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Literature as Community

The Turtle, Imagination & the Journey Home

A WHILE BACK, Min Song, professor of literature, interviewed me and asked apologetically if I considered myself to be an Asian American writer. I didn't understand the apology, and he explained that several of his interviewees became somewhat incensed at the question, remarking that they were *American* writers who happened to be *Asian American*. I ask myself: Where is Asian America? And what is Asian America if not a political construct? It is a naming category to recognize the immigration and participation of Asian and Pacific Islander peoples in American society and political life over the past one hundred and fifty years. Initially, the literature asserted its grounding within American continental history and geography, but it has always been culturally referential to the necessary crossing of the oceans, both Pacific and Atlantic, without which it cannot be fully read or understood. This navigation in relationship to the Americas has not been necessarily pacific but often a relationship and result of colonialism, racism, and war. As such, Asian American literature is at heart a literature of politics and resistance. So, I guess I am unapologetically an Asian American writer.

SO WITH THAT QUESTION out of the way, I want to begin what's been asked of me: an intimate lecture, a way of thinking about an Asian American journey personal to me.

Of the exact date and year I cannot say, but I am sure that my Aunt Chizu took me on a drive from her then home in Rossmoor in Walnut Creek to visit my cousin, Ted Ono, at his gift shop on Solano Avenue in Albany, on the border with Berkeley. I'm pretty sure that my Aunt Kay also came along, and perhaps we also met Ted's wife Barbara at the shop. The other purpose of that trip was to climb the steps to a small apartment on the same street and to meet with the author Yoshiko Uchida. Years later, I would discover Kay's cache of letters and her wartime correspondence with one of her best friends, Kay Uchida, Yoshiko's sister. I took for granted the connection of the

Yamashita family to the Uchidas, connections through the church and UC Berkeley and to their wartime incarceration at Topaz in Utah. These connections were part of the tightly knit association of Japanese immigrant communities in San Francisco and the East Bay. Now years later, we descendants can find ourselves retracing the weave of our relationships and near-encounters through the nisei conversation starter we often made fun of as kids: What camp were you in? We thought, camp? Could've been a tribal event of initiation or something. Why weren't we sent to camp too?

I know that Chiz and Kay had planned this meeting with Yoshiko Uchida because they were proud aunties who thought I was a writer. All these years later, this memory is both comical and sweet to me, and meanwhile Yoshiko Uchida, who met an earnest sansei kid just out of college, had no idea. In those years, Uchida was the most successfully published Japanese American writer of her generation. I might name other nisei writers (Hisaye Yamamoto, Toshio Mori, Wakako Yamauchi, Mitsuye Yamada), but of these writers, only Uchida lived by her craft. Not that she was swimming in royalties. Despite her many published books, she probably received a few cents on every copy sold. She lived alone and very modestly. She was, I thought, a real writer. I remember asking her why her stories were not anthologized in recent collections like *Aiiieeeee!* Perhaps there was a hint of bitterness in her answer, that her audience was considered juvenile. Children's literature had been a genre form she'd chosen to enter the publishing world, but it was still writing gifted with sophistication. Years later, she would publish her adult memoir, *Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese American Family*.

In the 1950s, my parents relocated from Oakland to Los Angeles, my father to pastor the Japanese American church Centenary Methodist, on 35th and Normandie Avenue. My folks, with other young nisei couples, had returned from the war and camps to try to jump start their lives in this old center of the Japanese American community in LA. We lived on 5th Avenue near Jefferson, a street lined with Japanese American businesses — groceries, butcher shops, pharmacies, dry cleaners, candy shops, and restaurants. Every day my sister and I walked past these storefronts to 6th Avenue Elementary School. Our classmates and neighbors were a mix of Japanese and African Americans, but for the most part we lived an insular life within the church, its Japanese American congregation at our center. In 1949, Uchida published her

first book, *The Dancing Tea Kettle, and other Japanese Folktales*. I assume this book to have been the first book of Japanese folktales written in English. So if we learned to read with Dick and Jane and Dr. Seuss, we also grew up with Uchida's stories. Of these tales, the one story that continues to puzzle and resonate for me is "Urashima Taro."

> Long, long ago, in a small village of Japan, there lived a fine young man named Urashima Taro. He lived with his mother and father in a thatched-roof house which overlooked the sea. Each morning he was up before the sun, and went out to sea in his little fishing boat. On days when his luck was good, he would bring back large baskets of fish which he sold in the village market.
>
> One day, as he was carrying home his load of fish, he saw a group of shouting children. They were gathered around something on the beach and were crying, "Hit him! Poke him!" Taro ran over to see what was the matter, and there on the sand he saw a big brown tortoise. The children were poking it with a long stick and throwing stones at its hard shell.

This is how Yoshiko Uchida's version of the Japanese folktale begins. As the story goes, Taro saves the tortoise from the bullying children, returning it to the sea. One day while Taro is fishing, the tortoise appears and, as a return gift of thanks, invites Taro to visit the princess of the sea. Taro climbs onto the tortoise's back and travels to the bottom of the sea. The sea princess fetes Taro with food and music and dancing and all the seasons of the year. Taro lives in this luxury for three years, which seem to him like three days. But at last Taro feels he must return home to his parents and takes his leave. As he leaves, the princess gives him a "small jewel box studded with many precious stones" and warns him that if he wishes to return to the Palace of the Sea, he must never never open that box. Well, perhaps anyway you know this story.

Sometime after the Watt's Riots and the assassination of JFK, and after my father's stroke and disability retirement, my family moved to Gardena, an old enclave of Japanese American strawberry and flower farmers turning their land into the suburbs. By then I was in high school and cynical enough to agree with my friends that Gardena was the armpit of America. This brings me to speak of a few of my Gardena high school friends, in particular Kathee Yamamoto and Garrett Hongo.

Kathee was always writing. She was the editor of the school newspaper, but before that she was the editor of a fan newsletter for the

Beatles. I figured Kathee was a writer because it was in her genes; her aunt was Hisaye Yamamoto, and Hisaye's best friend was Wakako Yamauchi, who also lived in Gardena. Like the relationship of my aunts to Yoshiko Uchida, I also never paid much attention to Kathee's relationship with these two illustrious nisei writers. Some years after high school, I heard Garrett complain to Kathee; why hadn't she told him about Hisaye and Wakako, introduced him sooner when we were in high school? Kathee replied with amusement, *Garrett, I didn't know you wanted to become a writer. I thought you wanted to blow up the world.*

One Gardena summer Garrett lived in an apartment a block away from Wakako Yamauchi's house, walking back and forth and forming a mentoring and writerly friendship that has lasted a lifetime. In 1982, Garrett published this poem for Wakako Yamauchi in his first book of poetry, *Yellow Light*. The title of the poem is "And Your Soul Shall Dance," honoring Wakako's short story, a story she eventually crafted into the dramatic play by the same title.

Walking to school beside fields
of tomatoes and summer squash,
alone and humming a Japanese love song,
you've concealed a copy of *Photoplay*
between your algebra and English texts.
Your knee socks, saddle shoes, plaid dress,
and blouse, long-sleeved and white
with ruffles down the front,
come from a Sears catalogue
and neatly complement your new Toni curls.
All of this sets you apart from the landscape:
flat valley grooved with irrigation ditches,
a tractor grinding through alkaline earth,
the short stands of windbreak eucalyptus
shuttering the desert wind
from a small cluster of wooden shacks
where your mother hangs the wash.
You want to go somewhere.
Somewhere far away from all the dust
and sorting machines and acres of lettuce.
Someplace where you might be kissed
by someone with smooth, artistic hands.
When you turn into the schoolyard,
the flagpole gleams like a knife blade in the sun,
and classmates scatter like chickens,
shooed by the storm brooding in your horizon.

I believe that what Garrett captures here is the same desire both he and I shared for something beyond the confinement of our provincial origins, even though we would have to return again and again in order to leave.

Leaving the old armpit of my California home, I went to school in Minnesota, Carleton College. One day, Alex Haley, the author of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, arrived to give the convocation lecture. Though it seems an impossible memory, I believe we were riveted to our seats for the next three hours, while Haley spoke of his relationship and writing with Malcolm X in the first hour, and then for the next two hours told the cadenced storytelling of the transatlantic crossing of his named ancestor, Kunte Kinte. I have never forgotten that day sitting up in the hard pews in the balcony of the Skinner Memorial Chapel, filled to capacity. That we come from somewhere had meaning. In the next year, I would make my transpacific crossing to do what my family called "KT's roots thing," figure out where we came from and why. But finding out my roots turned out to be a mixed bag because I had thought it would be the same thing as finding belonging. If I had not entirely belonged to my Japanese American communities in LA and Gardena, I was a really bad fit in Japan.

In my continuing years at Carleton, two professors there were special mentors, American literature professor Bob Tisdale and anthropologist Paul Riesman. Many years later I realized that it was Tisdale who quietly believed in me despite my huge anxieties; he was behind small invitations to meet writers at his home and supported my proposal for the Watson Fellowship that would send me to Brazil. And it was Paul Riesman who made me understand my role as a stranger and the powers of observation and empathy that role might support. The lessons my teachers provided took many years to understand. I was sent away with two odd and disparate, but now obvious, books: Claude Levi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques* and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. And I would have to travel to the other side of the hemisphere, a time travel of sorts, to meet another community of Japanese immigrants who'd acculturated Brazilian. If these Japanese immigrants were Brazilian, what did it mean to be American?

This is the question I pondered while researching the Japanese Brazilian community and writing and rewriting the novel *Brazil-Maru*. I arrived in Brazil at the end of the American sixties, a period rife with ideological, racial, and political turmoil, the Vietnam War, hippie com-

munalism, civil rights movements. I met a community of Japanese Brazilians who had lived through similar experiments, idealizing a new civilization and practicing communalism from the 1920s on. These people could have been my grandparents, my parents. What had happened to their community, and how did they survive the war years? What I learned were lessons of resilience, hubris, and failure. Over the many years since, I've maintained interest in scholarship and writing about Asians in the Americas, but only recently have I come across Asian American writing that haunts the psyche of Brazilian discovery—encounters of indigenous and civilized, science and belief, sexuality and race, story and history. While her story resides in the Pacific, in her novel *The People in the Trees*, Hanya Yanagihara binds these narratives in her writing with complexity and danger.

This segment from *The People in the Trees* reminds me of the folktale of Urashima Taro, which Hanya extends darkly and magically to explore ideas of immortality.

> As my father stood near the shore, very sad, he suddenly saw something dark sliding beneath the water's surface. My father assumed it was a school of the skinny, silvery fish that anyone could scoop up with a bit of homemade net and then cook over an open fire, their bones so fine you could eat them whole. But then, to my father's great astonishment, the thing rose, and my father saw that it was an enormous turtle, the biggest he had ever seen, both taller and wider than he was, its feet as large as lawa's ferns, paddling the water in brisk, forceful strokes and staring at my father with its slow yellow eyes. My father was so amazed he found himself unable to move, but then the turtle waddled the top half of his body on to land, and my father understood that he was to straddle the turtle's back and the turtle would take him to Ivu'ivu.
>
> My father had never felt exhilaration like the kind he experienced riding atop the turtle. The turtle swam gingerly through the shallows, careful not to scratch his feet on the great oceans of coral, but once they were in open water, his swimming became swift and powerful, and they passed groups of sharks, pods of whales, and once a magnificent fleet of other opa'ivu'ekes, hundreds of them, each as big as the one he was riding, who lifted their heads from the water and stared at him as if in salute with a multiplicity of glowing eyes.
>
> In no time at all they were at Ivu'ivu, and as my father was climbing off the turtle's back, he was for a moment certain that the turtle, who had been watching him with his big eyes, as large and yellow as mangoes, was going to speak to him. But the turtle did not, only blinked at my father and turned and swam back to sea,

> while my father kept his head bowed in the turtle's direction, in respect, until he could no longer hear the turtle's strokes, only the sound of the waves.

Hanya captures here the idea of the turtle as a magical but also an inscrutable being upon whose back we climb hoping to find our destiny. Perhaps what lies ahead is an adventure or an escape or the moment of our death. The turtle is a great vehicle, a silent spaceship; the responsibility of our journey is only our own, real or imagined.

About the time that the Brazilian military returned the government to a civilian democracy, I left with my Brazilian family to immigrate into Los Angeles. As predicted, LA had become a diversely cosmopolitan city, its growing majority complexion turned Latino, and by the time the 1992 riots burned across our landscape, we knew the media had completely mischaracterized the conflicts as black and white or black and Korean. As Brazilians, we were part of the Latin American shift, and I sought to understand this shift in a novel called *Tropic of Orange*. It was during this time that I met, and have been ever since been inspired by, the East LA poet Sesshu Foster.

Sesshu narrates, as only Sesshu Foster can, an alternative reality in his novel *Atomik Aztex*.

> Perhaps you are familiar with some worlds, stupider realities amongst alternate universes offered by the ever expanding-omniverse, in which the Aztek civilization was 'destroyed.' That's a possibility. I mean that's what the Europians thot. They planned genocide, wipe out our civilization, build cathedrals on TOP of our pyramidz, bah, hump our women, not just our women but the Tlaxkalans, the Mixteks, the Zapoteks, the Chichimeks, the Ute, the Triki, the Kahuilla, the Shoshone, the Maidu, the Klickitat, the Mandan, the Chumash, the Yaqui, the Huicholes, the Meskwaki, the Guarani, Seminoles, endless peoples, decimate 'em with smallpox, measles and shit fits, welfare lines, workaholicm, imbecility, enslave 'em in the silver mines of Potosí, the gold mines of El Dorado and Disneylandia, on golf course & country clubs, chingados, all our brothers, you get the picture . . . The Europians figured they'd wipe us out. Plan A, enslave our people down at the corner liquor store, crush all resistance thru germ warfare and layers, lie, cheat, kidnap, ransom, burn our sacred libraries, loot our capital, install Christian theokratik diktatorships, slaughter us by the millions . . . then claim it waz all accident, just their luck—they'd pretend they just happened by on their way to India to buy some

> cardamom, some nutmeg and spice—like you'd just accidently happen to decimate Whole Civilizations and Worlds just to set a nice breakfast table—hot coffee, cinnamon toast, chiming silverware . . . Did we care if they had a Plan B? Hell, no. Cuz in no way does this fit our aesthetic conception of how the universe is supposed to run. It's just plain ugly. To think that they want to foist that vision of Reality on the rest of us. That's the insult. Barbarik, cheap aesthetic based on flimsy Mechanistik notions of the omniverse as a Swiss watch set to ticking by some sort of Trinity. The Spanish believed they had superior firepower with the gunpowder, blunderbusses, crossbows with metal darts, steel body-armor, Arabian horses, galleons built in Cádiz. All that waz true. But we Aztex had our ways and means. We have access to the meanest, nastiest, psycho Gods through voodoo, jump blues, human sacrifice, proletarian vanguard parties, Angry Coffee House Poetry, fantasy life intensified through masturbation & comic books, plus all our armies, Flower Warriors, Jaguar Legions, Eagle Elite Units, Jiu Jitsu and of course the secret weapon. In a nutshell. The Spanish didn't have a chance.

The imagination sometimes reveals itself intensely and violently insane, but it's the only sane site where we can do war, bloody hand-to-hand combat, express grief and anger, find solace, reconciliation.

In the mid-nineties, I met Ryuta Imafuku, writer, scholar, and cultural critic, who invited and sponsored my family's six-month stay in Japan to research the return migration of Japanese Brazilian factory laborers. During that period, Ryuta invited me to write online monthly installments about my research and travels, and those essays found their way into *Circle K Cycles*. It was Ryuta's insistent but always gentle prodding that encouraged me to see and explore the growing Brazilian *dekasegi* community and to see that community in diasporic movement in the context of both a historical and contemporary Japan. If I had learned my lesson as a young stranger in years past, I was given the confidence and freedom of an old stranger. The twisting triangulations of my world are constantly changing and flexible. Although it's possible to name other writers who live with such mobility, I feel closest to the shifting homes of R. Zamora Linmark, moving about Honolulu, Manila, San Francisco, Miami, Madrid, Buenos Aires, Tokyo, and always pursuing the chaos of language with play and dark humor.

A recurring immigrant story is that laborers leave their children behind with grandparents or relatives, then send for their children years later when they are able to afford to do so. This is the last scene of Zack's

novel *Leche*. The protagonist Vince returns from Kalihi, Honolulu, to his childhood home in the Philippines, San Vicente, where his grandfather has died, to find it emptied of his family and childhood past.

> And the photographs? What happened to the wall-to-wall photographs that showed generation after generation of the Lewis clan? Where are the hand-painted photographs of turn-of-the-century relatives, one who came to the tropics as a soldier to fight the Filipinos and another to teach them. And the airport group shots of himself, Alvin, Jing, Yaya Let, and Don Alfonso in front of the fountain on the afternoon they were sent off to their parents. Whom do they belong to now?
>
> He reassures himself that they're upstairs. Of course, they're upstairs, where the bedrooms are. He runs up the wooden staircase, heads straight for his room as if he's lived there all his life. It too is empty. As empty as the succession of closets and cabinet drawers he pulls open, hoping to get assaulted by memorabilia smelling of mothballs. But nothing. No one dusty shelf of books or issue of komiks. Empty . . .
>
> Fighting off tears, and with a heart that doesn't know when to give up hope, he searches room after room, wall after wall, for holes punctured by nails upon which used to hang gilt-edged picture frames. He checks the inside of doors for shadows of the photographs that had once been tacked there.
>
> He took everything with him to his grave, Vince tells himself. He didn't want me to return and reclaim what was mine — my family history, objects from my childhood. Why didn't Alvin and Jing tell me? Did they even know? They must've known. Why did Lolo Al do this — erase all the dust and dirt of my past? Why did he renounce everything? Nothing salvaged. Nothing. Except this house smelling of newly waxed floors.
>
> Back in the living room, he goes and stands by the window, an unlit cigarette in his hand, looking out at the white sheets and towels hanging on the clothesline, at the church steeple, and beyond it, at the Sierra Madre that gave birth the legend of four women who had turned their back on San Vicente; looking, just looking at the coming darkness the way his grandfather, on the same spot, used to sit on his favorite cane-backed chair, listening to the radio and smoking Marlboro Reds in his pajamas with his legs crossed, his foot tapping against his slipper, watching the dusk as it claimed San Vicente light by light.

Zack mourns here the loss of home, while showing the predicament of mobility of the transnational as a state of new global citizenship, often celebrated, but also for many migrant laborers a state in limbo and of great precarity. So it seems that here, the great turtle with its

shell as home has a different lesson, how we must also travel within our bodies, even if marked by ethnicity, gender, color.

IN THE LATE NINETIES I began teaching at UC Santa Cruz, and along with learning how to teach, I made forays into San Francisco to research the Asian American movement as it was birthed in Chinatown, Manilatown, Japantown and in the universities, factories, and cultural and political institutions spawned in that period. And I found the center of that narrative in the International or I-Hotel. As with other projects, I set out to be a gathering machine, recording myriad stories of anyone willing to talk to me. I never recorded anyone on a recording machine; my method has been to record with my body and to remember, well, everything — bodily expression, insinuation, syntax, cadence, and story. The most difficult recording was the one I tried to accomplish with the poet Al Robles. I met with him at Vesuvio in North Beach next to City Lights and sipped Cokes with him for hours while I tried to pin down the most preposterous stories. By the time it grew dark, he stood up and said, *Let's get some dirty food*, which meant that we would go to Chinatown and slip into a greasy diner for chop suey. I think I dropped him off at home around midnight and headed back to Santa Cruz. I was exhausted; I'd been "recording" for maybe twelve hours. Maybe I didn't get Al's stories quite right, but he was, as his friends said, the poet-monk of the Tenderloin, and I miss him dearly.

Al, with the help of Russell Leong and the UCLA Asian American Studies Center, published one book of poetry, *Rappin' with Ten Thousand Carabaos in the Dark*. This is the first stanza of that signature poem.

> International Hotel — in the mongo heart & isda mind of the
> Philippines — where old & young Pilipinos live, hang, &
> roam around all day like carabaos in the mud: eating, sleep-
> ing & working. Pilipinos scattered all over — brown faces piled
> high, moving like shadows on trees, concrete doorways,
> pool halls, barber shops. Guitar music echoes thru —
> down deep in your mongo heart & isda mind. Chinatown
> across the way. Sixty-thousand or more live in rooms the
> size of tea pots, stretching east, west, north & south.
> Thousands are crammed in damp basements, alley ways,
> behind run-down barrels of ancient Chinese mountain wine.
> Thousands of Chinese children run along soy sauce streets —
> long black hair glistening like a cool stream — a quiet moon
> watches. Short crop of hair — morning spring faces —

> underneath fresh-soaked clouds. All those tiny footsteps
> keep the winter belly warm.

Similar to the turtle, Al gave the old Filipino bachelors, the manong, a kind of mythical status as carabao, water buffalo roaming surreally in the halls and teapot rooms of the International Hotel, mud replaced by the concrete doorways, barbershops, pool halls, soy sauce streets.

In the past years, I've been forced to think about the future, partly because many of my students want to write science fiction and fantasy, what the academy has rebranded as the speculative. My colleague Micah Perks pointed out that I've been a speculative writer for years; just didn't know it. With the help of Stephen Hong Sohn, I published *Anime Wong: Fictions of Performance*. This work remembers my collaborations with director Shizuko Hoshi, videographer Karen Mayeda, composers Vicki Abe and Glenn Horiuchi, and the dozens of actors, dancers, designers, stage personnel, and producers who joined our performance projects presented at venues in Los Angeles for Asian American audiences. Recently more Asian American writers have taken a turn to the speculative. I have followed with admiration the writing of Chang-rae Lee since his first book, *Native Speaker*. Most recently, his novel *On Such a Full Sea* imagines the present-future of vacated and blighted cities and the global exchange of labor in a completely secular society governed by class and capital.

What follows are edited selections that introduce the collective narrator and the protagonist of Chang-rae's novel.

> It is known where we come from, but no one much cares about things like that anymore. We think, Why bother? Except for a lucky few, everyone is from someplace, but that someplace it turns out, is gone. You can search it, you can find pix or vids that show what the place last looked like, in our case a gravel-colored town of stoop-shouldered buildings on a riverbank in China, shorn hills in the distance. Rooftops a mess of wires and junk. The river tea-still, a swath of black. And blunting it all is a haze that you can almost smell, a smell, you think you don't want to breathe in.
>
> So what does it matter if the town was razed one day, after our people were trucked out? What difference does it make that there's almost nothing there now? It was on the other side of the world, which might as well be a light-year away. Though probably it was mourned when it was thriving. People are funny that way; even the most miserable kind of circumstance can inspire a genuine throb of nostalgia.

[And then there is]

> . . . the tale of Fan, a young woman whose cause has been taken up by a startling number of us. She's now gone from here, and whether she's enduring or suffering or dead is a matter for her household, whatever their disposition. They are gone, too, transferred to another facility in the far west, the best scenario for them after the strife she caused.
>
> We can talk about her openly because hers is no grand tragedy, no apocalypse of the soul or of our times. Yes, there are those who would like to believe otherwise; that each and every being in the realm is a microcosm of the realm. That we are heartened and chastened and elevated by a singular reflection. This is a fetching idea, metaphorically and otherwise, most often enlisted for promoting the greater good. But more and more we can see that the question is not whether we are "individuals." We can't help but be, this has been proved, case by case. We are not drones or robots and never will be. The question, then, is whether being an "individual" makes a difference anymore. That it can matter at all. And if now, whether we in fact care.
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> Did Fan care about such things?
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> . . .
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> But let's suppose another way of considering here, which was that she had a special conviction of imagination. Few of us do, to be honest. We wish and wish and often with fury but never very deeply. For if we did, we'd see how the world can sometimes split open, in just the way we hope. That it and we are, in fact, unbounded. Free.

Perhaps it is not obvious, but what I have attempted here is to weave a personal history with encounters of community, remembered and imagined, as literary history. Why I ended up writing, I am not sure. It wasn't genes or a passionate choice. It's probably the only thing I'm really equipped to do. But in reflecting on this journey, I have traveled within and been a part of many communities, perhaps as a familiar stranger, providentially there and not there, an empathetic observer, wanting to learn, caring to record. That has been my particular role and contribution. There are many writers whose names and words I might have also shared today, but given the time, those mentioned here are a few of those with whom I have grown up and grown old.

Immigrants, refugees, exiles, by the fortunes of life, have set forth on the backs of immortal turtles to distant places or perhaps not so distant, but alternate, displaced, bomb-out realities, often never to return or to discover that return is never possible. Asian America might be an

imagined island or an undersea palace. Perhaps it is Hanya's Ivu'ivu, Sesshu's East LA, or Al's I-Hotel. Or it is Zack's limbo, Garrett's somewhere, Chang-rae's unbounded world.

As Yoshiko Uchida has retold the story of Urashima Taro, Taro returns from the Sea Palace on the back of the great tortoise to his village and finds it completely changed, and where his thatched-roof home should have been there is "an empty lot full of tall green weeds." He queries an old woman who recalls a story about a young fisherman named Urashima Taro who went out to fish and never returned. This, she muses, must have happened three hundred years ago. Confused but thinking that the jeweled box gifted to him by the princess must hold an answer, he opens the box.

> Suddenly, there arose from it a cloud of white smoke which wrapped itself around Taro so that he could see nothing. When it disappeared, Urashima Taro peered into the empty box, but he could scarcely see. He looked at his hands and they were the hands of an old, old man. His face was wrinkled; his hair was as white as snow.

This year, Coffee House Press will publish *Letters to Memory*. While I am unable to characterize the book, my editor Caroline Casey has said it is essay. It is a work based on an archive of family correspondence, documents, and photographs, the center of which are letters written between 1938 to 1948, capturing the family's wartime dispersal from Oakland, California, to the Topaz concentration camp in Delta, Utah, and beyond to schools and work in the Midwest and East Coast and, for a portion of the family, their eventual return to California. The form my book has taken is epistolary, that is, fictional letters. What follows is the first part of "Letters to Laughter."

> Dear Qohelet:
>
> You're a preacher's kid. When we met, we recognized each other immediately, that PK je ne sais qua, like we're supposed to being doing something significant eventually or actually, like we were raised with everyone looking on politely resentful, assuming we knew, when we didn't, and thus, perpetual strangers in a world of blessed woe, primed by difference to serve. One day I heard you lecture, and I turned to you after and marveled, *You gave a sermon*. You answered, *All my lectures are sermons*. I thought, maybe mine too. Frustrated PKs. But you must have been really frustrated because finally you entered the seminary and got a master of divinity.

> I could never do this. Well, you believe, which is kind of necessary. One day I came home from junior high school and announced at dinner that I'd discovered a philosopher named Jean-Paul Sartre and a great idea called existentialism. I can't remember what John said, but that was the beginning. I have been that kind of PK, heading out in another direction which turns out anyway to be the same. I figure you will understand, that you'll know the skinny and funny of it.

Recently I saw again yet another staging of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and I wondered about those good and bad daughters, silent tribute versus false fawning and the misreading of love and honor. Do daughters naturally aspire to be Cordelia, or is this an impossible and romantic notion upset by character and circumstance? *No, no, no, no!* cries Lear to Cordelia, broken and unwilling to further challenge his fate. *Come*, he encourages her, *let's away to prison*. And then these his last words to his daughter:

> We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage.
> When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down
> And ask of thee forgiveness. So we'll live,
> And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
> At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
> Talk of court news, and we'll talk with them too—
> Who loses and who wins, who's in, who's out—
> And take upon 's the mystery of things
> As if we were God's spies.
> And we'll wear out
> In a walled prison packs and sects of great ones
> That ebb and flow by the moon.

I am drawn to memories in which we . . . *live, and pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh* . . .

Ah, but to *laugh at gilded butterflies,* this must be the satiric laughter that I am prone to, but John would say that this is not truly laughter, not the laughter that preoccupied his thinking. It is not laughter *at* but laughter *within*, I think, that concerned him. I am growing old searching for this kind of laughter, and where is he now that this laughter is needed most? Meanwhile I have found myself beholden to the lost possibility that we *take upon us the mystery of things as if we were God's spies*. Perhaps, this has been the meaning of these letters, though surely no mystery is revealed here. Simply, we have been together for a time to try.

NOTES

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