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## Journey into the Self: Essays on Biculturalism

Heidi Moe Graviet

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Honors Thesis

JOURNEY INTO THE INTERIOR: ESSAYS ON BICULTURALISM

By  
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Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment  
of graduation requirements for University Honors

English Department  
Brigham Young University  
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## ABSTRACT

### JOURNEY INTO THE INTERIOR: ESSAYS ON BICULTURALISM

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This thesis examines what it means to exist as a bicultural being and how one approaches creating and negotiating a multicultural identity in terms of names, war, religion, belonging, and loss. In *Narrow Road to the Interior*, Matsuo Bashō embarks upon a journey of transcendence and self-discovery into the interior regions of Japan. In doing so, he establishes a Japanese writing tradition that centers around introspective journey-taking and writing oneself into truth and being. This thesis examines, participates in, and expands upon this writing tradition as it follows one Japanese American woman's attempts to selfhood. Ultimately, it proposes the idea of wholeness through fragmented identity, supporting the theory that self-creation never concludes and resists the resolution of a blended being.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## Introduction

*Bashō rose long before dawn, but even at such an early hour, he knew the day would grow rosy bright...He had long dreamed of crossing the Shirakawa Barrier into the mountainous heartlands of northern Honshu, the country called Oku—“the interior”—lying immediately to the north of the city of Sendai. He patched his old cotton trousers and repaired his straw hat. He placed his old thatched-roof hut in another’s care and moved several hundred feet down the road to the home of his disciple-patron, Mr. Sampu, making final preparations before embarkation (Hamill 9).*

When I originally began this project, this is exactly what I had planned to do—follow in the footsteps of Matsuo Bashō in the sacred Japanese writing tradition of traveling through the countryside and writing down whatever the land inspired within me. I planned to travel the ancient road from Magome to Tsumago, meditate in the Hiroshima Peace Park, and make a pilgrimage to the standing ruins of my great-great-grandfather’s house. Through all these things, I hoped to come to an understanding of my own self—what it means to be bicultural, what it means to be me. Instead, due to extenuating circumstances, I ended up taking a journey of story and memory through interviews with my relatives and introspective journeys into my experiences. I began writing a piece that served as a space where I could negotiate different aspects of bicultural selfhood and unfold various aspects of my multi-faceted identity. Though I was not able to take part in Bashō’s writing tradition in person, my work is a result of my attempt to do so in spirit. It represents an authentic attempt to craft my own personhood by putting myself in dialogue with the ancients.

In this critical introduction, I will discuss how my project reflects the formal tradition of Matsuo Bashō and Kamo-no-Chomei in form and purpose while participating in and adding to the critical and aesthetic traditions of Asian American writers such as Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Amy Tan, and Maxine Hong Kingston.

As I began wrestling with identity and the literary form that would best facilitate my journey, I realized that identity is fragmented. I came to find that the things that constituted my self were disconnected feelings, episodes, and memories that were strung through with the common thread of me. Thus, as I began to write, my piece naturally found shape in a series of fragments interspersed with both prose and poetry. In the course of my research, I found that this form was the very same chosen by Matsuo Bashō and Kamo-no-Chomei to house their own meditations and journeys into the self. In his own work, Bashō sought a literary form that was a “natural outgrowth of being Bashō, of living in this world, of making the journey itself one’s home” (Hamill 21). To this end, he reinvented the form of *haibun*, which combines prose passages with *haiku* (11). According to recent scholarship, Bashō found “within the study of writing itself a way to set his own life in order” (15). As my own intent was similar in its attempt to “set my life in order,” I found that Bashō’s form constituted a natural and appropriate fit for the purposes of my work and that I was naturally inclined to write in a similar fashion. The form seemed to arise from writing within this tradition and felt specially suited for this type of introspective task. Thus, my own piece echoes *haibun* in its constitution of prose passages along with occasional brief poetic pieces that interrupt the flow with play of form. Although the fragments fit together in a thematic mosaic for each essay, each individual fragment serves as an end in and of itself, also echoing Bashō’s self-contained

fragments in that “Each step is the first step, each step the last” (23). In its framework as a pieced *haibun* lyric meditation, my work pays tribute to the *haibun* and travel journal heritage while moving beyond traditional schemes in terms of topic, play, and formatting.

The prose of “Journey into the Interior” also takes part in the travel journal tradition in its poetic tendencies, especially in its echoing of Chomei’s writing. In their introduction to *Hojoki: Visions of a Torn World*, Moriguchi and Jenkins note, “There can be no question as to the essentially poetic intent of *Hojoki*. From the first lines, we are clearly aware of an enhancement of language that carries its subject in a crafted, rhythmic manner” (15). In the first lines of “On Names” as well, we see an “enhancement of language” and institution of rhythm in dialogue that carries its own cadence, eliciting an almost melodic or rhythmic charge with its back-and-forth swing and even tempo. Always on the edge of poetry with its lyrical quality, the piece as a whole occasionally bursts into poetry, as seen in a short poetic offering in “On Religion.”

*Quiet river, quiet presence.*

*Their spirits float through and touch us.*

*The girl can't see or touch them*

*But she can't deny they're there* (Graviet 21).

Thus, “Journey into the Interior,” like *Hojoki*, seems to confess “essentially poetic intent,” hitting the mark between poetry and prose, melody and verse.

“Journey into the Interior” also speaks to Japanese philosophy of truth in its underlying subscription to the Zen idea of “truth articulated in spontaneous response,” a theory that undergirded Bashō’s *haikus* (Hamill 21). In my own research and meditations

upon my experiences surrounding naming, war, religion, belonging, and loss, I found that I was not able to come to many answers that I was capable of articulating. My process relied heavily upon this Zen ideal, finding answers through words and ideas that would occasionally come somewhat unconsciously through my pen. In doing so, I was able to access previously inaccessible truths through spontaneity, a method and belief practiced by Bashō and his followers (21). This idea, the idea that we can produce things that we do not know—or more precisely, things we do not *know* that we know, informed my own journey and helped me to realize the power of spontaneity as a legitimate and time-honored method for accessing truth and a foundational element in the work of traditional Japanese authors.

In my second essay, “On War,” I seek to implement the principle of *wabi*, an “elegant simplicity tinged with *sabi*, an undertone of ‘aleness’” (Hamill 36). For Bashō, *sabi* also included the concepts of *yugen* and *kokoro*, “aesthetic feeling *not explicitly expressed*” (or “ghostly qualities”), and true sincerity (36, 18). While I work to adhere to these principles throughout the entirety of my writing (indeed, they are characteristic not only of Bashō, but traditional Japanese writing in general), “On War” represents a direct attempt to simplicity and bringing my audience into my aleness as I implement introspective fragments on acute isolation, fear, and transcendence. These are given by way of simple descriptions of moments in a museum, using simple language. I implement “ghostly qualities” in my reflection on haunting memories that almost feel contemporaneous through my use of tense and memory superimposition. In this essay, I uncover some of my deepest pains concerning bicultural identity, especially in terms of

familial relationships, betrayal, and placelessness, using this space to participate in Bashō's legacy of *wabi* as clearly as I can.

My final essay, "On Loss," demonstrates adherence to the Japanese principle of *aware*, (which originally referred to "emotion initiated by engagement of the senses"), in the emotions that it evokes by a simple touching of places and things in memory (Hamill 16). For Bashō specifically, *aware* describes the insight that allows him to "perceive a natural poignancy in the beauty of temporal things" (16). Similarly, in my essay, the simple smell of the *tatami* mat turns the key to a world of questions and emotions concerning bicultural ethics, and the memory of laundry stirs the feeling of my own longing to be connected to my grandmother as I wander, figuratively, through my grandmother's house. *Aware* allows me to interact with ordinary things in echo of the way that Bashō does, permitting me to perceive a deeper value in them and undertake a similar sensory journey. However, while Bashō leaves the moral of his wanderings subtle and largely unwritten, (often employing the concept, "things are as they are," as the concluding sentiment), I move beyond his subtlety by addressing the moral directly, consequently employing my *aware* to bear a more fully articulated lesson. I end "On Loss" with a *direct* address of how the human condition requires a cycle of transience as the price that we pay to be human, thus departing from Bashō's tradition while participating in it. In doing so, I give voice to what Bashō suggests through literary aftertaste and metaphor, expanding upon his form and writing philosophy.

In addition to taking part in a dialogue with ancient writers and Japanese writing tradition, "Journey into the Interior" participates in the tradition of female Asian American writers who have resisted resolution in their writing and come to a unification

of self that at once submits to collaboration of the various fragmented parts of the self and resists unification in full. In “Treading the Narrative Way,” Mary Stange claims that “autobiography has always aimed toward the articulation of a unified ‘image’ or ‘metaphor’ of self” (15). In works such as Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*, Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*, and Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, such efforts to unified articulation can be seen in the ways in which Cha seamlessly weaves multiple forms into perfect cohesion, Tan superimposes mother and daughter narratives and identities onto one another, and Hong perfectly blends myth and reality to the point that the two cannot be told apart (Kingston 202). However, these authors also complicate Stange’s claim by emphasizing the power of maintaining different, fragmented parts of self—especially Maxine Hong Kingston.

In her scholarship of Kingston’s work, Nelly Mok offers the following commentary:

“Cultural hybridity depends on the perception of cultural as a sphere—instead of an invariable entity—which necessarily undergoes continuous mutations, a space for creative negotiation and contestation wherein cultural traditions and folklore can be reinterpreted, retold, and rewritten through the prism of the individual’s life experiences and journey” (188).

In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston uses her writing as a space in which she can negotiate her own identity by retelling her cultural stories in her own way—in an Asian-American way. To strike an understanding between her selves, she answers a pull to reach back into her cultural narratives and make them her own in the retelling of them. However, while there is one “space,” there are multiple selves battling with “no-name

woman,” mother, aunt, and others. Despite her blending of myth and reality, Kingston resists unifying these selves; she *cannot* blend her American and Asian selves and does not attempt to do so. Instead, she chooses to bring them into conversation with one another. In doing so, she emphasizes the value of keeping selves separate, but collaborative, when creating a multicultural identity. Imagination also becomes crucial as (at certain times) the only possible bridge between selves. In Kingston’s particular case, imagined ancestry is “the only avenue available for connecting between cultures” (Borman 91). My own ancestral section, “On Ancestors,” involves an imagining of my great-great-grandmother, a woman I never knew. Like Kingston’s imaginative writing, it serves as an attempt to reclaim my own past.

In “On Names,” in particular, I support the creation of a new self that exists between two selves—Heidi and Moe—adding to the tradition of these Asian American women writers. While several lines of the piece point to creating a whole, my “dueling selves” ultimately never bend to one another. While this might initially appear a unified metaphor, the space seems to be one of continued dualism as the selves collaborate but then relapse into their normal rhythms. While a sort of unity is momentarily formed, the tension between irreconcilable selves remains, the image suggesting that the selves retain their individuality and selfhood. In “Journey into the Interior” as a whole, I demonstrate an autobiography that aims toward the articulation of the unified self that is posited in difference—in disunity between selves. I acknowledge the impossibility of perfect reconciliation as I instead support the creation of a new self that threads through multiple selves while retaining all of them.



My own work resists resolution—an important characteristic of multicultural life writing that can be found in the works of the aforementioned authors. In my piece, I come to an understanding that I realize is not *the* understanding or resolution of self, just another step in self-actualization and cultural negotiation. In this way, my writing ascribes to Nelly Mok's ideal that,

“Cultural hybridity therefore implies the subject's active role in his/her relationship to the Other's culture—the one of the dominant group and/or that of ancestors—stressing its creative potential as it is likely to give birth to a new, multivalent identity, which, far from being fixed, is continuously redefined, engaged in constant “hybridization”” (188).

My piece, rather than reflecting a narrative, represents moving and living pieces of self that are continuously reshaping themselves. Each fragment and passage builds on the previous one with new direction, resisting a linear line of progress.

In multicultural narratives, myth and reality often serve as important tools to navigate and reshape one's cultural story and personal identity narrative. In Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club*, Tan seamlessly blends reality and myth, employing a “self conscious repetition and revision of...myth” to give rise to identity and reshape story (Romagnolo 94). In “‘The way I heard it was...’: Myth, Memory, and Autobiography in *Storyteller* and *The Woman Warrior*,” Catherine Lappas claims that “Kingston create[s] a third culture that *mixes* “reality and myth” (life and fiction) cross-culturally, until the reader begins to recognize all reality as a mythical construction” (58). In “Journey into the Interior,” I also use myth and reality to attend to cultural movement, definition, and multi-faceted identity. However, instead of masterfully making each element

indistinguishable as Tan and Kingston do, I complicate the combination by working to keep reality and myth, to an extent, separate from one another. I work to ensure that each voice can be more easily distinguished as a voice. This formal choice allows me to take a more analytic, introspective approach to my autobiography and more fully institute myself as a main voice and my self as a main self, grounding my use of memoir.

Shari Benstock claims of women's autobiography that "the self that would reside at the center of the text is decentered—and often is absent altogether" (20). Kingston seems demonstrative of this in the ways in which the "I" in *The Woman Warrior* is decentered by her being part myth and part reality in indistinguishable ways, causing the "I" to be ever-present throughout the autobiography in non-overt ways. To more fully instantiate my "I," I attempt to deliberately separate and distinguish myth and reality in my piece by way of line breaks, italics, and formatting change. I also attempt to integrate more analysis of the self, changing the balance of myth and reality to reflect an autobiography that moves from introspection to story as an emphasizing factor and then back again instead of moving from story to introspection. Rather than constructing an identity through "polyphonic engagement with the world" as Lappas remarks of Kingston, I attempt to firmly establish an "I" from the very beginning and then complicate her—taking her apart, and then piecing her back together (57).

Ultimately, while "Journey into the Interior" does present a unified self of sorts in its collage of forms and cultural pieces that work together to articulate my self as one entity, it complicates the idea of the unified self through its disjointed breaking of forms and features, suggesting the idea of a self that is unified in disunity. With this piece, I hope to present the idea that one can be a whole person while simultaneously being

caught between multiple things—one does not have to blend oneself in order to experience wholeness, or attempt to articulate oneself as whole at the end of an autobiographical journey. I can be a fragmented “me” and still be “me”—in fact, that may be the only way to fully inhabit my self.

It is said that Matsuo Bashō often told his students, “Do not simply follow in the footsteps of the ancients; seek what they sought” (Hamill 37-38). If anything, this piece is just such an attempt—to seek what the ancients sought; an understanding, a transcendence, ultimately, an actualization of self. It is an attempt to put myself into dialogue with the ancient writers and seek the resolution and enlightenment they were after in hopes of catching a glimpse of what they were looking for; something that might allow me access to an inner wisdom that would teach me how to be me.

## *On Names*

My name is Moe.

People are often confused when they meet me, and understandably so.

“I’m Moe.”

“What?”

“Mo-eh.”

(pause)

“Oh, like the MOA Museum? That’s cool!” “What is that?” “What is that from?” “Does it mean anything?” “Are you Chinese?” “You are so unique!” “I love that you are ethnically ambiguous!” “Sounds like Moana. Can I call you Moana?”

Yes, you can call me Moana because it's cute. Or momo, because that means peaches. And because I know that saying my name is hard and weird, like trying to fit a mango in your mouth. I laugh about it now. But if you call me Moana, you will never know my legends or my stories. You will never feel the ancient magic of sliding from one vowel to the next, of uttering a name that invokes the old wisdom and learning of centuries. You might never know me.

My name is spring buds and young trees. I can trace it on my palm. *Kamuri*, or crown and grass, with *tsuki*, moon—Moe.

My older sister's name is Yuki, noble first child. Just under me is Mika, bright summer, then Emi, laughing-smiling, and Aya, sparkling child.

These are our middle names. We all have American first names, though, because my Japanese mother thought her American children would need American names. She named me Heidi, after Heidi of the Alps. When I was young, I occasionally responded to Heidi at school. That was the name on the school roll. But my mother soon found that she couldn't easily pronounce our American names and started calling us by our middle names, in her native tongue. So I quickly grew out of Heidi. She became a stranger to me. And when a substitute teacher would call out "Heidi" on the roll, I would sometimes forget that Heidi meant me for a moment. All of my friends would chime out, "She goes by Moe!" "What?" "Mo-Eh!" And I'd sit straight in my seat and smile the smile of a child who's been found, feeling settled again.

I sometimes wonder if a white version of me is running around on the Alps somewhere—Heidi of the Alps, drinking fresh milk in the highlands of Switzerland. She calls me Moe, I call myself Moe. We're friends—but we know we're not the same.

*Moe is Japanese. She is elegant, and she walks beautifully. She wears her name like a crown—a princess of the Motherland, and a herald of spring. She eats with chopsticks. And she is resilient, quietly determined, and wise. She does what needs to be done, what the situation calls for. She laughs quietly, always covers her mouth, and eats rice. Waits to speak. Afraid of the dark. She loves philosophy and reading. Midnight hair. Olive skin. Almond eyes. Moe. Daughter of spring.*

*Heidi is Caucasian. She is hardy, and she loves hiking. She keeps "Moe" locked up like a secret. She only eats with forks. And she is brave, stubborn, and clever. She acts boldly, earnestly. She laughs loudly, doesn't cover her mouth, and eats bread. Never afraid to speak. Never afraid of the dark. She doesn't bother with philosophy. Brown hair. Pale skin. Freckles. Heidi. Daughter of the Alps.*

From my earliest years, Heidi and Moe become symbols of the increasing confusion I feel surrounding my bicultural identity. And proof that I can't bring my two selves together. In America, I realize I am the Asian girl. The representation. The one who keeps the class diverse. But I talk American. I walk American. I stand American. I shout

American, laugh American. And yet, I catch myself folding my hands neatly in class, bowing slightly when I meet people, covering my mouth when I speak, employing the passive Japanese glass face when I do not want others to know how I feel.

I am the girl who brings strange, smelly food to school in a little bento box. All the kids stare. I am the girl who gets straight As, who can't have playdates during the week, who practices math over the summer and attends summer festivals in bright kimono, watching fireworks burst over the sky. I color every room I walk into—ethnically ambiguous. Different. American, but not quite. This girl is not quite one of us. She is from somewhere else.

When I go to Japan, I feel like even more of a foreigner than I do in America. I find that I am simultaneously an insider and an outsider—which is almost worse. I am thoroughly western, defiantly so, with tan skin and American freckles sprinkled across my face. Mom tells me that my freckles are beautiful, that people stare at me because they want them. No one has freckles in Japan.

Grandmother takes me around to meet all of her friends. They delight, how beautiful she is! How big her eyes are! Laughing, smiling. A little dark with her tan? But still. I bow to thank them, and then attempt to express my thanks, but my words come out jumbled and unpressed. They raise their eyebrows.

I bow Japanese. I smile Japanese. I eat Japanese, defer Japanese. But I find that I can't help being overeager, over-earnest, interjecting to share an opinion, telling my Baba "I love you," wearing my hair differently from my Japanese classmates in what I now understand was a small resistance to the conformity that made us Japanese.

*Be loud! Be quiet. Be hardened! Be soft. Stand up for yourself! Accept your failings. Be an individual! Conform to others. Be bold! Be humble. Wear your heart! Hide your feelings. Tell your teacher you're struggling! Don't show weakness. Tell your sister what she did wrong! Let others learn their own lessons. Get involved in the situation! Be okay with whatever happens. Interfere! Let it go. Is there an ethics of culture? What is the "right" choice? It depends on who's speaking. Heidi or Moe. America or Japan. How do we do this? How do we choose, day to day? Moment to moment? How do we live?*

I look at myself in the mirror. Half my mom, half my dad. Half America, half Japan. Heidi and Moe. Incomplete.

I realized from a young age that life was not going to be simple. None of it was ever going to be simple, for any of us. I've come to understand that we are made of pieces we do not always have direct access to, cannot always understand. We are walking mixes, with no written rules or codes of ethics for what we owe to different parts of ourselves. Fragmented identities trying to fill one existence. Heidi and Moe are two different worlds, two different stories. Most of the time, it will be impossible to be *Heidi Moe Graviet*—to be me.

Once in a while, though, magic happens.

For my last school project, my inner conflict subconsciously becomes my source for intense creativity. I write and direct a musical about a family who moves from the East to make their home in a small town in the Old West. The protagonist, an open-minded son, acts as a liaison between East and West as the two cultures collide in an interracial marriage between him and an American girl. My mother composes the music, Old West meets Japanese flair, and the script incorporates Eastern tradition and humor with Western custom. Imperial golds and reds meet the calm of cornflower blue and the greens of grassy fields in a vibrant collaged set. *The best play we've ever seen Emmett do. How did you come up with that? Who thought of this? Brilliant.* As I sit in the front row, I almost feel my two worlds come together in an entirely unexpected moment of transcendence through art; the creation of something extraordinary, completely original and dynamic; something neither cultural perspective on its own could reach. I feel like I'm balancing on the line where Moe and Heidi meet. The moment is brief—it's only a second before I slip back into the tension of my back and forth. But I witness it. I witness me.

## On War

I open the door one night to my mother sitting on the carpet watching a Japanese animated film about WWII. She's somber, sorrowful, and soft—glowing embers in place of her tiger mom fire. Quiet, vulnerable in the darkness. Unnerved, I lean into her shoulder and hold her arm, trying to give her my child strength, trying to reach her wherever she is. *It's a brother and sister after the bombs*, she explains. We watch as an orphaned boy and his three-year-old sister escape the ruins of their town and try to make it in the countryside, surviving on grass and frogs. I watch with delight as they spend their days hunting frogs and swimming, seemingly free, a bizarre paradise in the middle of a hellish situation. Then I watch as they slowly starve, and Seita tries to save Setsuko from malnourishment by first carrying her on his back to beg and then leaving her to rest while he scrounges for food. I think of my own two-year-old sister. I get up to leave; I can't watch anymore. But my mother gives me a look that holds me in place. *You need to watch. This is your history, too.* So I stay. For her? For our ancestors? For someone. Even as a child, some deeper part of me knows that I owe it. I sit back and watch in horror as Seita returns to their cave dwelling one day to find Setsuko dead. My child heart breaks. And an intense biracial conflict about WWII begins. I start to realize that I really don't know how to feel, how to think, about what *my* people, Americans, did to *my* people, Japanese, and vice versa—how to sort through feelings of pain and confusion that seem to come from nowhere. I don't know how to live with the blood of both nations in my veins.

My mother doesn't feel conflicted about the war. Neither do my younger sisters. Mika only felt annoyed when Kyle Harris called her a yellow-bellied something in fourth grade. And blamed her for Pearl Harbor.

But Yuki and I feel conflicted. We sense the battle raging inside and two opposing faces in the mirror. We feel acutely our combined blood of the oppressed and the oppressors, the conquerors and the conquered.

We are the bombers and the ones who suffered from it, the ones who lived in terror in mountain caves while fires turned our cities to ash. We are the American heroes and the Japanese girls assaulted by them. We are the peacekeepers, the guardians, the power country defending land and liberty and emerging triumphant to gallantly offer candy to small Asian children. But we are also the small children picking up this candy, the first food we've had in days, wondering where our parents are.

The emperor of Japan never really admitted defeat. Up until the very end, the entire Japanese government had kept the people in the dark about the actuality of their situation. *We are winning*, they would say. *Keep fighting for the noble emperor.* When the allies sent an agreement, the emperor and his cabinet responded diplomatically that they would accept the proposed provisions for the “good of the empire.”

There was no hint of the reality. The reality was that the emperor was not even living a royal life anymore. He had been relegated to a small, hot bunker in the palace.



The people were starving. Japan was entirely exhausted, depleted of resources—could *not* go on. But they never surrendered.

When I ask my Baba about her thoughts on the emperor and the war as a teenager, she nods her head and tells us girls that it was the government, not the people, who had wanted the fight. The government was bad. And the people believed them. They had tricked the people and gotten them into the war. And America was good. *If America had not dropped the bombs, we would have kept fighting. We would never have given up.* But by the way she says “we,” I suddenly realize with a start that she isn’t including us. She’s speaking of her own Japanese people. And she’s trying to compliment us, her half-Japanese granddaughters, the “good Americans.”

When I imagine the war, I switch sides depending on what context I’m in. But “we” and “us” have lost all definition for me here. Sometimes I’m them, sometimes I’m us, and sometimes them is America and us is Japan and sometimes them is Japan and us is America. What they did to us. What we did to them. Our loss, their victory, we never surrendered, they never surrendered. Inside, the war goes on—complicated, painful, blurry, with no clear sign of definition. I don’t know what to think. I let the pieces lie, until they are triggered again in some conversation, some context, and then I’m confused again.

Ten years after watching *Grave of the Fireflies*, I see the faces of soldiers from both sides at the WWII museum in Chiran. The place where the suicide bombers were trained and the station they departed from with only enough gas for a one-way trip. I see one black and white shot of Japanese pilots, standing huddled together in a wooden bunker, raising small cups. In the caption below, I read about these *kamikaze* pilots, “God’s wind” warriors, who would fly their planes directly into the sides of US ships hoping to sink them. The night before, they would barely get any sleep. In the morning, they would have a ceremony and drink warm *sake*. And then take off, with the priest’s blessing. They look so young, these soldiers. I search their eyes for any sign of fear—what were they thinking, feeling? Was this bravery or insanity? One soldier looks particularly young. Bald head, tan skin, short and thin. He appears scared. But resolute. *For emperor and for country.* And for the family he has left behind. After all, it’s an honor—an extraordinary honor—to die for Japan. Part of me instinctively feels a deeply rooted respect for his courage, patriotism, and sacrifice. I *want* him to sink the ships—American ships. I want his efforts to be worth it. But another part of me is shocked at my instincts and feels revolted, sick at his blind loyalty and suicide bombing efforts to sink the ships that come from the place where I was born.

And then I wonder if I would have cheered from the ship deck, when we shot his plane down, or if I would have shouted when our comrade hit the hull of the American battleship right on, a trail of smoke against a blazing horizon. It’s a few seconds before I realize I don’t know. I don’t *want* to know.

My mother joins me at one of the plaques and whispers in my ear, pointing to the diagram, *We would try to hit the ships right here, to sink them.* The next picture shows a young family. *This woman, after her husband flew off, took her two children to a creek and drowned them and herself in it. Isn't it sad?* A few others like her did “dishonorable” things, did not understand the privilege. Or maybe they actually understood what was going on.

I'm suddenly overwhelmingly nauseous as images of small, drowned children and then images of hopelessly starving Seita and Setsuko flash across my mind. I make my way outside to a small courtyard with incense burning in a stone holder, incense for all of the dead and their families. Everyone who was lost. Leaning against the rough cement altar for a moment, I close my eyes and dip into our collective pain. Our collective loss. It's a pool—a deep, dark, lonely pool that calls. Its vastness grips me. I don't know if I have the right to feel it as a half, as a partial “enemy,” but I do. So many lives—young men crushed in the dark hulls of ships and exploded planes, sailors drowning in the warm waters of the Pacific, desperate mothers and scared, innocent children; children who were killed, given away, who lived in caves. Children just like my own grandmother.

My grandmother was born during WWII when bombs were a constant threat to her coastal city. Her mother died soon after giving birth. As the city was no place for a single father to raise a large family and a brand-new baby, my great-grandfather made the hard decision to adopt my grandmother out to a family in the country who could raise her. When her oldest sister Yumiko, then a high school student, returned home to find my grandmother missing, she confronted my great-grandfather, exclaiming, “How could you give Hisako away? She is family!” Yumiko walked miles out into the country to retrieve my grandmother and then spent the next four years of her life raising her, walking door to door daily to beg for milk to feed her. When the bombs rained down, my Baba's city burned to the ground while she watched, just a child, from the caves where all the villagers were hiding.

I lean against the altar and see her—my Baba as a small toddler scrounging for food in caves. Just a girl. I wonder if the reason I felt a duty to witness Seito and Setsuko's story as a child was because I somehow knew that in a way, their story was ours; was mine.

I remember Baba's own words from a few days earlier. *It had to be done, she says. They had to drop the bombs. I think it was ultimately a good thing. It had to happen. Shouganai.* She looks away and nods briskly, then wipes the table with a soft white cloth. I look at her incredulously. How can she say that so casually about the atomic bombs that wiped out two cities and caused such devastating destruction to our people? How can she think that? But then I realize she's blocking herself from the pain of it. It's too complex, too painful to understand. It cannot be understood. Best leave it be.

I stand in the entryway of the Chiran Peace Museum feeling weighed down with the deaths and the stories of 1,096 dead men. And the heaviness, the breathtaking heaviness of my own confusion. I see a painting to the left of the doorway. My father and sister gaze for a minute or two and move toward the door, but I can't move. My feet resist me. Something familiar in my heart demands that I stay, that I witness. A young Japanese pilot hangs suspended in the sky with his head on his chest, flag armband hanging in shreds from his unconscious body, the fire and debris of his broken plane raining down around him. Falling from the sky. I can almost hear the hiss, the wind whipping, the black waves lapping below. Around his body are two arms of a translucent, beautiful Japanese maiden with long black hair, lifting his body to heaven. Her face is full of calm and pity, vaguely reminding me of the benevolent look I see on the face of the beloved Mary in every rendering. But there is a deeper sorrow—and a sadder song.

I don't know why I can't move, or why I can't stop staring. Maybe it's because in this painting I see something like grace. Something like redemption. Some glimmer that there is a higher hope, a greater presence than all this madness. My face is hot as I watch the angel pulling, lifting, endeavoring toward the white clouds with the fallen soldier. My brother. My enemy. Without realizing it, I feel myself reaching for her with something like a prayer. *Please help him—us—help us all.* Then I turn and leave.

## On Religion

*The gong sounds. I approach the shrine slowly, incense between my pointer and thumb, blush on my childhood cheeks. With clumsy hands I place my offering in the holder. I clap and bow, not knowing what to say or think, not knowing whether my bow itself will be noted as a blasphemous blight on my young, newly formed Christian convictions. I sweat lightly, trying to keep my mind blank. White canvas, no paint, just a Christian girl with Japanese traditions. But deep down, I feel a yearning—a longing to be a part of this, to belong to it. Something ancient pulls.*

When I ask my mother about her beliefs, she says she believes in both Christianity and Shintoism. She's visited the temple and her ancestors' graves since childhood. When she's in Japan at the temples now, she asks our ancestors for help and guidance. And to watch over our family. "If you can ask someone for blessings, you should! The more the merrier!" Then she clarifies that she actively practices Christianity, but practices other traditions more for culture than religion. They're just a part of her. She says this all matter-of-factly, with a laugh. She doesn't feel conflicted—for her, these belief systems are not at odds. They fit hand in hand.

My dad says he's Christian, but he understands my mother's traditions. He participates in Buddhist and Shinto religious rites as culture—in his mind, "worshipping ancestors" is just respecting and communicating.

My dad sometimes talks to his dead father, "Just in case he can hear me" he says. "The first time I went to the *butsudan* and lit the incense, I felt uncomfortable because we're not supposed to worship anything but God, and they called it worship. But I can change my purpose. Anything we can do to unify cultures, we should." He sounds resolute. In his mind, these rites fit perfectly into little boxes with no overlap. He's tailored them to fit his frame. They don't have relationships like they do in my mother's mind. They respect each other's space.

When I ask Yuki, she becomes thoughtful, ponderous. She thinks she has Eastern religious tendencies. *I believe in oneness. That we all belong to each other. And that it's impossible to operate in this world without Karma. I don't ever find God in a church. Sometimes I feel His presence, but I don't find Him there.*

*Eastern practice feels spiritual, mystical, with a sense of awareness and connectedness. There are consequences for actions because you're connected to others. Western, on the other hand, feels forceful—centered around willpower, self control, hardened lines of being. If you do something, it's because you're going to get punished—not because you're part of this world.*

I sense the longing in her voice—and a rift she carries from beliefs and yearnings she can't bring together. The inner conflict that smolders.

In our phone conversation, Baba says she doesn't know what she believes. *I go to the gravesites, I go to the temples. I went to a Catholic church to play when I was little. We went to play the organ every Christmas. I don't know what I believe. I'm not a believer, but I pray once in a while. I don't know if the person I pray to is the Indian or Christian god. I pray to the zenno God—the one who is above everything. I make onegais to my obachan. "Please watch over Takako and Mutsuko's houses."*

Baba says she is not a spiritual person. But she also believes she inherited her mother's energy—the mother she never met. My mom says deep inside, she thinks Baba believes in spiritual things.

For me, it's always been a battle of East and West.

*Write a wish*, Baba says to us girls, handing each of us a slip of paper. We climb the steps of prayer to the bright red temple that dwarfs the surrounding buildings, hands clasped tightly on our wishes. We near the mesh box, close to the wooden doors that shield the inner sanctuary—the place of secrets—and toss our wishes in. *It's just for luck*, I tell myself. *It's not worship, it's fun*. I pray to my Christian God—*please let our wishes come true*. Then we hear the drums, from the inside of the temple. *Taiko. Thunder*. The low, fervent, foreign chanting of the priests inside, just behind the walls. We lean in, breathing incense, trying to peer through the screens. A long wail, unlike anything we've heard in our Christian tradition, startles us. *A funeral*, Baba says. *They're laboring for the spirits*. I feel a sudden split. I become conscious of the fact that part of me, what feels like my young "Western" self, is slightly alarmed at such an unnatural and earnest religious display. She is dismissive, feels like I shouldn't be interested in Eastern ways of worship, gods that our Christian scriptural studies have taught us to quickly reject. But as much as she is bewildered and repelled, another part of me is *drawn in*. My Eastern self recognizes that something about the beat thrums our soul, touches an integral facet of our spirit, feels *right* and *natural*—that this rite is just another way of making sense of being human. My Western self questions her, wondering at how she sees truth in these rites. And I'm at once cautious and intrigued—by how natural it feels, by how much something inside me yearns for this without me knowing it, how much this feels like home. Feels divine.

*Resist. It's beautiful, give in—feel it. This is the most natural thing in the world. This is who you are. Don't listen—don't you know we're Christian? There's room for both. No, there isn't. Feel the pull, Moe, this is your heritage. These are your people. You don't have a right to think they're wrong. Moe, ignore this. Turn away. But we're drawn, drawn to the drums, drawn to the feeling of lament, drawn to this old, old spirit—and you can't deny that you feel it. You know there's a truth here. Embrace it. Let it lift you. Let it teach you. Just listen.*

In Kyoto, we meander along the ancient stone pathway to the Otowa Waterfall in front of the Pure Water shrine. Water spews forth from three stone mouths in the small temple into a clear pool below. A line of visitors moves forward slowly, each person taking a long bamboo handle with a metal cup to take a drink from one of the fountains. *Each has a different blessing*, my mother explains excitedly. *If you drink from that one, you'll receive wisdom. The one next to it, health. The last one, luck in love. But don't do all three—that means you are greedy. Then, you turn around to say a prayer to the gods to grant your wish.* When we reach the front of the line, I hesitate—not daring to believe, to be *taken in*. Health, wisdom, or love? Will it even work? Probably not. Foolish folk traditions? Yes. I don't believe it. But something within me does. *It's not foolish*, my soul whispers. *It's lovely, it's beautiful, it's tradition.* I swing my cup under wisdom's flow, let it fill, and take a sip, imagining that my mind is filling with clarity and my heart is opening onto an old knowing. Then I turn to face the shrine icons draped in red and white flowers, close my eyes, clap my hands, and bow. I don't pray, but I *feel* it. Gratitude, warmth, love for my culture and for these beautiful beliefs that lead to clasped hands and undeserved luck and blessings. Perhaps these feelings of gratitude, beauty, and cultural unity are the blessings of wisdom, luck, and health that come from drinking the fountain's water. Or perhaps it is the ceremony itself, the act of being present and turning outward, that brings about these gifts. Maybe it doesn't matter how they come about—the point is that they do. I don't know who I'm feeling for, or talking to, but I reach out and touch a presence—and something reaches back.

*Quiet river, quiet presence.  
Their spirits float through and touch us.  
The girl can't see or touch them  
But she can't deny they're there.*

In Makurazaki, I trace the outlines of my ancestors' names on their weathered, rough stone graves in the countryside above the sea. *We've found them.* My geisha great-great-grandmother. A feudal lord. The woman who raised my grandmother. We put our hands together and bow in the traditional Buddhist rite, and I'm stirred by the connection I feel. Foreign but familiar. These tombstones are somehow more alive than American ones to me—maybe it's because here, we believe in our ancestors more. We believe that they're here, moving among us. Their presence is almost tangible. The overgrown garden is full of spirits. I imagine my great-great-grandmother is sitting in front of her black stone, graciously smelling the roses we've brought, brushing her fingers gently over our faces in the breeze. Her summer *yukata* is light blue, her face round and white like the moon. She smiles. I stand in front of her, share an audience. Tentatively reach out. She nods and smiles—*It's okay.*

I know something is awakened in these Eastern rites—something that invigorates my spiritual life, that offers me different modes, at once new and familiar, that help me to feel closer to the divine. I wonder if worship is not about singling out one way of truth

and being and if East and West have never actually been diametrically opposed. If the only battle that existed was the one I created within myself when I couldn't make space for both, couldn't see the ways in which both seek and apprehend truth. How much my Japanese traditions do not take away from my Christian beliefs, but infuse them with color and life, ground them, ground me. How much they make me a more whole spiritual being.

And I wonder if perhaps it really is as simple as my mother believes. As simple as my eight-year-old heart imagined.

“Thou shalt have no other Gods before me,” I think nervously as I approach our ancestral *butsudan* a year or so after my first awkward encounter. I watch my mother before me with slight anxiety, wondering what she will do. My grandmother smiles at her and bows gracefully with honor after completing her own worship ceremony, proudly and fully expecting my mother to participate. My mother approaches reverently, but with a smile and twinkle in her eye, and carefully takes a stick of fragrant Japanese incense. She lights it and places it in the golden holder before the picture of my great grandmother Wakabayashi, who is also smiling. I take a deep breath. Part of my anxieties come because I still do not know—is this worship, or is this culture? My mother rings the small gong to signal her presence to our ancestors, claps her hand in religious ritual, and holds them together as she gracefully falls into a slight bow, as if praying. I wonder if she *is* praying—and if she is, to whom, and what she is saying. Ten seconds later, she breaks her pose and smiles at me to come forward. I quickly lean in and whisper, “But mom, what do I say?” She smiles and whispers back, “I just say ‘Hello’.” I approach the *butsudan*, light the incense, ring the gong, clap my hands together, and bow. In my mind, I say “Hello.” And some part of me says, “Thank you.”

## On Belonging

My Baba never met her mother. *Hide* died soon after giving birth to her, *some kind of complications*, mom says. On the phone, Baba says she never missed her birth mother because she never knew her. Her stepmother, *Toe kasan*, was a kind, compassionate woman who came into the family when Baba was four. I'm shocked by her seeming indifference as Baba declares that she never even felt a need to know her own mother. Was never curious.

But when I ask my own mother, she tells me, *Baba always says she is just like her mother, Hide. Though she never met her. Hide was very kind—always shared with others. Baba heard this from other people. Baba thinks she got her personality.*

And then I sense the things Baba won't admit to me, perhaps not even to herself. The pain she might be trying to shield herself from with practicality. Her deep longing to feel connected to her mother, to see some part of *Hide* in herself. It's a familiar feeling. I've looked for evidence in myself—my body, my personality, my tendencies—all my life. Hints that I belong to a culture I've never fully known, to a community thousands of miles away, to people I've never met—my ancestors.

What does it really mean to belong? I'm not sure. We say that looks don't matter, until they do—until you say you're Japanese and people laugh at your pale skin and light brown hair. Or suggest that you don't have the right to claim an ethnicity because “you don't look like it.” Is it blood? The biological balance of particles and liquids in your body somehow give you the right to say that a culture is yours? Behavior? My father thinks his children are American because they behave American in his eyes—but he doesn't see all of the little things—the quiet pride, perfectionism, submission and defiance that we do. Commitment? Love? But even the most loyal Caucasian scholar with flawless Japanese who completely committed himself to his Japanese family and lifestyle could never really become one of them. Despite the complexity of these questions, from a very young age I recognize the feeling of when I belong and when I don't. You just *know*. And I collect those moments and pieces like treasures. I become a sign seeker.

The sun is lowering as we make our way down the other side of the mountain island of *Enoshima* and out onto a rock that juts into the ocean at surface level. *Don't get too close, don't fall in*. We toe out as far as we dare, shrieking at the spray that kisses our faces. Then, the water in front of us begins to rise. A huge balloon is forming, moving so quickly toward us that we don't have time to reach higher ground. *Tsunami*. Mika screams. An ancient instinct kicks in. I drag my sisters down and instinctively kneel on the rock, trying to hold on. The wave crashes down, trying to pull me, to loosen my grip. The ocean is loud, I feel her strength. She wants us to come with her. But in my heart, all is silent. I am kneeling in submission, but defiance. *We need to stay here*. Praying without words—reaching out to God to keep us on that rock, to protect us from losing ourselves and each other. *We need to stay, ocean sister. Let us stay*. The pulling increases, then abates, and she releases. With a sigh, the waters dribble away. And we're all on the rock, kneeling.



It's over in a second. And of course, it isn't a tsunami—just a large freak wave, my aunt says. We all get up laughing and shaking, soaking wet. My aunt congratulates me on my rightful instinct to kneel. *That's exactly what you're supposed to do. How did you know to do that?*

I look into the mirror searching for traces of my heritage, hints that I belong to my forbearers. I will them to come out, with American determination. Then, I see them. In the Misono nose I inherited from my grandmother. In the roundness of my cheeks that makes my face look like a moon. In the slightly indented edges of my mouth where I always willed dimples to emerge like Baba's. In my almond eyes from my mother. My high cheekbones from Jiji. My refusal to lose a chess game. My ability to recover quickly from setbacks. My wondering if I'm enough.

In Idaho, I dance at the *obon*, grasping at earth, water, stars. I wear a *kimono* with my best friend for twin day at school. I'm practically allergic but manage to get the raw squid down. I sit silently victorious in my chess wins, imagining I inherited my talent from my chess Olympian grandmother. I fold my hands in my lap, like a perfect *geisha*, feet tucked under, hair wrapped up, a ritual. I run and build muscle with the strength of my body-builder grandfather. I wield my Japanese knife and draw upon the inherent instinct of my mother and grandmother to flavor Japanese dishes. *We don't need recipes. We just know.* My *gyoza* are folded perfectly with precision. I pull through every obstacle with the determination of Yumiko, my Baba's older sister who brought her home, knowing that I can overcome. And I hold in my heart numerous other signs the origins of which I don't know, seeking to place them with what I learn about the people who've come before me. The keys that will allow me to belong to them, to myself.

Most of all, I listen to our stories. Stories of the really ancient ones who've faded into legends, who might be able to explain parts of who I am.

*Your great-great-grandfather Nagano had two women. He was a Lord over Kago. He had made his wealth mining and had a wife and seven children. But as many lords tended to do in those days, he loved to play, especially in Kyoto. As he was an artist, he often traveled there, perhaps for artistic interest. One day, he found a geisha in Kyoto and fell in love. He brought her back as his concubine. For lords, having a mistress was a status symbol. Her name was Fude. That's Baba's line.*

My great-great-grandmother was a *geisha*. An entertainer, a dancer, an artist, she painted her teeth black so that they wouldn't look yellow against her red lipstick. How lovely she must have been to catch the eye of Lord Nagano. Or how interesting, smart maybe, kind...my mind fills in the gaps in the story to build a bridge to reach her.

*Slender, like a bamboo reed, with long black hair that floats around her waist, Fude steps shyly onto the stage. Young, like a spring flower freshly sprung, face a pale moon. She breathes deeply. Nervous. Excited. Many grand men watching. The shamisen starts. She lifts her pale blue fan to her face, and slowly moves to the snow dance, walking then collapsing and twirling back. Her white skin catches the light, betrays it, a perfect porcelain doll. Somewhere in the crowd, perhaps towards the front, Lord Nagano stares, captivated by her perfect beauty. She has an allure, a mystery, he can't touch. His new muse. After the show, he quickly approaches her and hands her a note on cream paper that she takes shyly. She looks into kind eyes, a middle-aged man, a wealthy Lord. Come away with me. She's scared, hesitant. The steward tells her later that night that he's a wealthy man. Good man. A painter. She doesn't know what to think. But by morning, when he comes for her, she decides to take her chance. Packs her silk gowns and fans and leaves behind everyone and everything she knows.*

*Perhaps she is a bit older, mid twenties, and hasn't yet found a suitor. She is in charge of the other girls, a steward. She is no longer slender, but she is kind and her hair is still black. And she's the best shamisen player in Kyoto. Lord Nagano chances to hear her play one autumn evening, this confident and noble woman, bent over the delicate instrument. But he is enchanted. Every time he comes to Kyoto, he inches closer and closer. She notices. The courtship is long, several months of coy smiles, brief haikus written on scraps of paper, subtle bows and outstretched hands. Finally, he asks her to leave with him and she does, ready to see a part of Japan she's never been to, ready to go away to the beautiful mansion in the mountains he's been telling her about.*

*Or perhaps she is much older, in her thirties, greeting spinsterhood. Not a pretty face, but plain, broad cheekbones. A beautiful painter. She thinks that no one will notice her among the attractive younger girls, but my great-great-grandfather does. After all, she is painting a scene he has seen in his dreams. He stops to admire, she doesn't entertain the possibility, but he makes a joke and she laughs. She is not young—but she is smart, and talented, and knows his heart. He can see it in her art.*

*Fude—whatever you are, I see you now. In the *Sakura* petals that fall gracefully to the streets in old Kyoto. I see your bravery in the empty houses, how you left everything behind—friends, family, Kyoto, for my great-great-grandfather—a man you may have barely known. Maybe you loved him, maybe you didn't, but you're a part of me now.*

*And I see you when I don a *kimono*, when I put on red lipstick, when I place ornamental flowers in my hair for *bon* dances. I see you in the grace of Yuki's neck, my small feet, Mika's love for art, my joy in the quietude of falling leaves. Somehow I feel that I remember you.*

Fude had four children. When she had her last daughter, Hide, she died in childbirth. As the family couldn't take care of a new baby, Grandfather Nagano gave *Hide* to a family in Shirahama that wanted a baby, along with land and many lovely gifts. Though she occasionally came back to visit, she never came home.

Hide married a tatami mat maker and had seven children, but died after the birth of *her* last daughter, my Baba. No doubt Yumiko knew the story—how her mother had been given away after her grandmother died. Perhaps she didn't want the pattern to continue. I wonder what it did to Hide to be given away, I wonder if she felt lonely, lost, or misplaced. Like she was missing part of herself. I wonder if Yumiko sensed that loneliness and decided it couldn't happen again, not to her baby sister. So hair combed, back straightened, sweaty palmed, but determined, she walked the long miles out into the countryside and asked for her sister back.

And my own mother left home for America when she was 16. She lived with a large family in Prescott Washington, in the middle of an apple orchard. Far away from the luxuries of city life. They were poor. They made homemade bread. On weekends, they would wake up in the early morning hours to clean doctor's offices to earn extra money to support their missionaries. And they were happy. She was supposed to come back after a year, but she stayed. And she's been here ever since.

Three generations of women adopted out. One, my great-grandmother, visited her birth family on holidays. One, my Baba, was brought home by her sister. And one, my mother, will never return.

The daughters in our family are journey-takers, it appears. But we never forget our origins or stop seeking signs of the ancestors who are carved into our hearts and faces. And letting them come alive in us. The pieces of them we recognize and touch, light by light, to know ourselves. To belong.

## *On Loss*

*Baba is going to sell the house.*

My heart stops. I halt in my path to class amidst a sea of students.

*What? Why?*

*To pay for her assisted living. She and Jiji are getting old, you know.*

I feel a sudden irrational urge to empty my bank account even though I know the funds of a college girl won't be enough.

*But they can't sell it.*

*I know, it's sad. But shouganai. It can't be helped.*

Baba's going to sell the house.

The house she and my Jiji built on their tiny budget back in 1984. The house they paid for working side by side at the noodle shop while my mother took care of her baby sister at home. The last landmark that connects my sisters and I to our culture, that ties us to Baba and our Japanese selves, that holds a space for us to learn how to be.

She's going to use the money to pay for a new home for her and Jiji. And it will be a nice assisted living, one in the mountains that serves that good red bean miso, not the cheap white bean one. One with a view of the valley beneath that captures the rays of the rising sun through long-paned windows with clean glass.

You're going to sell that room, Baba, *your* room, the one where I showed you the project that I was working on in sewing class—a small tissue holder. Green felt with a pink watermelon and white seeds, clumsy child stitches. You gave me your beautiful white silk tissue holder and I promised you I'd use it on my wedding day. You laughed and promised that I'd lose it. But I still have it, Baba. I've lost most of the things you gave me—but that tissue case is in the blue box in my room.

The roof where we'd unclip fresh laundry soaked in sunshine, piece by piece. I asked if you were embarrassed hanging up your underwear to dry where the neighbors could all see. You laughed and reminded me *minna ningen da you, hazukashiku nai zen zen!* We're all human, nothing to be embarrassed about! We piled the clothes in a basket and climbed back into the house. We knelt on the carpet covered in flowers, and folded—and I held your pink shirt up and buried my face in it, trying to soak up the sunshine, and you laughed at my nonsense.

The floor where we knelt across from each other, a chess board in between us, and you taught me about castling—the only move that I remember of chess, even now. You told me to think, to not act too rashly, to use my head—you beat me every time. The *tatami* mat that I laid upon, pressing my face against it and breathing in the sunny nuttiness of a thousand fields of grain. The smell lit me up from the inside—I breathed deeper, trying to pin it, trying to become it. I knew I had smelled it somewhere before. I wanted to soak in a thousand fields of grain. I wanted the stories of my ancestors to unfold inside of me like a map—telling me how to live, how to be.

The room where I was eleven and asleep in the warmth of the clean, puffy *futon* that you laid out for me in between my sisters when the roof began to shake. A giant bird was walking on the roof. *Yuki? Mika??* I whispered urgently, afraid to make a sound. The house was going to fall down. But Yuki and Mika did not wake. So I lay in the darkness, listening. The next morning, we found out that it was a tremor. But in the darkness, in my young imagination, it was a giant bird.

The garden that smells like time, old rocks covered in moss lying under small maple leaf trees. A tiny garden—the size of a bedroom—but the world when I was a child. Mika and I ran through it when we were young, barefoot, even though you told us not to, and pulled a leaf off of the tree—red, gold. Fingered it in our hands. Something ancient awoke.

The cement street with little holes carved in it, designed to keep cars from skidding in the *typhoon* months. The street that mom says used to have a fried chicken shop at the end of it where you would send her to pick up the chicken you'd always order for Christmas dinner. *One Christmas night, I picked up the chicken in its brown paper bag and paused for a moment in the street on my way home to smell it. I breathed deeply. And then I looked up into the sky and saw all of the stars—*Mom smiles and nods quickly, unable to continue. We all gaze up at the stars with her.

The cupboard where you kept all of the silk *kimonos* you bought for us girls for Coming of Age day. Mine was green—green with red and pink flowers and bonbons. I never told you how much I loved it, Baba, but I did—because when I saw it, I knew that you knew me. That you knew that I wasn't pink or red, but green. Like *wakabayashi*—young trees. Green like my name—spring buds and a crown of grass.

The entryway I came to when mom and dad confused the date and were unable to pick me up from my service mission to Nagoya. I had nowhere else to go. I hopped on a *shinkansen* and rode a taxi in the rain and you opened the door and gave me the biggest hug—*We were so worried! We're so glad you're safe!* Even though I wasn't in any real danger.

The bathroom where you kept your *shiseido* face cream on the right-hand shelf. You always smelled like *shiseido*, Baba—the mild soft sweet. And when you hugged me, I pressed my nose into your cheek and breathed your beauty.

The kitchen where you taught me to fold dumplings after the way of the women in our family. *Palm, press—make a crescent shape, four folds with thumb and pointer, like you're folding the moon.* It took me ten years to master the skills. One summer, I made a hundred for you and we cooked them for your friends and you offered them proudly. *My granddaughter is a daughter of the old country. Behind those American freckles is a Japanese maiden. She is ours. She is mine.*

You're going to sell the house, Baba. *Hyaku-en* for a memory, like fresh *ahi* at the *Mitskyo* marketplace. And if I ever have children, they will never know what it is like to pull in fresh laundry that has been soaked in sunshine.

They'll never peel a ripe *mikkan* at the living room table while they watch a *Samurai* period drama with you. They'll never taste-test your first batch of pickled plums with *shisou* leaves or slide open the paper doors to leave a pear at the base of our great-grandmother's *butstudan* and light the incense or discover the hidden pathway that leads from the kitchen right into the street.

They'll never know what it's like to open that heavy, wooden door and breathe time. They'll never step with delight into that bath, four feet deep, and laugh while you sprinkle in peels from a giant grapefruit. They'll never spend a summer evening listening to hundreds of hidden cicadas in the trees, watching the fireflies light one by one with you telling them not to chase but admire, running through the summer festivals in bright white *kimonos* watching fireworks burst against the night sky.

And they'll never know you, Baba. They'll never know what it's like to be loved by you, even though you are too embarrassed to say "I love you." They'll never know what it's like to feel all the ways in which you express your care—the special effort you put into meals, your yearly call on my birthday—trying to bridge the gap; trying to cross the distance of six thousand miles and 24 years in two minutes of singing.

And they'll never know the stories of our people, Baba. Not for lack of trying—I'll tell them every story I know. Every one you told me. *Princess Momonoke, the tanuki, orihimesama and hikouboushi*, the frog who sang on his way home. And I'll teach my daughters to make dumplings at the table, just like you did. And as we fold, your spirit

and Grandma *Wakabayashi*'s spirit and those of your sisters will light upon the chairs like petals and we will fold in peace, wondering why we feel so connected, wondering why making the moon folds makes us feel like we are folding time. And I will make a joke and you will all laugh—the sounds of a tinkling wind chime. The wind will take it away.

And in the evenings, I'll tell them about you, Baba. *She was an international chess Olympian, you know. She had a big face and her eyes crinkled all the way up when she laughed. She had a loud laugh for a Japanese grandma. A wizard at ping pong—quite the athlete, even though her knees were bad. She was the most determined person I've ever known. She always wore a visor in her fluffy black hair. She could give you a bruise by pinching you with her toes. She was an artist—she made delicate little dolls out of clay, three inches high, with curled brown hair and wide white hats and pink dresses, holding bouquets of flowers. Mika and I used to imagine they were us. I wish you'd known Baba.*

And when they're asleep, I'll hurt for them—for the things they'll never know how to miss, the loss they won't know they have. The inexplicable longing they're going to feel at random moments—when someday, they wonder why they feel nostalgic when they hear a strain of *Totoro* or when they catch a waft of *kinmokusei*, and they'll ask *what is this? What is this feeling?* And I'll take them in and hold them tight because I'll know exactly what they're missing—I've missed it all my life.

And the *samurai* blood will trickle out, Baba, thinned by American water. Her eyes will probably be light brown, her nose straight and tipped—no trace of *Misono* in her face. She will never see you in the mirror like I do sometimes. The wide cheekbones that I used to hate. The big bones. The large eyes. The dimpled smile. And you will be a picture to her, a bundle of stories she'll grasp at but never understand. And gone will be the misty mountains that rise in the majesty of the morning fog. Gone will be the deep and dark woods where the *tanuki* drum their round bellies and run in search of magic and mischief. Gone will be the red arches, the unending fields of long green tea, the smell of earth, the black sand by the ocean, the smell of incense in our great-grandmother's *bustudan*, you learning enough English to tell me, "I miss you."

And our ancestors will lay to rest in the mountains by the sea. And my children won't know them—can never know them. Despite my best efforts, Japanese will fade to mumbled expressions of hello and thank you in their mouths with over-rolled r's. Silk *kimonos* will turn to the cotton ones you buy as a token because I won't really be able to tell the difference and they won't care. And all that will be left are pictures with you, chopsticks in the kitchen, old books I don't know how to read.

The house will melt into the swirling fog to become part of someone else's story. Shape, shadow, gone. And I'll lose you.



Baba is going to sell the house. And the ancient walls are going to slam. And all that will be left of Japan will be memories.

And I'll curse myself that I didn't go back more often—that I didn't take the time. That I didn't save the money to buy more tickets—that I didn't call you every week. And most of all, that I don't have the money to buy that house; to pay for your and Jiji's assisted living. That all of my assets add up to a list of nothing.

For a moment, I wish I could go back to warn my younger self. I would take her hands and brush the hair away from her unplucked eyebrows, look deep into her dark brown eyes and tell her, *Don't fall in love with this house, Moe. This place, this land. Do you know how much you're going to love it? Do you know how much it's going to hurt? It's going to become part of who you are. And when it's gone, because it will be gone, you'll be lost.*

But a wiser part of me would run back and grab Moe's hands and exclaim urgently, *Love it, Moe! Love it with all of your heart; love it while it lasts. Trace your fingers along the wooden walls, grow roots in the garden by the Bonzai tree, let the nutty tatami seep into your veins. Love it. With everything you have.*

Baba is going to sell the house. And there's nothing I can do about it. And a nice family with young children and a small dog will move in. *Good price*, they'll say. *Good neighborhood*. Or maybe they'll rent it while they're looking for a space to build that's a little more convenient, closer to the city. And maybe they'll stay, and maybe they won't. And the house will just be a house. It'll take its place in the cycle of mortality, becoming a different home for different people just as people must replace us and others must eventually replace them. All things waves in the ocean of life, emerging, cresting, and joining the sea once more. Loss simply meaning life—the price we pay to be human. Yes, the house will just be a house. And I'll just be the girl who loved it.

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