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KARTIKA REVIEW

MEDITATIONS ON “HOME”



DAVID MURA

TALES OF HYBRIDITY

A man who lived in the hotel
run by my father's family

had a child with a Native woman.
Up in Alaska, canning salmon.

the women kept moving to seasonal
labor. (The men saw no reason

to fish for someone else.) Iron
Chink they branded

the canning machinery
and who cares Nips

manned its welding
as the Native women scooped

innards and bones from

souls close to their own.

How does the living man speak
to the living woman

fleeing the Christian missionaries
for potlatch and native belief?

Why didn't she choose her own?
Why did he leave? The heart

conceals nothing but
the heart, which is invisible

to history but never
the body. Issei. Tinglit.

Hiding in plain sight.
A baby called China Jim.



Recall May as an avenue
into summer. A tryst

in the fields. Jesus
and a Jap girl. Sighs

in the gathering heat
and the first weeds.

Tell me a story
in seventeen syllables.

Write me a window
where his face appears

and she turns around
like a promise

that can only be whispered
and never kept.

Which of them can believe
in God? The gods tell us tales

for which we pray
but our skin simmers

as the summer enters
and the strawberries ripen

and mother's characters
look away a moment

as father mutters
hayaku, hayaku

and the earth proves us
mortal providing fruit

and sorrow
in equal proportions.

Half and half.
An impossible notion.



Once there was a house.
In the suburbs.

My father recalled
nothing, though there

were legal documents
he signed. No

love affairs, no
violence. Just

a blank memory
as if he ran away

and never returned.

I wished only
for a cruel instinct.
Instead I weep.

I pull on a coat
and it's cold.

I lie down
and I'm clay.

I shake my hands.
Fists won't appear.

Only forbidden
pleasures. Kisses

from white girls
and the separation

that exists in a room
where two lovers

have given up
their ghostly embrace.



We were a colonized people.
We were a colonizing people.

We were never a people.
A nation. A tribe.

In the story
that brought me

to the frozen heart
of the continent

dawn breaches the river
beneath the bridge

and a poet leaps
into immortality

or away from
the personal life.

There is no
personal life.

My father learns English
before I can be born.

I learn Japanese
to forget who I am.

And our faces turn
to history

strangers to the happa
children who

slam doors
in anger

or exhuberance
running through my home.



From *Turning Japanese: My Grandparent's Kuni*

--David Mura

Going to Japan brought me right up against the idea of home. Home, in one sense, is a limit. It restricts by categorizing: he was born in the country of ____, the city of ____, in the home of ____. The Japanese, those insular, rooted, island people, are highly conscious of where they come from, their kuni . In contrast, I was pleased when my Japanese teacher told me that Abe Kobo, the Japanese novelist once remarked, "I have no kuni ." A compatriot, I thought, another of the homeless.

Long ago, for my ancestors, the village of my name was the center of the world, and the mountains or the seashore, the edge of that world. Sure of their kuni , their gods, their values, those ancestors knew what lay beyond

was the realm of unreality, the country of the dead, the dwelling of phantoms and nothingness. Generations removed from those ancestors, I suffered from a lack of a center, a fixed point from which to chart the stream. Instead, I was constantly sinking into the foam of formlessness, a dissolving identity--What God do I believe in? Who are my people? What language do I speak? What are my customs? How shall I raise my children? Where will I be a year from now, ten years, at my deathbed? What is my history, the stories of my family, the myths of my people?

The man who emigrated--my grandfather-- carried within him the memory of home, the former world, the place where he was once "real." It tore at him, that memory, and yet it kept him anchored: He knew where his home was, knew that he had lost it. The son of that man--my father--believed he could make the new place his home. The task was probably impossible, but it kept him occupied. The son of that man--myself--realizes what? That the new home--in my case, a Jewish suburb--is no home, is, in fact, for me an absurdity, a sham, and that the old home is lost in unreality.

At the time I went to Japan, I saw my sense of homelessness and my defiance of limits as intimately related to my reaction to stereotypes. If American culture wanted to see me solely as Mr. Moto or the buck-toothed gardener, I wanted to outplay, to leap beyond the bounds of, other people's conceptions of me. I would not choose, would not settle; I would keep my options open. I countered with the illusion I could be anything. One day, Yeats said, the poet will wear all masks. Perhaps that was the reason it took me so long to return to the lost center, my grandparents' *kuni*.



David Mura is a poet, creative nonfiction writer, critic, playwright and performance artist. A Sansei or third generation Japanese American, Mura has written two memoirs: *Turning Japanese: Memoirs of a Sansei* (Anchor-Random), which won a 1991 Josephine Miles Book Award from the Oakland PEN and was listed in the New York Times Notable Books of Year, and *Where the Body Meets Memory: An Odyssey of Race, Sexuality and Identity* (1996, Anchor).