

KARTIKA REVIEW

MAGIC TREE

VICTOR LUO

The fully blossomed sakura tree that suddenly appeared on the school lawn had been discovered on June 19, 2005, but the records will show it was discovered on June 20, 2005. It had been during that period when the school year had just ended and summer classes hadn't started yet. Because the 19th was a Sunday, no one had been on campus and the walls around the schoolyard prevented the surrounding suburbs from getting a general view inside. It had been the janitor who, for the records, found the lone tree, which had stuck out from the few purple jacaranda trees lined up at the sides, right in the middle of the lawn at 6:00 AM, June 20th.

There had been quite a commotion regarding the sakura tree's appearance. The police, called in by the administration, had worked on the angle that the tree might have been planted as a prank or by some fervent environmental group using "guerrilla-style" tactics, but could not conceive of a way that a 30-foot pink tree could have been transported without anyone noticing. Scientists had rushed to check the tree for some undiscovered strand of plant hormone that could have caused the tree's rapid growth, but had found nothing out of the ordinary other than the astounding possibility that, had the tree been transported, its roots had been maintained perfectly and that it could be supported by the surrounding soil. It hadn't been too long after that the townspeople, especially the small Asian population, began to rumor that the tree was magic. A militant group of faculty members, led by English teacher Ms. Kawazoe, had devoted themselves to keeping the tree on campus, rejecting the pleas of scientists wanting to cut down the tree for further analysis. After a week of unchanged observations, the scientists had willingly left the tree alone with the simple request that they be informed if there were any sudden changes.

I should mention that Ms. Kawazoe, the only Japanese faculty member, and I are the only ones at school who refer to the tree as a sakura. The predominantly white administration, in every proceeding regarding the tree, always referred to it as the cherry blossom tree. I suppose a few people within the Asian population of the town referred to it as the sakura, but the few Asian students I knew mainly called it the cherry blossom tree. I myself am Chinese and not Japanese, but I just like the roll-off-the-tongue pronunciation of SA-KU-RA.



I was the first one who found the tree, on one of the loneliest Sundays I'd ever had. Graduation was that Friday before and seeing everyone walk the stage threw me off my emotional balance. What was supposed to be a moment filled with joy and congratulations was substituted with a loathsome obsession that I should have been up there walking with them, going off to college instead of being stuck here. Being left behind felt so unfair.

No matter how hard I'd tried these three years, I could not make up for the year I lost being in a coma. In the summer finishing eighth grade, I remember taking the bus to the library to apply for a volunteer position over the summer. I was an ambitious one, thinking about college applications and choosing top-rate schools by then. Call it an Asian stereotype if you will, but it was my way of getting to some metaphorical top. I'm not a particularly arrogant person, but I'd always felt like I belonged somewhere better than here, this rinky-dink town. School, home, family, friends—by fourteen, I felt bored by everything around me. I felt different from everyone else, but saying, "my life sucks" made me feel like everyone else. Mind you, I never complained much and I didn't want to fall into the predictable teen angst, so I worked hard quietly so I could be in that better place someday. Looking back at my fourteen-year-old self, I figure I was just never comfortable in one place or one time. I suppose that I felt trapped by the normalcy of being a kid and that I just wanted to grow up so I could be somebody. Being eighteen, however, I still don't know who that somebody I want to be is.

After filling out the application, I decided to wait for the bus home by flipping through a book. I don't remember which book it is that I picked up, though. All I remember is picking one up and sitting at an empty table to read it. As I read, the words crawled off the page slowly, and I let out an echoing yawn that filled the library. I didn't care that everyone could hear me at the time because I felt very tired, and soon I'd drifted off to sleep.

A whole year passed while I slept, but it didn't feel like it at first. I awoke, thinking I'd nodded off in the library, but finding myself attached to an IV and lying in a hospital bed. The doctors were at a complete loss to the trigger of my coma, unable to deduce how I had woken up. They told me that the strangest thing had been my unusual level of brain activity that had remained consistently at a high point where they had expected me to wake up at any minute. My body's metabolism hadn't slowed that much and my muscles hadn't atrophied at all. I had even grown two inches. It was like I'd just taken a quick nap instead of a yearlong sleep.

My parents were thrilled that I'd finally awoken, kept hopeful by the fact that my vital signs remained strong. The house hadn't changed at all, and the only thing that felt like a year had passed was the sight of the calendar. Chronologically, I was fifteen years old instead of fourteen when I woke up. I wasted an entire year of my life sleeping, and I felt cheated by time. The world around me had aged while I had done nothing. I felt like Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, "unstuck in time" and cruelly left to wallow in mediocrity while everything and everyone moves on. That's a bit melodramatic, I admit, but I was frustrated that time had robbed an entire year from my life and that I was expected to just pick up where I left off with a smile. But I'm a post-modernist now (Whatever that means. Like the word "sakura," I just like to say it), and time seems to pass so irreverently, unconcerned with me or anyone else.

"So it goes."

I'd fallen a grade behind and I had to start high school as a freshman while everyone I'd grown up taking the same classes with were now a grade above me. I wasn't bothered so much by that or by the fact that everyone in my grade was younger than me. All I wanted was to be back on track, to make up for my lost time. Every summer after my freshman year, I took classes at the high school and the community college to catch up. I didn't make it in time to graduate this year, but I negotiated with the administration to give me my diploma after finishing two classes this summer.

I applied to six out-of-state colleges, three of them Ivy League, but none of them accepted me. I suppose I might have been too ambitious, but I didn't want to compromise by staying in state for four years where I'd be expected to come home every weekend. Settling for going to community college for a year or two and then transferring, I felt like time flipped me off again. Of course, everyone tells me it's not so bad, and my situation really isn't bad at all. But having to tell myself that makes it feel like such a lie. I've been left again just to wander around in a place I don't belong, waiting for a time I don't know when it will come or what it will look like.

On the Sunday I didn't graduate, I wandered around campus dreading the summer classes I'd have to take and knowing I had no choice. I walked around the school lawn, mulling about the stairways and attempting to climb up the jacaranda trees. The enclosing walls made the school feel like a prison, but it was nice to wander in privacy. I then proceeded to sit down in the middle of the lawn to read Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*, which I finished in about a twenty-five minutes.

My remarkably increased reading speed was one change I noticed after I awoke from my coma. Strangely though, it only seemed to work with novels because I still had to read slowly over my textbooks. Sometimes, it didn't even feel like I was reading quickly. Even as I picked up a book I'd never seen or heard of, I would have an unerring feeling that I'd read it before. I theorized it might be that because I fell into a coma in the library, my spirit had actually stayed in the library. I quickly dismissed that idea, but thought how cool that might be if that was the case. This ability certainly helped in English classes, but it wasn't worth the year's loss in time.

Anyway, as I thought about the religion of Bokonism with its idea of a *karass* as a group of people often unknowingly doing the will of God together, the *wampeter* as central point of the group, and the *kan-kan* as the thing that brings one into the group, I faded into a nap. Even though the grass was itchy, the sun beating down was a warm, comfortable blanket.

When I woke up, an hour had passed and I returned home. Nothing about the lawn had changed as I blinked. I snuck out of the school, making sure no one would see me and think of me as a trespasser.

My parents, away on a month-long vacation back to China that they had pleaded me to go on, had left some money in an envelope on the kitchen counter for food. I decided to order a bunch of things like fried rice, fried noodles, egg rolls, sweet and sour chicken, broccoli beef, and BBQ pork from the local Chinese delivery so I could eat leftovers for about a week. I could never order this food while my parents were here because they'd complain how it wasn't authentic and note how the delivery boy is almost never Asian. True, the food isn't authentic, but it tastes good nonetheless.

When the doorbell rang, I picked up the envelope and met the delivery boy. Yep, my parents' voices said in my head, this guy isn't Asian. He could've been Hispanic or Filipino. He could have been Chinese I suppose, because I've had friends who were 100% Chinese and mistaken for Mexican at times. I paid the guy, who did an awkward bow as he accepted the money and left. When I counted the money in the envelope, I realized an emptiness in my side pocket. I didn't have my wallet.

Realizing that the only place I had gone that day was the school, I grabbed an egg roll and ran out the door, chewing with difficulty.

Sneaking in the school by climbing the sidewall, I sprinted the last stretch to the middle of the lawn. It was then I discovered the flowering sakura tree where I had slept, and my wallet right in front of it.

With a convenient breeze wafting through, the sakura tree's branches swayed with surprising flexibility, its flowers rhythmically bouncing along. Flashing through my mind were the hundreds of storybooks this scene came from. Counting that many plots, I was still awe-struck by the unassuming silence that the flowers danced to. As I picked up my wallet, I touched the swaying tree and a single blossom fell on my forehead.

It was then that the thoughts about the unnatural appearance of the tree led me to entertain the possibility of magic. It could have been magic or it could have been reasonably natural. I billed the tree as beautiful either way, and I went home content with that explanation.

After summer classes started with Ms. Kawazoe's triumph in protecting the tree, the rumors were in full swirl in school and in town. The superstitious old biddies would refer to the tree as a good luck gift from the gods, some of them even coming to collect the falling blossoms for a tea that would "ensure longevity." Since the school's gates remained open during the summer days, families with young children were drawn to the lawn like a park for picnics. From the World Literature class I was in, the guys stuck retaking the course looked down at the lawn, calling all the purple and pink such a gay color combination and that the cherry blossom tree should be cut down, all of them sneering and agreeing all the way.

Ms. Kawazoe, our teacher, couldn't stop talking about the tree as she reminisced about her childhood in Kyoto. She insisted that we use her first name, calling her Ms. Sayuri. She did not look anything like a Sayuri. From her obviously highlighted wiry black hair to her gummy smile, Ms. Kawazoe was on the wrong side of forty, acting like a woman in her twenties. She made terrible puns trying to get the class to laugh, bringing her aging hand with long nails, middle and ring fingers tucked in, to her mouth as she let out a high-pitched giggle. She was an entirely competent teacher, but sometimes it was clear to everyone that she was trying too hard when students put on their cloaks of apathy.

On the first Tuesday back after the July 4th Weekend, Ms. Kawazoe proudly pronounced that the class would be celebrating Tanabata, the Japanese star holiday, on the 7th. She explained the holiday's story of the celestial lovers Orihime and Hikoboshi who were separated by the stars being allowed to meet once a year on that day. In a romantic adrift sway of her communicative

hands, she described her childhood memories of writing wishes on small pieces of paper and hanging them in trees, believing that writing in poetry would increase the chances of her wishes coming true. She offered extra credit to the class to write two wishes in the forms of poems, one related to academic goals and the other to personal whims. Because the class was clearly struggling with Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, everyone gladly accepted the offer.

I got a call from my parents from China that night, telling me that they'd be back after this week, asking me if I was okay and that they had bought a secret present they knew I would love. Giving them my usual uh-huhs, I quickly told them everything was fine. I didn't really care about anything they could have bought me, because in all likelihood it was just clothes. I wanted them to have fun so they'd be more inclined to take vacations more often. I wanted them to forget about me on their trips so it'd be easier for them once their only son moved out.

I went to my room, thinking about what to write. *The Brothers Karamazov* was on the desk, already finished within an hour over the weekend. I didn't need the extra credit, but it wouldn't hurt to be safe. I decided to go with haiku, since it was an easy form and no doubt would appeal to Ms. Kawazoe's attention to Japanese tradition. The first poem was easy to write:

*School, the vital path
To succeed brings great honor,
A lifetime's dream done.*

A little cheesy, I thought, but it'll do. There was nothing specific about a wish, other than my wanting success in school. School never seems to be a dream, just a way of getting there. Better to get it done and move on.

Just thinking about the second wish was hard. I didn't know where to start, so I just started with whatever sounded right.

*At one with the stars,
Seeing all time pass with care,
Feelings of fate's joy.*

I was convinced poetry wasn't my forte. It sounded fine, but I didn't understand how it all connected, or rather, I couldn't explain it. How poets could string together lofty meanings was beyond me. It was good enough for Ms. Kawazoe though.

On the 7th, Ms. Kawazoe was dressed in a pink kimono and had decorated the class with paper lanterns with sakura patterns on them. Traditional Japanese festival music was playing from her CD player, and she had even brought a traditional *biwa* lute. She couldn't play the lute well, but she simply laughed it off with her signature giggle.

She passed around small, colored parchments on which to transcribe our wishes, and some string. My short haikus took only a minute to transcribe on the light blue paper. We were then led out onto the lawn to the sakura tree where Ms. Kawazoe had set up a stepladder for us to reach the branches to hang our wishes.

"Traditionally, we hang Tanabata wishes on bamboo, but I think it's okay to improvise with a sakura tree. There are important differences between the two in symbolic Asian mythology, but we can make do with what we have. And the fact that this is a magic tree could make a difference!" Ms. Kawazoe lectured in a giddy smile.

One by one, the students lined up, showing Ms. Kawazoe their wish-poems and hanging them on the sakura tree branches. When it was my turn, Ms. Kawazoe beamed, complimenting me on my use of haiku. I chose the tallest branch I could to hook my wish onto. A breeze wafted through the branches, cradling my wish in the airflow while the string held steadfast.

Ms. Kawazoe then presented us a platter of rice crackers, giving us twenty minutes of free time before we headed back to class.

It was strange that Ms. Kawazoe approached me just then. Teachers rarely approached me because my grades were good, not great, and I didn't stand out.

"I understand that when you finish this class, you will have graduated in three years."

"That's right. I'll be going to community college in the fall."

"So you're going to transfer to a university?" she asked. I nodded. "Which one do you want to attend?"

"I'm not sure yet, but I want to go out-of-state, maybe East Coast."

"Ivy League?"

"I'd like to, but I'm not sure if that's within my reach. I guess I'll just have to wait two years and see."

"Going wherever the wind takes you?" she observed, wandering around the sakura tree, "Have you thought about what you want to study?"

"I'm not so sure about that either," I answered, laughing to alleviate my nervousness.

"I see. You don't have to decide now," she replied. "Sometimes it's better to just wait and see what works."

The other students were chattering away, texting and gossiping. If I hadn't been talking with Ms. Kawazoe, I probably would have just sat and stared at the sakura tree.

"I enjoyed your haikus. A little rough around the edges, but it's a deceptively easy form that's difficult to master."

"Thank you."

"I'm curious, though, about what your wish in the second haiku meant."

I stood in silence, looking at Ms. Kawazoe with a confused expression. It wasn't something I could explain. As she waited for my reply, her hand extended and caught a falling blossom, which she closely analyzed.

"Have you read *Slaughterhouse-Five*?" I asked. She nodded.

"I guess that might have crossed my mind when I wrote that. The way that those aliens could see every point in time was really something to think about. But they were too stoic, too apathetic to everything. I mean you should be able to do things with such an ability to see time, or at least feel happy."

"You read literature very well," she said. I blushed. "You remind me of my younger sister, Sakura."

I couldn't imagine Ms Kawazoe with a sister. She fit the image of an old, single Japanese woman so well it was hard to think of her as being part of a family.

"My sister was always impatient, but she was very ambitious and very successful in school. She was convinced she was meant to travel the world, and she was never very comfortable just staying in one place. She was an

excellent writer of poetry, winning awards in school every so often. She was the kind of person who believed the world offered everything to her, and that she had the power to take as she pleased. A fervent dreamer, really.”

“One day, though, she’d mysteriously fallen into a coma. Nobody could figure out why, though I believed it was because she was in a deep dream. We didn’t have life support back then, so after three years she passed away without having woken once.”

“I ended up traveling the world after her death. After a few years abroad, I settled here in America, went to college and got a teaching degree. In a way, I sort of inherited her dream.”

“I remember one Tanabata festival when we were kids, Sakura had expressed her dream to travel the world. I asked our parents why we burned the papers after hanging them for a day, and Sakura quickly explained it was because wishes were things beyond ourselves, that they could move and change and that letting them burn up was a way of releasing them into the world to grow.”

Ms. Kawazoe looked up into the sky, lifted her hand and blew, letting the blossom ride away on the wind.

“I hope you one day realize your wishes. They can be connected to things outside of yourself and still live on even if you forget.”

“That’s all very romanticist, isn’t it?”

“I guess it is. It’s like believing this sakura tree is magic. I’ve never seen one blossom this fully in the middle of summer.”

“You don’t really believe this tree is magic, do you?”

Ms. Kawazoe simply smiled, touching the sakura tree’s trunk and admiring the blossoms.

“Sakura blossoms bloom quickly, then die as they fall. But they grow back into life before long. Even if the tree should disappear or wither away as quickly as it appeared, its life would reappear in another form.”

Ms. Kawazoe then summoned the students to return to class, thanking them for sharing in this celebration with her.

By the time fall rolled around, the sakura tree had withered away, its blossoms completely fallen out and its life slipping away slowly until the tree collapsed when some students accidentally knocked it over playing Frisbee. The scientists leapt at the tree's remains, quickly carting it away to try to dissect its secrets. We haven't heard anything from those scientists since. The town quickly forgot the tree, though some remembered it fondly as a small, but beautiful phenomenon.

I started my first year of community college, taking huge general education courses in auditoriums fitted for hundreds. Everyone looked the same in these classes, but then again you remembered that everyone was different in their own way. Though I didn't get to go away to college like I hoped, starting school was a new change that I eventually warmed up to.

Waiting didn't seem so bad, and I liked passing time on the college campus lawn cloud watching. I liked to nap and dream my afternoons away, thinking about time passing me by and the sakura tree that no one knew I had really discovered.



Victor Luo is currently an undergraduate at USC studying Creative Writing. He was born in Monterey Park, California, a heavily concentrated Chinese community, and is a first-generation college student. He aspires to attend an MFA program in Creative Writing and to eventually acquire a PhD in English. Find him online at <http://puzzlingcreativity.blogspot.com/>. This is his first official publication.