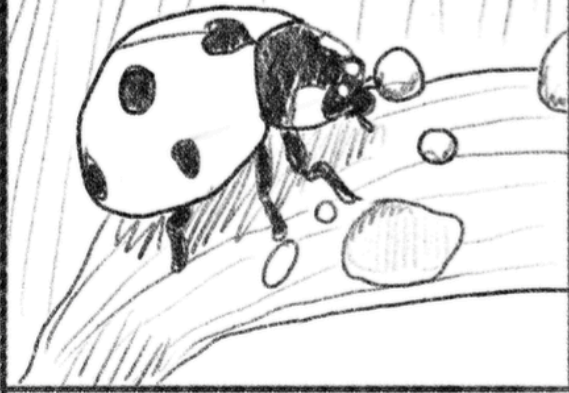
Stopped sharing my
hopes and dreams



I was like a
break-up



where the other
person was still
beautiful



Still kind



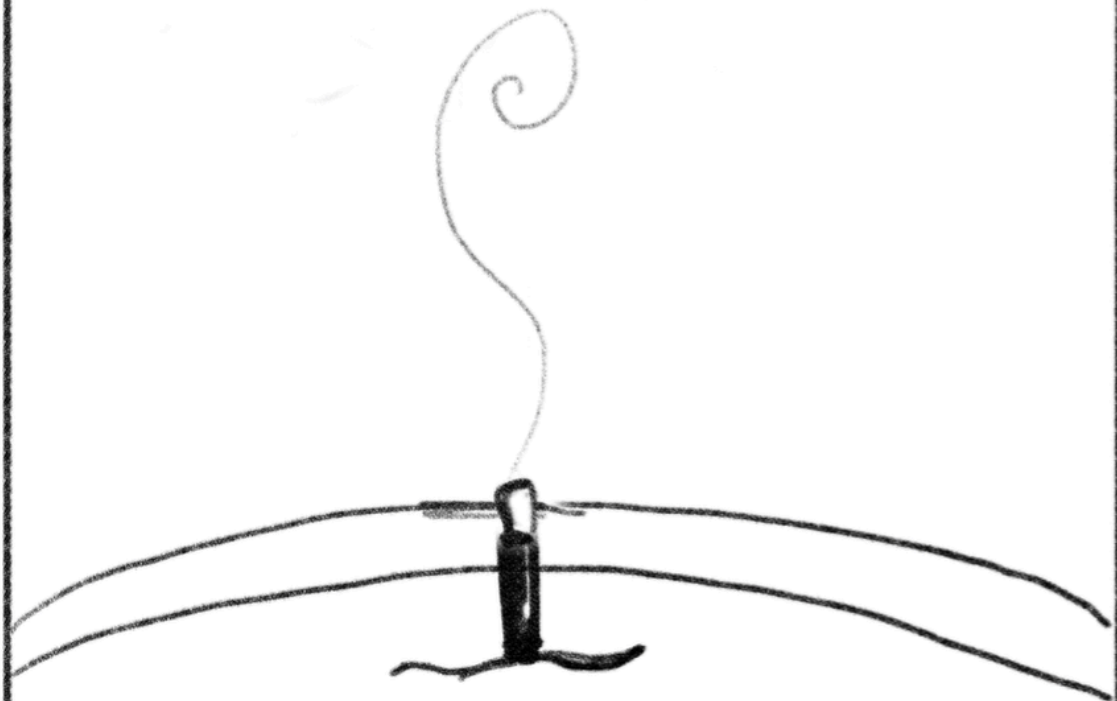
Still funny



still interesting



They just didn't think about you.



NATURE, IMAGES, AND SPIRITUALITY IN *WHERE THE MOUNTAIN GODS LIVE AS INSPIRED BY BLANKETS*

In my graphic memoir, *Where the Mountain Gods Live*, I use Craig Thompson's *Blankets* as visual inspiration to tell my own story about my spirituality. Throughout my graphic memoir, I have many panels of the mountain and forests around my grandmother's town that I had grown to love from summers of exploration. The forest and the mountain represent my spirituality or the "mountain gods" I believe in. In *Blankets*, Thompson also utilizes illustrations of trees, rivers, snow, and other aspects of nature to explore his spirituality in the form of his Evangelical Christian faith. Like Craig, my character in my graphic memoir experiences disillusionment towards the relationship between herself and her faith. I imitate Thompson's art style and depictions of nature in order to tell a story about the progression of my relationship with my spirituality. On top of using nature, Thompson also uses images of blankets, ranging from the blanket he shared with his younger brother to the blankets of snow, to further illustrate his relationship with his spirituality. In my graphic memoir, I decide to use incense as a recurring image to represent the strength of my spirituality.

I chose to illustrate scenes of nature to represent my spirituality, mirroring how Thompson uses nature to follow Craig's faith. On the first panel of page seven of my graphic memoir, the reader is introduced to the forest that I spent most of summers in for the first time (fig. 1). By combining my hopes in seeing spirits with an image of lush forestry, I begin to connect the idea of the mountain to my spirituality. The following panels on the same page show my character's awe and admiration for the mountain gods as she looks around in the forest, carefully taking in the trees and the shrubs that surround her.



Figure 1, pg. 7 (U08-11-9678)

Figure 1 starkly contrasts the first panel on page eighteen that contains an illustration of a storefront. In both Figure 1 and Figure 2, my character is on her way to the forest with an arm full of offerings to the mountain gods. However, in Figure 2, I pair the image of a man-made storefront with the news of my friend's mother's death, effectively damaging my relationship with my spirituality. Figure 1 and Figure 2 represent important points in my spirituality and I use the background and nature to emphasize the change my character goes through.



Figure 2, pg. 18 (U08-11-9678)

Craig Thompson also uses nature to explore Craig's spirituality. On page fifty-six of *Blankets*, Craig wanders through a forest while reading the Bible and applying it to his life. This page captures Craig when his Evangelical faith is at its strongest, strong enough to make him burn all his childhood drawings. Thompson pairs this powerful spiritual moment with illustrations of the forest, drawing connections between Craig's spirituality and nature.

While Thompson uses the recurring image of blankets to illustrate his spirituality, the recurring image of incense is used in *Where the Mountain Gods Live*. Incense is used in Japan for a number of different occasions, including Shinto or Buddhist ceremonies, spirituality, and prayer. The actual application of incense is inherently spiritual. In *Where the Mountain Gods Live*, I use incense beyond its actual use and use it to represent the mountain god in relation with people. On page eleven, my character's unnamed friend reveals that she goes to the green shrine every day because her mother has cancer (fig. 3). Paralleling this reveal are sequential images of incense burning. As the unnamed friend explains why she prays, an incense stick gets shorter and shorter as it burns before finally snapping off. This represents how the mother's ailment is beyond the mountain gods' realm of power, causing the initial "snap" to my understanding of the relationship between people and the mountain.



Figure 3, pg. 11 (U08-11-9678)

The image of incense appears on the last page of *Where the Mountain Gods Live* as well (fig. 4). In the final panel, the incense, which have been drawn fully burning and producing smoke, finally smolders out. It is short and stubby compared to the past images of incense as well. This symbolizes my character's complete disillusionment to the nature of the relationship between people and the mountain gods as she realizes that love does not go both ways.

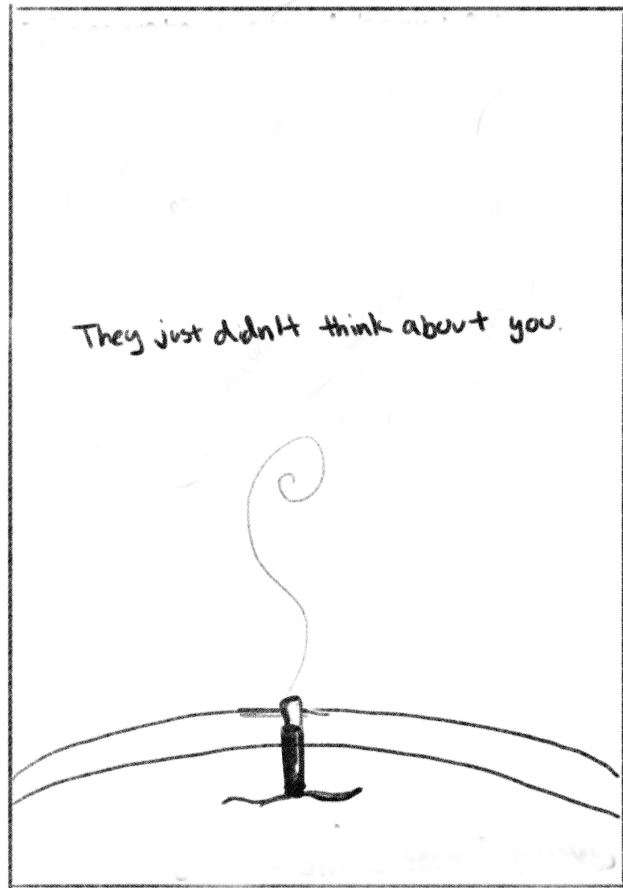


Figure 4, pg. 23 (U08-11-9678)

Thompson's final use of the recurring image of blankets also holds significance regarding Craig's faith. On page 581, Thompson illustrates Craig leaving footprints in a blanket of snow (fig. 5). This represents Craig finally beginning to develop his faith and spirituality free from the confines of his Evangelical upbringing, bullying, and parents. As Craig's figure walks away from the reader, he walks towards his own future and makes his own mark in his spirituality and faith.



Figure 5, pg. 581 (Thompson)

Both *Blankets* and *Where the Mountain Gods Live* heavily rely on images of nature and recurring images to explore an individual's relationship with their spirituality. By imitating Craig Thompson's storytelling technique of deliberate use of imagery and symbolism, *Where the Mountain Gods Live* also joins the conversation on the individual and spirituality.

WORKS CITED

Thompson, Craig. *Blankets*. Marietta, GA, Top Shelf Productions, 2003.

Zhang, Aurore. *Where the Mountain Gods Live*, unpublished, 2019.