

Foreign Correspondence

Anoush Ralapanawe

Dear home,

America feels undoubtedly unreal, possibly because all I really know about it is the product of piecing together the oddly shaped puzzle pieces of the movies, books and TV adaptations of it we all seemed to grow up with. Driving through the deciduous forest reserves of New Jersey only to break out into possibly the set of every photograph wherever placed on a postcard feels like it was pulled out of the establishing shot of an indie short film in the way nothing could ever quite reproduce, and the house my cousins now live in, with its front porch, basement and dog feels so out of touch with the traditional wooden cabinets, backdrop of Sinhalese TV and holiday-abandoned office spaces we used to call our home.

I learned to skateboard here, and it's a skill that'll likely have to stay here. Our suburbs aren't built with winding paths around quiet lakes, and our cities aren't built with pavements (sidewalks) meant to be ridden on with wheels. They're cracked, bumpy and they tend to drop off into the road at the most inconvenient of times, meant to be ignored as you jaywalk 10 metres away from the crossing, because if there aren't gonna be lights telling me when to go, I'm gonna cross when and where it's convenient for me. Life here seems constricted, somehow—like it is only a movie set, beautiful but hollow.

Walking into a supermarket here feels like a stamp of reminder that everything is bigger in America, grander and greater than you could ever imagine. Every Target is its own self-contained ecosystem, every Macy's its own small mall. The aisles seem to call for me to get lost in their straight edged labyrinth, as I undoubtedly get confused and then distracted on my way to locate the coffee grounds, following signposts like they're the map markers to a long-forgotten kingdom. Every street sign lights up with recognition, but not from a life that's my own. 7/11's hold no meaning to me, but their slushies remind me of the musicals that name drop them with the assumption of some sort of cultural ubiquity. I know about twenty different special Starbucks orders even though I've been there about five times since I got here. I could name almost every department store and chain restaurant, but I could not, for the life of me, tell you anything else about them.

College is all that I could have hoped for, and more, and less. There are moments when it feels just as cinematic as it was promised to be: the days when we would 'hack into' and edit WAMCO signs then run down empty streets at midnight lit only by the moon and the occasional streetlight, going on day trips to rediscover the filing cabinet on top of a hike in Littleton, going ice skating for the first time and managing to last almost the entire two hours without falling only to land hard on my ass a minute before we left. I remember the quiet moments and liminal spaces created at 3AM, as we all quite forgot why exactly we were staying awake. The only thing we knew for sure is 'Fireflies' by Owl City, the fading taste of Domino's in the back of our tongues, and the faint smell of mint and berry ice, painted with fairy lights decorating the edge of our vision. When we accidentally came across the jazz ensemble rehearsal during our weekly potsticker night and the world seemed to dissolve into 1930's black and white.

But there are also those moments, far more common yet far less impressive, colored by frustration at class materials that never quite seem to make sense, at the five hundred new things that need to get done every day, the million new responsibilities to keep track of, and the fact that no matter how hard I try I can't seem to make myself get up and do them. Emails I can never seem to make myself write, lists I never finish creating, dishes I never end up cleaning and assignments I do ten minutes before they're due hoping the professors don't notice that I didn't do any of the readings.

Through it all comes the dawning realization that I've never been more lonely. America is big and beautiful and idyllic, but it's also so empty. It's full of vast plains and mountains and strip malls and buildings that do nothing but remind me of the fact that I am so, so small. It reminds me of the feeling I get when I look at the stars in the night sky—it's this cosmic entity that's bigger than I'll ever be, that's been around for a millennia before me and will be there for a millennia more after I'm gone, and that pulls my life into harsh perspective. Everything in America is lit in technicolor, it reaches new soaring heights with the knowledge that it will only lead to a fall of more devastating depths.

I've protested here, standing on the sidewalk of Pearl and 28th, with a sign made of cardboard and sharpie, simply saying 'I want my rights.' I have almost never been as afraid for my life as I have that day, more aware of the fact that I am uniquely vulnerable, of the fact that outside our snow globe campus walls America was gearing up for existential conflict. I ended that day with three shots of vodka and a Mike's Hard to forget the fact that I met a man who told me with a cheery grin that the pre-planned murder of 1.5 million of my people—Armenians—was a lie we made up. He said that I didn't deserve to exist, and a few weeks later amidst a landmark victory came the bone chilling knowledge that 7.4 million people somehow agreed with him.

I've felt, all my life, that I was never quite at home in Sri Lanka or Armenia, it meant that I was destined for my birthplace—the 'melting pot' of America. It's not out of the ordinary to be mixed race here, to be liberal, to be queer. I thought my distance from the traditional values of the places I'm from, my immersion in American media, culture, and slang meant that when the TSA officer waved me through, no questions asked, with only a "welcome home" I would feel it, I wouldn't be different, I wouldn't be foreign. That sense of my life finally being clicked into place, as if I'm where I'm supposed to be, but all I felt was existential emptiness. That gilded gold embossing on deep blue pleather is not enough to make me as American as I should be, as I thought I was.

I'll be returning soon, making my way to the home I've been missing while I've been away. I know it would've changed without me, as I've changed without it. My life has been moved by America, as my voice has changed to fit its accent, even if it's mild yet. I'll be returning, but I won't be staying long. I've become a restless wanderer, a commuter of distances of 24 or more hours.

America solidifies in my eye, now more than the myths and legends that drew me in, yet Sri Lanka drifts away into the realm of nostalgia and history. I'll pin it on my dorm wall—along with the fading polaroids of memories I'd like to keep close by, and then maybe I'll take the bus down to Denver to see some cats and drink apple cider.

See you soon.

With love,
Anoush