

“There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot.” —John Cage

10 days, 3 hours & 27 minutes

story & images by nikko snyder

I arrive at Suan Mokkh monastery with trepidation. I have come to meditate, in silence, with 100 other people for ten days. How I will cope with doing so is beyond the scope of my imagination—the most my mind can formulate in preparation is a worst-case scenario: leaping up in the middle of the meditation hall, screaming and pulling my hair, then running out and down the road toward the highway. Any other outcome will surely be a victory.

In my normal life noise is ubiquitous. Information flows continuously through my senses and into my brain, and then back out in my thoughts, speech, dreams, emotions, assumptions. It's as though the world and I are in constant, multilayered conversation. My alarm clock asks me to wake up. The morning kettle whistles me a lesson on the boiling point of water. The telephone says repeatedly that someone wants my attention. Grocery store magazines clamour for me to notice them in hushed but urgent tones. At the end of the day I close my eyes and my subconscious mind weaves colourful tales until the alarm clock asks me

to wake up again.

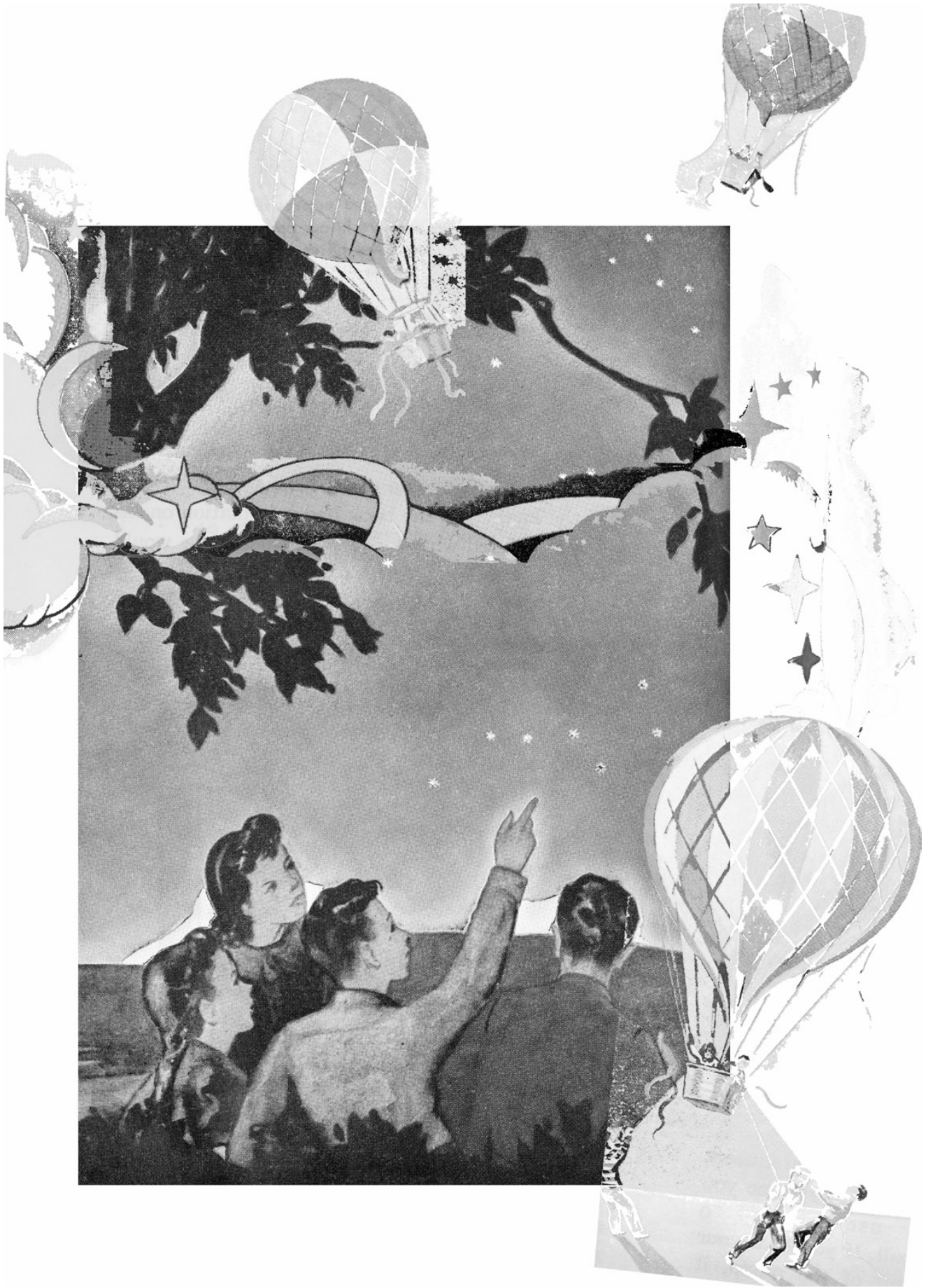
These stories never stop—if anything, they seem always to be coming faster and more furiously, filling my brain to saturation. Some of them I think I understand, while others are in languages I can't begin to comprehend. Many of the stories are overtly unhelpful and are woven directly into the fabric of my culture, chattering at me against my will about who and how I am supposed to be. Magazines, movies and television tell me that women should look one way, and because I don't, and because the stories are relentless and loud enough for nearly everyone on the planet to hear, they attach themselves (gradually but permanently) to the way I move through the world.

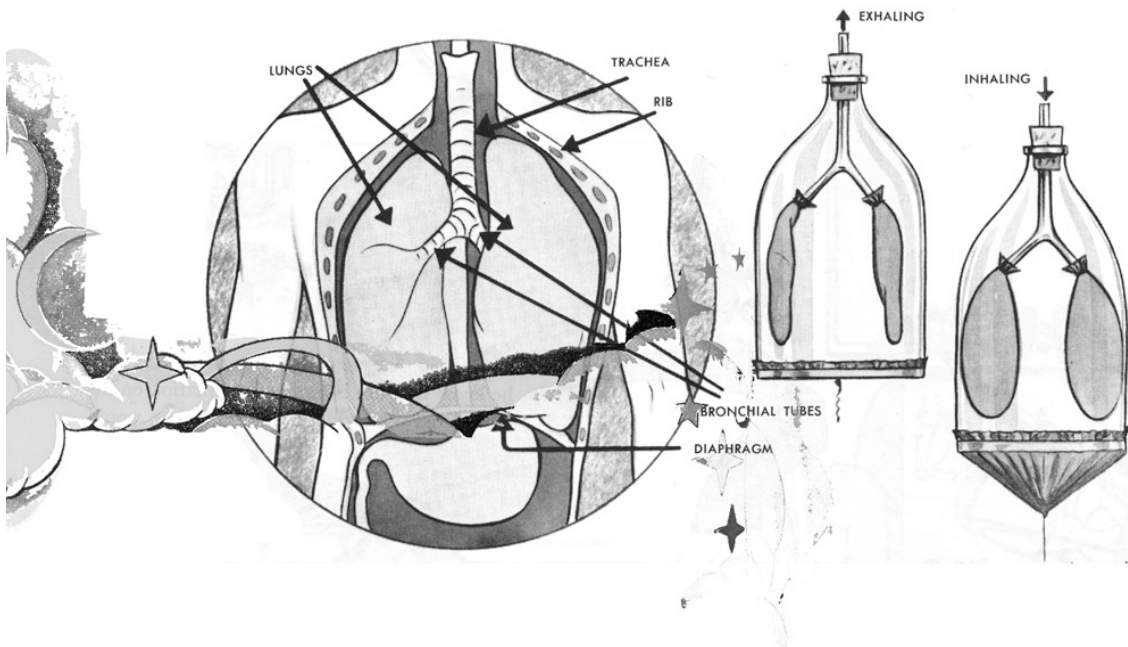
Although I have come to Asia with hopes of discovering new stories, as I travel alone through Thailand it is the same old noise that crowds the front of my mind, keeping me alert, on guard, vulnerable and exhausted. When I arrive at Suan Mokkh it is with trepidation, as well as relief. I do not know silence, but I want to. I want the stories to quiet down, even if just a little.

The transition is gentle. We are given a day to orient ourselves, take care of last-minute business and ask our countless questions. In the evening we meet for a few final moments of chatter and then, as though pushed off a diving board into a deep pool of water, our immersion in silence begins.

We stop speaking, men and women are separated, books and journals are relinquished. In addition, I hand over my mp3 player, clock and mirror. I take my remaining belongings to a tiny room with few distractions, and pass an interminable first night on a concrete bed with plywood mattress and wooden pillow (like what the Buddha slept on, I am assured). The chattering of my mind is deafening in the suddenly deep quiet.

From the next morning on, our communication is limited to an incoming flow of dharma: lectures on theory and practice by tiny ancient nuns and incomprehensible abbots. My communication with others and with myself is radically quieted, and the racket of the world's stories suddenly becomes audible. It takes me almost no time at all to realize I am suited to silence. Near





the beginning of the first day I become aware of a weight lifting as a lifetime of social conventions, constructions and resultant expectations begins to dissipate. I am surprised, not that the weight is disappearing, but that I had not been aware of its presence before.

I don't ponder myself in the mirror or in my journal, and I don't distract myself with books or music. Because I don't say anything at all, the energy normally spent coming up with new, nice or smart things to say is suddenly freed. I savour not only the lack of empty small talk but also (and surprisingly) the abandonment of the earnest reflection and conversation that make up my normal life. Most notably, I find myself on unplanned holiday from my gender. Women and men live in separate compounds, we eat on our own sides of the dining room, and we sit on our own sides of the meditation hall. I relish the unfamiliar spacious silence of gender dynamics temporarily suspended; the lightness of just, simply, being.

Oh, but how old habits die hard! As the days pass, we become increasingly adept at satisfying our desire for communication through nonverbal speech:

my neighbour flashes me a giant heartfelt smile as she hands me the serving spoon at lunch; two women double over in silent laughter across their laundry. We successfully transfer our chatter to what is soundless but not silent, and around day four our teachers instruct us to quiet our increasingly noisy body language. They remind us that eye contact and other nonverbal niceties are not helpful to the task at hand. Unsure how to proceed, people momentarily sulk at what feels like a reprimand. For my part, I feel another unconscious weight dissolve.

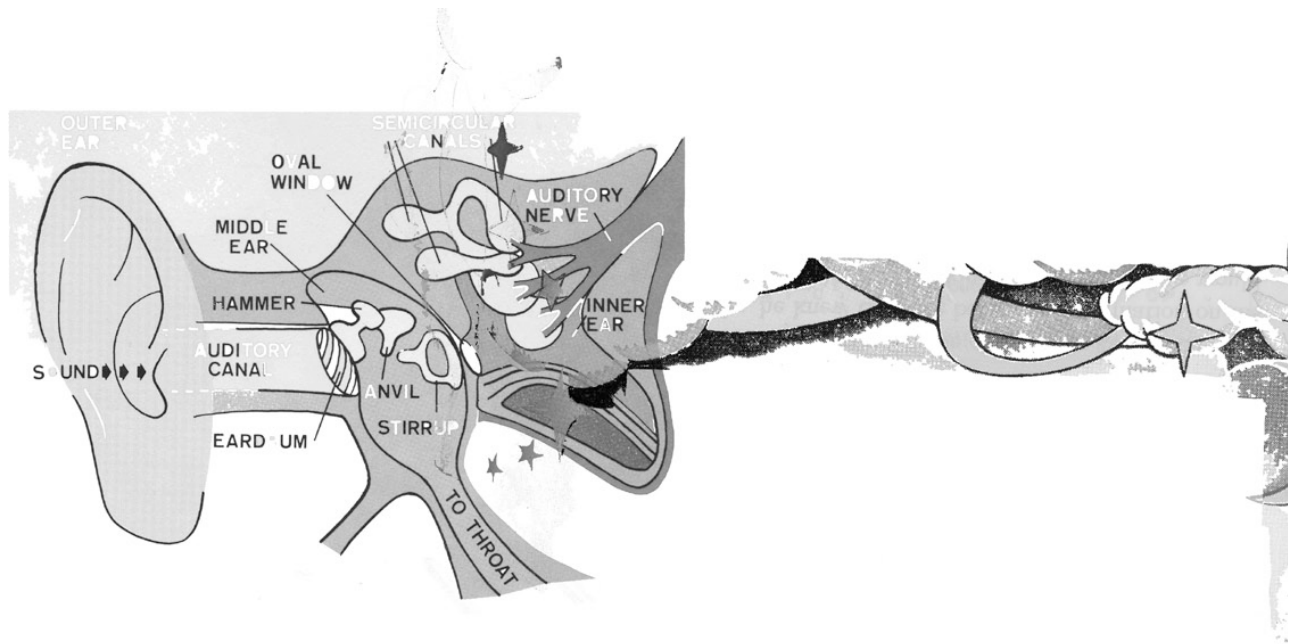
Gradually, I learn that at Suan Mokkh I have only one job, and that is to concentrate all of my energy on the task at hand. When I mop the floor all I do is mop the floor. When I walk all I do is walk, a million different parts of each foot experiencing a million pieces of sand as they touch down and come off the earth. And when I breathe all I do is breathe. Whatever it is that I set out to do, my job is to do only that thing, and I ask my mind (over and over and over, hundreds of times a day) to direct all of its attention to only that story.

When I become frustrated by the

process, soft-spoken monks remind me how silly it would be to chastise a baby that falls down when she is learning to walk. So instead of chastising my wandering mind, I simply breathe and breathe and breathe, walk and walk and walk, mop and mop and mop. Imperceptibly, silence deepens.

In the meditation hall, I sit erect, legs crossed, hands resting on knees. One foot is completely numb, the other nearly there. The feeling in my right hip has been gone for nearly a week. My back aches and my forehead itches. I swallow and the sound reverberates loudly through space. To my right someone shifts position, their rustling interminable. A frog croaks rhythmically in the distance and I fixate on the sound—I cannot *not* breathe in time to it. My mind tells me to ignore it. My mind asks what time it is.

Suddenly I notice the din that has drowned out the one story I am trying to listen to and have forgotten. Now I remember the moment's singular objective and recall my breath from amidst the noise. I listen hard as oxygen sears the insides of my nostrils, follows my trachea and fills my lungs, the breath



a never-ending figure eight as carbon dioxide retraces the oxygen's steps. I breathe in again and my nostrils feel nearly raw. It occurs to me that I may never have breathed before this precise moment. Then I hear the frog croak, and my mind asks what time it is.

After ten days of silence my world is not a silent place. My physical environment still buzzes with activity, and thoughts still race laps around my mind. Once the noise diminishes it becomes evident that even the deepest quiet is never actually silent, and I am reminded of John Cage in his anechoic chamber, expecting total silence and instead hearing two unexpected sounds: "one high, my nervous system in operation, one low, my blood in circulation." For me it is air passing through nostrils, throat closing to swallow, fidgeting neighbours, metronomic amphibians and (most blaring of all) the clamour of my own mind.

What is not quiet has become ear-splittingly loud—carved into my consciousness and magnified, deafening in its clarity. And yet, though many noisy stories remain, there are vastly fewer now. I only experience this fully when,

on day eleven, we finally break the silence. Women and men gather round for tea and photo opps, and a friendly whirr descends as we compare experiences and catch up on missed social chatter.

I am curious about the people that have floated by me for the last ten days, but I am also reluctant to leave the quiet behind, and find I have little to say. Words stick on my tongue as though very unnecessary, and I feel slightly awkward as though not entirely convinced that who I am is quite enough. I regret the reemergence of doubt. I leave Suan Mokkh as I arrived, with trepidation.

Later, on the overnight train and then in cacophonous early morning Bangkok, I delight in the final hours of my newly spacious mind as it experiences the world's assault on my senses. Dense, dirty air hits my face as I step off the train; technicolour produce leaps off the market stalls; coffee explodes bitter-sweet on my tongue. With every passing moment I feel my mind filling back up with the countless competing stories that the world is intent on telling me. I know it is only a matter of time before

the space fills up completely.

Inevitably, it has. The noisy stories have returned, chattering ceaseless demands of submission to the conventions of my culture. I catch myself wishing I was more successful or more desirable, rather than simply doing the job of just being. Most days I take for granted the renewed weights of gender and culture that bear down, the experience of weightless quiet now nothing more than a distant dream.

And yet someplace deep the experience of silence remains etched into my consciousness. If I focus all my energy on the task, I can still catch glimpses of that simplest but most elusive story—the singular, fleeting silence of mop on floor, foot on earth, breath in body. ☸

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