

KARTIKA REVIEW

OBACHAN

TASHA MATSUMOTO

I.

The smell of mothballs always makes me think of her.



She claims that she can tell my fortune based on the shape of my face. She massages the apples of my cheeks as if she is molding clay. She promises me that my cheekbones will bring me fame.

She tugs at my cartilage. ‘Your earlobes are like bags,’ she says. ‘They are fat and thick, like Buddha’s. They hold much wealth.’

She does not believe that the shape of one’s face is merely the upshot of genetics. That genes that reveal less about one’s future and more about one’s past.

My fat earlobes and round cheeks come from my father, whose ears and cheeks come from her. Like a facsimile of a facsimile, our faces are not identical, but whisperingly reminiscent. If our faces portend our fates, all my face suggests is that my destiny might have a common thread with hers.



To stave off starvation during World War II, she claws at the soil of the Chiba peninsula, uprooting grass to eat because she hasn’t any food. Even then, she never whispers a prayer in desperation. It is only after she moves six thousand miles away from Japan to Chicago that she converts to Buddhism, a religion that teaches her how to alleviate worldly suffering.

She closes her eyes, murmurs chants in Japanese. Her liver-spotted hands warm jasper prayer beads. Incense smolders, smelling of sandalwood and pine resin. For her, Buddhism is not about detaching from the world, but revisiting a world fast receding.



Though one is reincarnated, the soul does not migrate. There is no continuity from one life to the next.



Several lives elapse in her one body, from the daughter of a politician, to a starving farmer, to a lounge singer.

In Japan, she discovers that she is pregnant, and marries an American soldier who dies in the Korean War shortly thereafter.

In Japan, she marries yet another American soldier who abandons her soon after bringing her and the children to Chicago.

Her third husband, the only one whom she meets in America, is the only one of Japanese ancestry. She meets him while waitressing at a Japanese restaurant. There is a shotgun wedding, and my father is born.



Her life is as American as Fitzgerald's boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past; as American as salmon in the Pacific Northwest, swimming upstream; as American as Dorothy clicking her ruby red slippers. Regressive.



She tries to assimilate to American culture. Before she joins the Buddhist temple, she takes English courses. My father is born on Election Day in 1956, and she wants to name him Dwight. Instead, she names my father and his sister Alan and Alice. She cannot pronounce the names that she, herself, has given them. Ar-ran, Ar-riss, she slurs.

She has three children, one from each of her marriages. Jim shoplifts records using a pizza box, Alice shoplifts clothing from Woolworth's, and my father steals candy and baseball equipment. The family dry cleaning business fails. All three of her children are stealing from the cash register.

My grandfather returns from the graveyard shift at a factory only to discover that my father had eaten a piece of meat that had been saved for him. Obachan watches her husband beat her son, calling him a fat, disgusting pig.



Her husband begins to shrivel, until he can only fit into boys' clothing. His hearing deteriorates, until he can no longer sustain dialogue. He has rotted beyond recognition.

She retreats from the family. She misses my aunt's wedding to attend a Buddhist conference. Her English regresses. With each passing year, as Japan becomes increasingly more Westernized, she retreats deeper and deeper into Japan's receding culture.

II.

Obachan's words are mangled by her accent. She serves me salty Japanese food which I do not find palatable.

I wear her prayer beads as necklaces, bang on the altar's gongs, and eat the mochi that is meant as a sacrifice of Buddha.

She chooses my middle name, Keiko. There is a killer whale with the same name, and other children make fun of me.

She tells me that I should enter beauty contests. 'They're not just for pretty girls anymore,' she says.

By the time I am thirteen, I tell her, 肉を食べない, I don't eat meat, yet she stills serves me stews with balls of fish.

She wants nothing more than for me to visit Japan. During my first year of college, she begs some acquaintances to offer me a scholarship to study at a Buddhist theological seminary in Japan, neglecting to consult me. I am not Buddhist, I tell her, and moreover, I have little interest in Japan. I envision it as a futuristic theme park with chrome buildings, with crowds of people too germophobic to touch one another. I want bucolic Irish pastures, or Andean valleys carved from prehistoric glaciers, or rippling sand dunes in Tunisia. I decline the scholarship for which she has worked so hard, and it devastates her.



My parents were unmarried when I was born—a common occurrence in our family. The name on my birth certificate is Tasha Jackson, but my parents switch my last name to Matsumoto when I am young.

Anglo surnames preserve their forefathers' name, meaning that, as Tasha Jackson, the progenitor my lineage had been named Jack. Japanese surnames are vestiges of where one's ancestors lived, forever entrenched in a home we no longer remember. Our surname, Matsumoto, translates as "at the base of a pine tree," meaning that my ancestors had taken shelter beneath pine branches, on blankets of brown needles. In Japan, pine trees, green even in winter, paradoxically symbolize both youth and longevity.

In Japanese, the home of one's ancestors is integral to one's identity.



When I am twenty, I plan to spend four months in India. I agree to visit my grandmother's nephew and his family in Japan. Obachan is the happiest she has ever been.

III.

I fly from Detroit to Tokyo. Due to the curvature of the earth's surface, we fly over the frost-molded moonscapes of Alaska. The sun shines through my window during my entire flight, like an endless day. Flying westward through time zones, I travel backwards in time, until I cross the International Date Line that partitions Wednesday afternoon from Thursday afternoon, and I jump into the future.



My middle-aged cousin Keiko and her son Atsuko pick me up from the Tokyo airport. We drive to their home in Mito, the city of apricot blossoms. In the car, they ask if Hurricane Katrina has caused damage in Chicago.

I have studied Japanese for six years, and formal verb conjugations are my default mode of communication, not casual conjugations. My words are stilted and distanced.



Outside their home, a sign welcoming me to Japan sprouts from the soil of a potted plant. Inside, I meet Keiko's husband, Muneo, his elderly mother whom I called Obasan, and their younger son, Tetsuro, a twenty-nine year old auto mechanic. Tetsuro and Muneo wear Hideki Matsui New York Yankees jerseys sent from my father. Tetsuro is in a post-hardcore band, and loves the

Meat Puppets, Dinosaur Jr., and Hüsker Dü. Though he speaks no English, his knowledge of American music exceeds mine. Muneo wears oversized glasses and is excitable, as if he is a child. 'Call your father and your grandmother,' he insists. We talk on speakerphone, and everyone laughs as I tangle my Japanese and English. This is the last time my grandmother and I ever speak.

Muneo shows me a picture of myself. 'Red face, red face!' he yells in Japanese. 'Were you drinking liquor? Do you drink liquor?' He returns with a tray of white ceramic cups that look like the bottom half of eggshells. He pours sake for everyone.



I have searched and searched, but I have never found sake like that again. I learn that the flavor of sake changes depending on the type of the cup; different types of pottery retain heat differently, and the temperature alters the taste.



Muneo shows me grainy Xeroxed pictures of my towering Uncle Jim, uncomfortably bound in a kimono. Uncle Jim first introduced Muneo to Simon and Garfunkel. Muneo speaks no English, but knows the words to every song their albums. He sings "Bridge Over Troubled Water" in an off-key falsetto.



Muneo operates his acupuncture practice from the first floor of their three-story house. I discover that here, acupuncture is neither mystical nor New Age-y. Muneo differs little from a Western doctor. He whacks golf balls at an outdoor driving range every night, and owns an imported Mercedes, an indulgence in America, an extravagant luxury in Japan, amid Hondas and Toyotas.

Muneo invites me to watch him work, breaching all doctor-patient confidentiality laws. I wince as he sticks needles into an old woman's convex, liver-spotted back. He notices my discomfort, and sticks a needle into my arm. I lie down on a plastic bed that undulates beneath my back. He applies ointment to my skin, and presses a smoldering rod, about the size of a crayon, onto my arm, as if branding a bull into a herd.



Muneo and I ride a bus through fields of flooded rice paddies to go to Tokyo. There, we visit a Buddhist temple, where I buy Obachan incense.

The nearby Tokyo Tower, reminiscent of the Eiffel Tower, but taller, painted red and white, and utterly graceless, casts a net of shadows like spider webs upon the temple. In a more modern temple next door, a funeral is taking place. I feel self-conscious. I walk away from the somber procession, towards the gardens surrounding the temple. I investigate trees that have been planted by Ulysses S. Grant and George H. W. Bush.

Amidst the skyscrapers of Tokyo, occupying acres of the world's most expensive property, are the Imperial Palace's expansive gardens. Though rumored to be worth more than all the real estate in California combined, the gardens have been preserved for nearly four centuries, and were rebuilt after being bombed in World War II.



There are multiple calendars here. There is the Gregorian calendar. There is a calendar in which time is measured by the phases of the moon, with each month subdivided into six-day weeks. There is a calendar in which each year is measured according to the number of years the current emperor has reigned.



Muneo and I visit the Kairaku-en, one of the Three Great Gardens of Japan, which translates as, 'to share pleasure with people.' We visit the estate of a samurai. Before entering the house, we slip our shoes into plastic bags, and walk past hand-painted paper doors in our socks. The grounds are filled with plum trees, azaleas, and cedars, including one that is 700 years old. We watch artists in the gardens, immortalizing the park in oil paints. Near a frothing natural spring, Muneo and I see a motherless black kitten, its eyes crusted shut with discharge.



Each day, I go jogging in a nearby park, circumambulating a lake. I time my laps with an inexpensive digital watch, bright orange.

Muneo and I ride bicycles in the park. In the woods, we watch as a Noh drama is performed on a vaulted wooden pavilion. The actors wear billowing silk brocades, and move rigidly, like stylized robots. They mouth their words as

different actors backstage recite their lines into microphones, in exaggerated, yet stilted, cadences, reminiscent of exaggerated Al Gore impressions.

'I am unable to understand the dialogue,' I tell Muneo. He tells me that he, too, is unable to understand it. The language is too archaic.



In the middle of the night, Keiko, Muneo, and I board an all-night bus en route to Expo 2005, a world's fair in Nagoya. To enter the Expo, we wait for two hours.

'This is Japan's hottest climate,' Muneo says cheerfully. Sweat distorts his face like a melting wax candle.

Inside the Expo, a quarter of a million Japanese people visit a microcosm of the globe, with cultural pavilions representing Indonesia, France, or Peru. Muneo carries both a digital camera and a camcorder, and a tripod that, when fully extended, is taller than he. In the Toyota pavilion, we watch dancing robots gesture as fluidly as humans. Muneo sulks because flash photography is prohibited. Fun is fun only when fun is documented.

The American pavilion honors the discovery of electricity. The walls are paneled with white television screens depicting summer thunderstorms. A copper statue of Benjamin Franklin clutches a neon string, which pirouettes from his hand to the fluorescent clouds on the ceiling. There are displays of the Wright brothers' plane and General Motors vehicles. There are exhibits featuring the hydrogen fuel cell, but Enrico Fermi's nuclear reactor is absent.



I photograph commodes with control panels that activate built-in blow-dryers and bidets, and Keiko laughs at me. Each bathroom in their home has a urinal in addition to a toilet bowl.

The Japanese waste disposal system is an art form. The pristine sewer covers are engraved and painted with the pink blossoms for which Mito is famous.

I encounter my first non-Western toilets at the Pacific Ocean, about twenty kilometers away from Keiko and Muneo's home, which are nothing but terracotta holes in the ground.



There are two worlds here, the Japan that she remembers, and the hyper-contemporary world, unrecognizable to her, but familiar to me.



Obasan, Muneo's mother, resembles a shriveled ear of corn. She grasps my hand and pulls me to her bedroom. Unlike the other rooms, there are no flat screen televisions or computers. In the altar, behind a glass display case, are silvery daguerreotypes of my great-grandparents and a yellowed parchment with the names of our ancestors, written in skeletal brushstrokes. We sit on the tatami mat floor in front of her Buddhist altar, and offer bowls of rice and sticky candy to our ancestors.

Obasan takes me to see the graves of her parents. She takes pictures of me next to their tombstones, and I unintentionally smile. We replace a dead bouquet with a fresh one. She points to the weeds that have sprouted between the white gravel of their graves, and together, we hold them, and tear.



Muneo and Keiko look as if they are going to cry when they drop me off at the airport. As soon as Muneo returns home, he types an e-mail to my father and me with the subject line, 'I feel sad Tasha leaved Japan.' With the help of an online translator, he writes, 'This is Muneo. Tasha gone forth on time. She was very vigor. Would you please don't worry. My family had nice seven days. We made wonderful memory.'

The day I leave, I promise Obasan that I will give my grandmother a jade green silk kimono on her behalf.

I break this promise. She dies later that day.

As Obachan is about to die, it is I who is saying goodbye to her family, not she.

IV.

I am overly conscious of the prospect of death. My own, not hers. I have a connecting flights in Sri Lanka, where the U.S. Department of State has issued a travel advisory. The safety video on Sri Lankan Airlines features a demonstration of the duck and cover technique, a method as effective on an airplane as it would be during nuclear fallout.



I wait in three different airports. I feel as if I am occupying a liminal space, a threshold between realities, not reality itself.

Airport “terminals” are anything but. They are at once the ending, and the beginning, of a journey.

An ending is a beginning.

As Lao-Tzu says, to be born is to exit, to die is to enter.

The arcs of our lives, intersecting.



Mahayana Buddhists estimate that it takes the spirit forty-nine days to become reborn.

The forty-ninth day after she has died, her temple in Chicago celebrates her successful transmigration. I do not understand what happens during those forty-nine days, when she is suspended between two places. She is nowhere, beyond time.



I arrive in Mumbai at two o'clock in the morning. The weather is transitioning from the rainy season to the dry, and the air is thick and humid. Moisture seeps beneath the plastic face of my orange watch, and like an overdrawn metaphor, my watch stops.



The following day, I ride in a van to Pune, a city about four hours away from Mumbai. Rain cascades down the Western Ghats like waterfalls. In Pune, I check my e-mail in an Internet café. I have received an e-mail from my father. It begins with platitudes: I hope you are safe, I hope you enjoyed Japan, We should send the Hirasawa family more gifts, What would they like? He punctuates the email with, ‘My Mother died today. She fell asleep and never woke up.’

I do not know how to find a telephone. I wander around the city until I see a sign for I.S.D./S.T.D. international services at the entrance of a narrow passageway that is flanked by stores selling acid washed jeans and imitation

Nike duffel bags. I walk up a soiled cement staircase. There is a woman behind a glass window, with a telephone on a pedestal outside of her office. I have difficulties operating the phone, and the strange dial tone confuses me. I wake my father in the middle of the night. We are separated by eleven and a half hours.



Time is a messy form of math.

I try to calculate the time when she died. I try to factor in time differences from the U.S. to Japan, from Japan to Sri Lanka to Maldives to Mumbai. Perhaps she dies when I am airborne over the Bay of Bengal, or perhaps she dies in the middle of the night as I am riding my first rickshaw. Though I don't know the exact hour she passed away, I like to think that Obachan died the moment I left her homeland.

Whenever I imagine her death, I imbue it with elegiac beauty: I see myself kissing Muneo and Keiko goodbye as she is kissing my grandfather goodnight, and as I ascend the ramp to the plane, she ascends the stairs in her home, and as I walk onto the plane, she walks into her bedroom, and as I press my head against the cold window of the plane, she lays her head upon her soft pillow, and as the plane accelerates faster and faster, her heartbeat throbs slower and slower, and just before the wheels of my plane lift from the land of her birth, she exhales her final breath.



Tasha Matsumoto received her MFA from Notre Dame. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Ninth Letter*, *Quarterly West*, *Marginalia*, and *Pank*.