Bodies, Memories, Ghosts, and Objects or Telling a Memory

Natsumi Lynne Meyer

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Bodies, Memories, Ghosts, and Objects

or Telling a Memory

An Honors Paper for the Department of English

By Natsumi Meyer

Bowdoin College, 2023

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# Table of Contents

Preface 3

Part I: Baba

Chapter 1: Quiet Bodies, Memory Bodies 8
Chapter 2: Quiet Objects, Memory Objects 16

Part II: Jiji

Chapter 3: Talking to Jiji, Talking to Ghosts 36
Chapter 4: Ghost Stories, Ghost Storytellers 47

Coda 67

Acknowledgments 69
Preface

I think it started in December 2017, when my Mama sent me to Japan to take care of my grandparents, Baba and Jiji, alone. I had been to Japan almost every year since I was eleven years old, and several times before that too, but this was my first time without Mama. When Mama was there, Japan was filtered through her. I could poke bits of myself through her editing and approval. I could read street signs because of the way she read them, and I could understand my grandparents’ sighs from the timbre of her translation. That December, though, I had to see and hear alone. The tiny shakes in Baba’s legs and the indentation in Jiji’s forehead from when he fell down the stairs crystallized in my memory, and I had to write about it.

Maybe it didn’t start in December 2017, but really in March 2021, after my Zoom class on Asian American fiction where we just finished reading *Inheritors* by Asako Serizawa. As soon as the class was over, I called Mama to talk about it. I asked her, “Why didn’t I know about any of the war crimes committed by Japan? Did you know about them? Why do I get so defensive about Japan? Why do the tender stories of my family, so much pain at the hands of the United States, seem so at odds with other truths about Japan?” Perhaps it seems odd, but having these questions made me realize just how intensely Japanese my perspective on my family and global history was. I was raised with stories about pain in the family while these stories were shrouded in historical half-truths. The dissonance between “Japan as described by America” and “America as described by Japan” made me want to figure out where I belonged between these cultural and political poles. If I didn’t know about Japan’s crimes, what else did I not know? If I knew that Jiji feared popcorn because it sounded like little explosions all around him, why didn’t I know where he was, and who he was with, and how he survived the war?
That semester, I also read *Minor Feelings* by Cathy Park Hong. Hong’s frank, pained, and angry tone made me realize that I could write about the things I thought about too. Hong wrote about how the racism she encountered as a young adult was minimized by her white friends, so I realized I could write about that too. Hong wrote about her immigrant grandmother interacting with the United States, so I realized I could also describe the painful family moments I bore witness to. In *Minor Feelings*, Hong tells a story about a bunch of school children mocking her grandmother, sentence by sentence. She tells the story matter-of-factly, in such a way where her simple language allows the reader to feel all the hurt for themselves. Even today, after reading it for maybe the fifth time, I can barely look at the words on the page because they hurt too much. They remind me of fiercely defending the fishy rice my mom packed me for lunch in third grade (“You don’t want any? More for me!”). They remind me of ordering ice cream for my grandfather when I was six years old, only to later find out that Jiji only half-pretended not to be able to speak English so that I would have the confidence to speak for myself in public (“That’s my grandpa. He’s from Japan. Can we have two kid’s size vanilla ice creams?”).

Or maybe it really began when I was seven years old and Mama would list the names of her great-uncles to me until I fell asleep. “Once upon a time, long, long, ago, there were five brothers. Tomo-o, Tomo-jiro, Tomo-saburo, Tomo-shiro, Tomo-jiro … essentially Tomo-one … Tomo-two, three, four, five. Tomo-shiro, number four, is Jiji’s father.” Mama told this story slow, enunciating every syllable in every uncle’s name, hoping I would fall asleep before she got to the end of the list. But I would force myself awake because I wanted to know the ending, only to find out that there was no ending because Mama hadn’t thought of one, or because it ended with me. I always stayed awake to find out, how does it get to me?
I always wanted to know more, get the full picture, and piece together the stories in their entirety, but I soon learned there was no such thing as the “full story.” Mama only remembers her own grandparents, and I only remember mine. My grandparents remember their grandparents, but they don’t talk about war, or hunger or estranged uncles.

One of the things that Jiji does talk about is school. I remember being in fifth grade, studying for a semester in Japan while my mom took a sabbatical, and Jiji telling me, “Natchan, you must study hard. You must work hard so that one day you can attend Harvard!” I nodded eagerly at the idea, especially because the only thing I knew about Harvard is that Jiji liked it. (I laugh now because I think Harvard might have been the only elite college he could name.) I never applied to Harvard, but I hoped that asking Jiji questions about his childhood, history, and pre-history would fill out the story of his life. I hoped that setting off to interview him under the pretense of completing a school project would excite him into sharing more intimate and perhaps painful details, because Jiji always loved to tell a good story to a small audience.

But then Jiji passed away, and the only grandparent I ever lived with alone was gone. The memories only he had fell out of reach. The stories he told, over and over with long tangents that always led to new corners of his mind, faded off into one eternal, quiet pause, as if he sipped his tea between thoughts and never put down the cup.

I thought for a while that I wouldn’t be able to write this project without Jiji, but a stubborn part of me resolved to tell stories with and around his death and tell stories with and around Baba and her quiet. I gathered all the little notes I kept about Jiji: quickly scribbled stories on paper napkins I saved after talking to Mama at dinner and so many iPhone-Notes-folder memos buried deep between to-do lists and lists of fake band names. After compiling these notes as well as some stories I wrote in high school after my 2017 solo trip to Japan, I
found myself with a wealth of memory fragments. The fragments felt like they each carried so much weight (Baba having to wear a corset at her advanced age, Jiji’s love for instant ramen, etc.), but they didn’t make sense on their own. Much of this project is my attempt to piece those fragments together in such a way that affirms the physical and emotional existence of my family members, past and present, and to validate my history and pain, the history and pain of my family members, and perhaps the history and pain of Japanese (American) people.

In addition to collecting fragments of stories about Jiji, I decided to intentionally document my interactions with Baba, from my memories massaging her feet as a child to pulling fresh clothes over her delicate head last winter. Unlike Jiji, who was always happy to talk and talk and talk about his history, Baba is quieter. She speaks succinctly. She tells me to eat. After I read Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*, I learned I could address these silences directly, both by capturing Baba’s quietness and silence through narrative descriptions of her, and explicitly, by quoting Kogawa’s epigraph, “There is a silence that cannot speak. There is a silence that will not speak.” Kogawa’s words about the silence of the WWII generation appear a few times throughout my stories about Baba because they are just so true, and because I hope that maybe putting my Baba’s silences next to another grandmotherly figure’s silences will eventually show how pointed silence can be: how silence sharpens the words that are uttered and how silence amplifies the language of the body.

Finally, one of the most significant sources for this project were the conversations I had with Mama, the interviews with my great uncles that she helped facilitate, and the reflective moments I got to share with my father in-between. In moments where I found significant gaps in the family memory about someone’s story, the first place I always turned was Mama, and the second place I always turned were the people that Mama could speak with. I don’t say nearly
enough in this project how much Mama’s interaction with our family is captured implicitly throughout this work. Mama’s perspective and the kinds of details that stick with her are part of the core of this work, since most of the stories I retell I first heard from her. Perhaps, in some way, this work is a chronicle of Mama’s memory as much as it is a long and winding story about Baba, Jiji, Mama, Dad, me, and the people around us.

Lastly, with death and unknowns wrapping around the stories I gathered, this project takes on a looping, circular storytelling structure. This project travels through time and comes back again to the same moments. In this writing, time can happen and over and over and back again, where sometimes I’m sitting at the dining room table with the deceased, as a child, in an imagined future, back in time …

You never remember something just once. Images always haunt you. Your mind hits replay when you’re washing the dishes or trying to listen to someone talk. You see the necklace Jiji picked out for you in a catalogue before he died. You see Baba tear up a little the most recent time you say goodbye. You see it a little differently every time. Maybe Jiji was sitting on the floor in his living room when he picked out the necklace. Maybe he was flipping through the catalogue over breakfast, alone. Don’t worry, it still feels the same. Write it down before you forget.
It’s early morning and delicately cut shards of sunlight are warming the tatami floor. The room is washed with a hazy yellow, and the window shades made of thick, hardened paper stretched across a wooden scaffold seem to glow white. I am lying on a mattress on the floor that’s dressed with towels instead of sheets, but the blankets covering my body are exceedingly soft. My hair is still damp.

Out of the quiet, there is a sudden rush of feathers and a crow flutters onto the windowsill outside. He violently beats his wings and steps in a circle. He raises his beak towards the sun and shrieks.

_CAW!

I understand I am no longer asleep. Sounds from the kitchen on the other side of the paper and wood sliding door slowly amplify like I’m turning up the radio. My grandpa is, in fact, turning up the TV.

“It’s Tuesday morning, June 20th, 2017, Heisei era. The weather in Tokyo today is fair. The sky will be clear for most of the day here and in the surrounding areas. The temperature will reach a high of 32 degrees. Those in Chiba prefecture can expect a little rain tonight. Here, I am presenting you with a map of the national temperatures along the coast. You’re watching NHK. Next up is the latest news on Kim Jong-un…”

The light in the room softens and rearranges as I open my eyes. I slither out of the covers and slide open the wooden door that enters the kitchen and dining room. My grandpa, Jiji, is standing over the stove on the left, pushing vegetables into a steaming pot. My grandma, Baba,
hunched over at the dining room table, frail arms sticking to the table like posts that keep her upright. Jiji stands where Baba stood. Baba sits next to where Jiji sat.

Baba wasn’t always hunched at a ninety-degree angle, but she has been for most of the time I can remember. Baba’s feet don’t move when her mind tells them to, and she spends hours in the dead of the night shuffling to and from the bathroom. When I stay with Baba and Jiji for a few weeks each summer, it’s my job to facilitate her movement, to wake at the faintest call.

“Natchan…”

“Natchan…”

When I walk with Baba I bend like her, my back curved to mirror hers. She grasps me by my elbows, and I grasp her by hers, and I lift my knees so that maybe her body will realize how to lift her knees, and I’ll step forward so that her body must step forward. When Baba panics, her body rejects her, and she can do nothing but shake. In my arms, she feels as brittle as the rusted mechanics of a little metal bird, but her grip is as strong as ever.

*

Before Baba became a cooking teacher, she bought a luxurious couch without consulting Jiji. Jiji, who was usually an even-tempered and judicious businessman, exploded at Baba.

“How could you spend our money so rashly?” He asked. “Why do you need an expensive couch when the one we have works just fine already?”

And with that, Baba decided she would have her own money.

In just a few years Baba had a full roster of cooking students, all devoted to learning how to execute her delicately complex recipes. Baba developed recipes on Mondays, shopped on
Tuesdays, tested them on Wednesdays, and taught them Thursday through Sunday. She would teach a full course meal one month at a time, then change it all again the next month. Baba stood for hours a day, she wasn’t bent yet, and she moved too much.

One New Year’s, Baba was furiously cooking dinner in preparation for the symbolic feast. Noodles for longevity, fishcakes for happiness, lotus root for good luck, gold chestnuts for fortune. In her rush from the kitchen to the nearest bathroom, Baba suddenly crumpled in the narrow hallway. No one noticed until my Mama wandered into the kitchen and saw her fainted body on the floor. She yelped and frantically rushed to Baba. When Baba slowly opened her eyes and moved her mouth again, she said,

“I was next to a river… My mother was on the other side… I was going to cross the river… but my mom was shooing me, telling me to go away. So, I did.”

*

My Mama once told me a story about her great uncle. Her great uncle was a bit of an odd man. Quiet, kind, and unassuming. His sisters secretly worried he would never find a wife, but he did, and they were married for many, many years. Yet, strange as they were together, they never had a child. Instead, Uncle worked in construction while his wife watered plants at home. They read together, walked together, and occasionally appeared at family reunions, only to share a few pleasant smiles, stab at sweet treats, then return to wherever they came from. They grew old together and they sat together, until one day, the wife grew sick and withered.

When his wife died, Uncle packed up all the things in their small, one-bedroom apartment. He nurtured her plants then put them in the ground by the river. He gathered up all their books and gave them away. He collected all their clothing and threw those away too, till all
that was left of his and hers were a backpack, a map, a pack of cigarettes, two shirts, and good shoes. Uncle had nothing left to leave behind, and nothing left to take care of. So, he started walking. He visited the giant Buddha in Nara prefecture, the golden castle in Kyoto, and he stopped to toss a coin and pray at every Shinto temple along the way. Uncle walked and looked for six months.Stopping, looking, praying, watching, touching, holding, thinking, remembering, walking, then stopping again.

Once along his path, Uncle came upon a particularly old Shinto temple. The red paint had splintered off the iconic red gate, and the ritualistic ropes hanging from the temple’s ceiling were nearly threadbare. Uncle approached the offering box and tossed in a 100-yen coin. He listened to it clink against the other ancient coins in the box. Uncle grabbed the rope, rang the temple bells, clapped twice, and prayed, just as he did at every temple he came across.

The next morning, the monk who lived in the temple and whose job it was to care for it came outside to sweep seeds off the path. As he approached the largest tree in the yard, he noticed an old man slumped against the tree, backpack placed intentionally at his side, looking as though he were sleeping peacefully in the morning light.

“Sir? Excuse me, sir.” The monk called to the old man. “Are you quite alright, good sir?”

As the monk approached, he felt no warmth radiating off the old man. A pit formed in his stomach. The old man looked so peaceful.

* 

One summer morning when Baba and I were sharing vegetable soup and buttered bread for breakfast, she told me,
“My niece Kaori-san is coming today. Let’s make the house look nice. You must find her a gift.”

I nodded.

“You know,” she continued, “before Kaori-san was born, my sister-in-law could barely afford another child. She had a boy and a girl already, and her husband was a journalist.” She signed, then chuckled, “A journalist! They don’t make any money, so all four of them lived in a tiny apartment and they couldn’t afford another child.”

Baba raised the trembling bowl of soup to her lips and slurped. When she put it down, she continued,

“So, when my sister-in-law came to me and asked me what she should do about her unexpected pregnancy, I told her the wisest option would be to terminate the pregnancy. Take care of the kids she had. Save for a better place. But some overly enthusiastic doctor convinced her otherwise, and she kept the baby. Obviously, they never could afford a new apartment, so the five of them shared beds and shared clothes and read on top of each other. All three kids worked hard in school, though, and they got good jobs too.”

“And Kaori?” I asked.

“Ah, Kaori,” Baba grinned. “Kaori’s the best one. Her brother and sister moved away but she’s still here. Kaori takes care of everybody—her mother, her father-the-journalist, Jiji and me.”

I thought of the Tupperware containers in the fridge, always loaded with an extra meal cooked in someone else’s kitchen.
“He- he- he-” Baba chuckles. “Maybe I wouldn’t be alive without Kaori. Maybe Kaori wouldn’t be alive because of me.”

*

Nowadays, Baba is quiet on the phone. She tries her best to speak loudly when I’m on the line, but after a few exchanges she is out of breath, and after I ask her what she’s eating today, I listen to the crackle on the line.

Recently, Mama told me that she’d told Baba that I started taking birth control, just to get a reaction out of Baba. Mama did it knowing that it would intrigue Baba just as it had infuriated her. Apparently, it worked. I was hurt.

“Natchan’s doing that?” Baba had apparently asked. “I guess she would have to…”

As angry as Mama was when she found the pill herself, she described Baba’s engagement in their little gossip session with glee. I wanted to smile.

When Mama was in college, at music school, it was common to live at home. Mama broke no rules, but Mama thought she was grown, and she did what she pleased in secret. Mama started smoking cigarettes like all the other students who wanted a moment of relief or to share the congregation outdoors. Mama hid her secret well, never keeping cigarettes at home, never letting her clothes smell, never coming home till she had to. It worked until it didn’t. When Baba was searching through one of Mama’s purses for extra change to give the delivery man, her fingers curled around a familiar cylinder, and she pulled out a little white lighter. Baba immediately knew Mama’s secret, but because she couldn’t prove it with just the lighter, she tore
the clothes out of Mama’s closet with rage. Baba dragged boxes out from under her bed, emptied her drawers, and piled all her clothes on top of the bed in search of a damning cigarette. Angered that she couldn’t find anything that definitively proved Mama’s disobedience, Baba drew out Mama’s favorite skirt last, tore a vicious gash up its length, and left it on top of the pile of uprooted clothing.

Baba’s body is Mama’s body is my body.

When Mama arrived in Wyoming for graduate school in the United States, she thought she landed on the moon. There were no subways, no crush of people crossing the road, no apartments stacked on apartments stacked on apartments.

I imagine Mama in her twenties looked quite like me today. I see her standing in solitude, slender, in the vastness and flatness of this moon so, so far from home. She was so, so far from Baba, Jiji, her-uncle-the-businessman, the train station, and sticky-sweet air.

On this foreign planet, all my mom really had of Japan was her own thick, black hair, smooth, pale, luminescent skin, and her violin, slung across her back. Few things were the same, but there was wind rustling sheets of music, steam rising from soups, and the occasional call of a crow that almost sounded like home.

In her watery reflection, Mama saw Baba. At the core of her long, delicate fingers she saw the bones that underlie Baba’s masterful hands.

*Mama’s hands are a witch’s hands. Hands of a witch can do anything.*
Mama sings this rhyme to me when I fall and scrape my knee. She puts pressure on the hurt, and it escapes through her hand like magic. I wonder how she brought all this magic with her from Japan.

When I’m eleven years old and I skillfully crack an egg into a sizzling pan, Mama looks at me, a little shocked by the departure from my usual clumsiness.

“Natchan is Baba’s child, aren’t ya?”

Japan, for me, is soft like the earliest recollections of my mother and hard like concrete—hard like the weight of generations who filled subway platforms, burial plots, unknown caverns, and rice bowls before me, before Mama, and before Baba.

Today, it’s phone lines which tie us all shore to shore. Today, it’s Baba in a wheelchair, eating the food she’s fed, still critically like a teacher. Today, it’s Mama in the kitchen, and Mama in the orchestra, leaving home after dark. Today, it’s me, huddled at the dining room table with the steam from miso soup warming my chin, my grandmother’s precious bowl hovering before my lips. Today, it’s the three of us—three generations, three women, three lives, three stories. There’s three of us, and two kitchens, countless tables, and the same bowls.

Today, yesterday, and tomorrow, there’ve been hopes and devastations. Growth and transplantation. Births and deaths that happened or didn’t. Morning lights, softly sung songs, gentle steam rising up from bowls of soup, and the occasional call of a crow to remind us of who and what and where we are.
Chapter 2: Quiet Objects, Memory Objects

I. Speaking Objects

My dad and I are driving across New York State. He points to the forest along the highway and says,

“See that? That’s kudzu.”

I look to my right, and I see a wall along the highway covered in leafy vines, each leaf engulfing its own territory and the entire plant engulfing the sound barrier wall.

“It’s a Japanese plant, but they can’t even blame the Japanese for bringing it here, they did it themselves.”

The wall along the highway melts away to reveal rows and rows of dead trees. Their bark-less bodies glow white under the cloudy light. The same giant, leafy vines curl around the base of each tree, choking it as it climbs.

Kudzu was brought to the United States in 1876 because someone thought this climbing vine might look pretty wrapping around the porch of a plantation home. A little later, in the twentieth century, kudzu was enlisted to make cows strong (they need more protein) and to keep the soil from eroding (our ground is falling apart). Kudzu was declared a noxious weed in 1997, as it climbed across the United States, claiming its land as it stretched towards warmer and more temperate weather. In Japan, it just died every winter.

*
Baba was grown in Japan. She is a turn-of-the-century woman who wore heels to go hiking in her twenties. Today, nestled on her wheelchair in a nursing home, she religiously dabs on age-defying moisturizer. When Mama and I visit, she tells us she wants new makeup.

“You have makeup,” Mama says.

“No, I don’t,” Baba says.

“Yes, you do.” Mama reaches for a dusty pot of powder. It’s empty. “Oh, you don’t.”

“I want lipstick,” Baba says.

“You have lipstick,” Mama answers. She reaches for the collection of little gold cylinders at the bottom of Baba’s purse. She opens the first and finds a stub of color. “Oh.” She opens the next, and the next, and the next. I’ve never seen makeup that’s been completely used up. It doesn’t seem like something that’s possible to me. I can see that same little cylinder rolling around in Baba’s bag as she sits on the subway forty years ago, heels on and hands clasped as she sways back and forth, back and forth, with the movement of the train.

Baba says, “I told you so.”

When we’re thousands of miles away from each other, breathing quietly into the crackles on the phoneline, it’s a lot harder to think that Baba knows what to tell me.

“Natchan, where are you?” she asks me. “I thought you were coming to get the tablecloth today.”

“The tablecloth? Oh Baba, I would but, I’m still in Cleveland.”
“Oh, oh, that’s right,” she whispers. “So, you’re still in Cleveland…”

“Yes, that’s right. But Baba, I will be there soon. I will be there in December. When it’s December I will see you…”

Baba used to ask me in Japanese, “Nanka oshii?” Do you want anything from Japan? But she doesn’t ask me that now that she gets wheeled around in her nursing home, from food to bed, to food to bed, to bed.

She used to ask me, have you eaten anything good recently? Now we just tell her.

“Baba, I made eggs benedict with hollandaise sauce, and then we used the leftover egg whites to make macarons, which didn’t go well but the buttercream makes anything taste good, so we ate it all and I think we’ll try again.”

“Ohhhh, iine,” she responds. That’s very nice. “But you want salmon roe dontcha?”

It’s nice to know I’ll always be the eleven-year-old to Baba, piling juicy orange orbs onto my little mound of white rice, even when I know from her steady reports that my phantom-self flickered across the ocean to knock at her door, then flew back to give her a call. I wonder if my ghost mingles with my late grandfather’s, or Baba’s cousin who visited her in the middle of the night last week to hand her some souvenir cookies.

*

In America, Mama and I stand in separate bathrooms as she spreads sunscreen across her face and I, wrinkle-preventing acne treatment. In Japan, Baba’s back is curved so far that they make her wear a corset. She says the corset hurts. It’s digging into her skin. The synthetic boning of the corset brushes my knuckles as I pull a fresh shirt over Baba’s back.
“Baba, did you have a good day today?” I always ask. I don’t know what else to say.

“Unn.” She replies. Yes. I pull her wheelchair away from the bathroom wall so that I have room to maneuver around her.

“What did you do?”

“I ate.”

I guide Baba’s stiff ankles to the opening of her fresh pants. They’re purple velvet, like the Juicy Couture ones that everyone had in 2009.

“Was it good?”

“Not really.”

I chuckle as I tug Baba’s pants up. She tries to help by shifting her weight ever so slightly, side to side. When the pants get to her thighs I ask her,

“Tateru?” Can you stand?

Baba extends her forearms from the space between her ribs where they nestle and grips the fabric around my arms hard. Pulling, pulling, and pulling, she slowly stands up on her chair till she can grab my shoulders and I can pull her pants over her hips.

Baba and I, we always talk like this. The same conversation every day. The food is never better. She uses the bathroom. We change clothes together. Baba and I, we don’t talk all that much. I don’t have the words to tell her more, and I don’t think she does either. So, when I hold her toes, I hold them gently, and when I shimmy a shirt over her head, I make sure the cloth goes over smooth, not bunched, wide around the neck, pulled all the way down the back and sides.
Baba doesn’t dress me, but she tells me I’m a good kid. Tells me to eat a lot. Tells me I’m young. Tells me I visited her when I wish I really did.

*

One summer, I crawl next to Mama, who lays on the couch in the late afternoon light and pulled her limbs around mine.

“Natchan, is that bone your nose?”

“Yes.”

“How lucky I am to have a daughter with such a magnificent nose.”

I feel warm inside and I giggle, but as I close my eyes to breathe, the little faces of caricatured white people become projected on my mind, a face with a nose engulfing the rest of its features, born during WWII by the hand of an unknown Japanese artist. I wince for a second, but this hurts less than the caricatures of Japanese people drawn by the Americans during WWII. Pinched faces with big mouths and big beads of sweat and teeth that gnash, scribbled in a mess of graphite that makes me queasy, but I can’t look away. The little men look like my grandfather, were he squished and flattened and devilish. The scribbles look the way I thought I looked when the boys at school called me a “Communist!” because I wore my new fur-lined trapper hat to school. Or when the same boys called me Bruce, like Bruce Lee, and I thought it meant I was cool and strong and one of them, but really it just meant I was Asian and no one else was.

I get up calmly and walk to the bathroom. When I turn to face the mirror, I’m almost surprised I’m not outlined in black and white. I bare my teeth. I leer at myself. I squint my eyes, then push them wide open with my fingers. I hear someone’s footsteps approaching the
bathroom and I quickly drop the face. As I turn away from the mirror, I throw myself one more sideways smile. Big teeth, empty grin, lit up with the evil images I can’t erase from my mind. I see them in the mirror when I smile.

I didn’t use to like the way my own eyes feel so inscrutable to me. I force emotion onto my face with big smiles that get me compliments from old people who probably can’t even see me, and eyebrows that slither across my forehead to make sure I’m really understood— to make sure the cool girls see me as human and not pet— to make sure—

As I get older, I grow more careless—so what if I’m strange ... so what? I start letting myself be animal. I know I have eyes that dart and nervous hands. I know I have a quickness to look away and a familiar glance that I recognize in the dark eyes of mother, my grandmother, and that six-year-old girl from somewhere in China whom I tutored in reading once for an hour or two when I was in middle school.

*

My body has never just been my body. I am my mama’s American baby.

“Mama,” “Baby”—two curved lines gazing at each other.

“Mama,” “Baby”—shiny little eyes, milky like rice water.

Mama says that there are pieces of her in bits of me. I was grown in my Baba’s baby nest.

Before I ever was, this body was Mama’s, this body is Baba’s.

We paint together, we stare together, we taste together. I braid her hair, she pokes my skin, I lace her spine. We stand for picture and one of us smiles. Hold hands when no one’s watching.
I am her. She wants me to be—

*

Baba is quiet, at least, in my memory of her, but she is sharp as a knife. At breakfast, where we slice tomatoes and blow cool air on our vegetable soups, Baba says to my mom,

“Neeh, Miho. Where is that Oribe plate?”

“Which Oribe plate?” asks Mama. There are stacks and stacks of fancy dinner plates in the cupboards behind Baba’s feet, and more squeezed between long winter coats and ceremonial dolls in the back bedroom. Baba collected these dining tools throughout her many years as a successful cook teacher, planning new and increasingly extravagant full course meals for three new audiences a week. Mama has no idea which plate Baba is talking about.

“The big one?” Mama asks. She has to start somewhere.

“Yes, it’s big. It’s … um … the one where I put the main course sushi for … the dinner party.” Baba speaks definitively. Her voice shakes and she pauses to recall the right words, but Mama knows that she chose to say, “the dinner party,” not “a dinner party.” Mama should remember this, but she doesn’t.

“Oh,” Mama says. She is skeptical.

“Mitemite,” says Baba. Try to look.

Mama stands up from the breakfast table somewhat reluctantly. She shifts to the shelves behind Baba and crouches down.

“Nai, nai … nai,” Not here, not there … not there, she announces to Baba.
“No, it’s not there is it?” Baba agrees. She begins to shift her weight forward and extends her arms to the sides so that she can grab the sides of the dining table. Slowly, she pulls herself up, and up. Mama says,

“Woah, woah woah woah,” as she hears the creaks coming from Baba’s chair and quickly stands up, pulls out Baba’s chair and spots her. When Baba has been painstakingly turned around and the chair has been squeezed behind her knees, forcing her to sit back down, Baba lets out a long, rattling sigh. Perhaps her first big breath, all day.

“Jah,” she says. Well. “Soko mite,” she says, while pointing to the third cabinet down. Look there.

“It should be at the bottom. Under the Oribe dinner plates. Or maybe I took those out. But it’s there.” Mama waddles to the third cabinet, swings it open, and finds the plate.

“Hora,” Baba says. See? I told you so.

Mama is shocked, but not too shocked. Baba has proven over and over again that her memory for plates is unmatched. I wonder where in her mind she keeps them all—stacks and stacks of hundreds of pieces of silverware and clayware pushed in every corner of her mind. Oribe plates stacked on French plates, all cluttered with fancy forks and nice dinner clothes and bags of tea they’ve been saving for years. I wonder if Baba keeps a thorough index of all her dinner sets in every corner of her house, why her other memories aren’t stored like that.

“Baba, what happened to Hashizume-san, your cousin?”

“Hm,” she says, “lives in Tokyo.”

“Baba, what was it like living in Hokkaido, during the war?”
“Hm,” she says. “It was cold.”

Baba is quiet often. She speaks succinctly. She does not elaborate. I want to know more about her past—I want to hear her weave stories and draw great pictures in my mind, with color, but she will not. Perhaps she cannot.

Baba is silent like much of her generation. World War II happened, but it was very tragic and very bad. America hurt us very bad. I know Baba lived on the northern island of Japan as a little girl during the war to escape the chaos of Honshu, the main province, but I don’t know how she got there, or who she was with, or how long she spent there. I’ve never heard her talk about it. All I know is gathered from the threats that Mama used to give me as a child.

“Eat every grain of rice,” she would say, if I left even a single kernel in my rice bowl. “During the war, they had to save every bit of rice for the soldiers. This would be all you get. You understand?”

I understood, just enough. I also understood that Baba would not say such things. There is a culture of silence that surrounds WWII, especially amongst my grandparents’ generation. Baba, in particular, inhabits this silence. We are the strong ones, her generation seems to say. We are the survivors, the rebuilders, the ones who overcame everything. Why are you so lazy?

When I try to gather stories from Baba, I struggle because I know she won’t elaborate, and I know that if she does, I might not understand it. Stories can only survive the fighting, desperate minutes in which they are born, if they are properly incubated with repetition and Mama’s joint translation. As an American child, my mother’s “white” baby with the big nose, I struggle to extract stories from the calcified faces of a survival generation, and I struggle to keep them alive.
I don’t yet know which stories Baba keeps safe between shelves of silverware. I think she holds the rest of her memories in her body.

When I don’t have the right words for Baba’s quietness I crack open Joy Kogawa’s novel, *Obasan*. The novel itself is named for the more formal way of saying “aunt” (Obasan) or “grandmother” (Obaasan). My baby-ish address for my grandmother, Baba, is adapted for children from a version of this word. Into the eerie quiet of my own cluttered mind I read,

“There is a silence that cannot speak.

There is a silence that will not speak.”

And there are objects that do speak. Memory in plates, memory in empty containers, memory in the bend of her body.

II. Losing Objects

I can only breathe when it’s raining outside. The best way to wake up is slowly, surrounded by the gentle rhythm of small water. I can only breathe when it’s raining outside, and inside I can warm my chin in the halo of steam rising up from my morning cup. I can only breathe when it’s raining outside, but I don’t like getting caught in the rain. Mama and I were on a walk when the sky dimmed just so slightly, then the air quivered, then a demure thunderclap and a sudden sheet of rain. The water filled our shoes and we got to skip all the way home.

I don’t like getting caught in the rain, and I don’t like when I’m new to a place, so when I serve myself soup that my mother didn’t make, my arms are longer than they should be and the bowl and spoon in my hands change shape as I move. When I dropped a jug of new milk at
breakfast at seven in the morning before a day of third grade, my father was quiet. He told me, objects have a life of their own. He told me, the milk didn’t want to be here anymore, so it left. Many objects are strange like this—their protons want to leap, and that’s why butter doesn’t stick to the pan, it flies out. That’s why the pancake we flipped ended up on the floor. It leaped.

My father doesn’t leap anymore, but I think he used to. He once told me he used to know what “two miles away” looks like, because his young-man-self ran two miles down a straight road every week. He ran from the tree-lined edge of the road straight into the great open field split only by pavement. “Two miles away” looks like the little trees my father ran away from, then turned around to look at before heading home.

I’ve never run the same two miles as my father, but I’ve walked every mile with my mother. Around and around and around—we trace silly shapes around our block when we can’t do anything else. It was a rainy day when we rounded the corner of a shady street that we’ve rounded many times. Here, big trees with thick leaves form a canopy across the street, allowing only muted light through its web. Fat raindrops slide from sky to leaf, to leaf to ground. Wet ground, and pavement that’s been grayed with water. On concrete, around the corner, right on the wet ground, we found a hawk with its beak to the floor and its wings splayed out to the side. In our shock, all Mama said was, “It’s so big…” and all I could think was, “It looks so alive.” Usually so small in the sky, so big and so dead with its face to the ground.

* 

“Somewhere here, ”iii my Obaasan says. Pointing, not pushing.

“Eyes can no longer see,”iii says Kogawa’s Obasan, but both their bodies remember. “Memory comes skittering out of the dark.”iv The word for ‘lost; also means ‘dead.’”v Nakunatta.
It’s August and I’m trenched in sweat, the sticky air clinging to my skin. I am dragging large plastic boxes up two flights of stairs, each box containing a strange assortment of items that were haphazardly stuffed together during the frantic move-out a few months ago. My roommate’s bike helmet is wedged against the plastic plates we bought at Target. A shot glass and a saltshaker are rolling around in a Tupperware container. The specialized guacamole salt that El bought has made the whole box smell like garlic. We find a mysterious pair of sparkly bunny ears is tucked away next to the plastic cutting boards, and we decide they are officially property of our home. Now they sit on our bookshelf and our guests frequently try them on.

What’s magical about the items in the boxes is that I can arrange them into something that resembles “home,” or something close to it. This is my third year of gathering and arranging these items into different iterations of the same home. This year I embrace the colorful. I watched videos about maximalism over the summer. Minimalism seems too cold. Why settle for the dull satisfaction of matching gray with gray, and emptiness with emptiness, when a room can be full of colors and patterns and knickknacks that all somehow go together when they are arranged just so? I’ve acquired three tiny surrealist collages by a student artist. One of them depicts three women paddling from a ship in the sky, except the ship is an anatomical brain and they are paddling through the light blue ocean that exists in the background of their brain-ship. I decide this collage reminds me of the study of psychology. I hang it right above my desk.

When I am finally reunited with a dear friend who spent her summer on an island at sea-camp, she hands me a beaded bracelet. The bracelet is now on display at the base of my desk lamp. The item is now a piece of home.
I am such a sucker for good jewelry. I hang dozens of necklaces from push pins that are stuck into a cork board. This entire apparatus is stuck to my wall with suspicious-looking Command strips. I like it when these pendants catch the light and reflect the sunlight in pretty shards of light on my walls.

The first thing I notice in the room is the piano. It is one of those electric keyboards that are often pushed up against the wall in a small room, but this one was made to look like it is made of yellow wood. I sit down on the seat cushion. I gently press its keys, but no sound comes out. It’s mute. I can’t figure out how to turn it on. I double check: it’s plugged in. I stand up and keep dragging boxes in circles around the same 96 square feet.

*

In October I started losing things. This is strange because this does not happen to me. I check my pockets, three times if I have to. I double check for my wallet and keys. I create a mental image every time I put something down in case it disappears a moment after. I learn my own odd habits of placing and leaving so that even if I were to lose something important, I can hack my way back to it. Did I leave it on the shelf? Did I leave it where I last sat? I know where my things are. My favorite earrings are in the front pocket of my backpack whose zipper just broke. My best mask is in the pocket of my jeans. The papers I need are in the stack next to my desk. I know where my things are.

I bought a necklace at a flea market in Boston. The pendant is made of light green jade, and it is vaguely shaped like a butterfly. Rather, it looks like a piece of stone carved to resemble a butterfly with crude tools. The details of its wings and body are gentle grooves. As soon as I see
it, I know I want it. I easily hand over 25 dollars to the elderly Chinese woman behind the stand who nods and smiles and tells me the necklace will look beautiful on me.

I wear the necklace for that whole weekend in Boston. I wear it to the Korean barbecue restaurant where the smell of sizzling beef rises around me and sinks into my clothes. I wear it to a house party where I meet cousins and cousins’ girlfriends, and friends who live a town over. I wear it around that same house where the kitchen never seems to stay the same shape or size because I only ever see it dizzily and half-lit at night, or in the stark and clear morning light. I intend for this necklace to be part of my uniform now. I want it to be my identifying ornament. I want it to be part of the outfit I would wear if I were a videogame character. I want it to be my habitus. When I get back to campus, I wear it to my first class. I fiddle with the sliver chain. I periodically feel for the pendant, as I do with all my jewelry, for some kind of comfort in consistency. It’s here. I’m here.

Three hours later, during an office hours meeting with a professor, I reach for the pendant. I don’t know the answer to the question she is asking. I fumble for words as my fingers frantically turn the chain around my neck in search of the necklace. It has to be here. I think of all the places it could be: my bedroom floor, the last classroom I sat in, or somewhere along the path I walked from the edge of campus to the middle of the quad. When did I feel it last? After the meeting I pat myself all the way down. The pendant is not in the folds of my shirt or swung behind my neck. It’s gone, it’s gone, it’s gone. All but the shiny silver chain wrapped around my neck.

* 

When Jiji passed away, all I could do was sit at the piano bench in my room. The presence of the piano still felt like a surprise gift from the universe. You didn’t ask for this, but
you can have it. That’s what it felt like. I don’t even know how to play piano. The universe was giving me net zero. Grandpa + Piano = Zero. My friend showed me how to turn the piano on. I could make it speak, now, and make it change voices. First, I played it like a concert piano, then an organ, then I startled myself with the overwhelming sound of synthetic strings and shut the whole thing off instantly. Tentatively, I began again. I found middle C. I noodled my way around “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” I tried to recall that Adele song I learned in middle school. I imagined Jiji dancing in his kitchen, as I’ve seen him do so many times, nodding his whole body to the beat of Tchaikovsky.

*

I used to think my eyesight was bad only at dusk when everyone’s eyesight is bad. My mom always warned me to be extra careful crossing the street in the dusk, and extra careful rounding corners when driving at dusk. They can’t see you and you can’t see them. I wonder if there is science behind this, but for the time being I know that at dusk people are colored the same gray as the buildings behind them, and somehow it takes longer to detect movements, and for some reason I can never make out the expressions on people’s faces. Midsemester, I notice I can’t read the board. My classmate has written out the answer to a math problem with red marker on a whiteboard. I squint to see if I am imagining things, but squinting only makes it worse. A red-white board.

I got glasses last winter when I was back-to-school shopping in Walmart and discovered I couldn’t read the signs above each aisle that list what that aisle contains. I found myself amongst kitchen supplies when I was looking for notebooks and filing cabinets when I wanted a
calculator. I couldn’t remember a time when the world didn’t look like this, yet I knew that this wasn’t how the world looked. I just didn’t notice it was always dusk.

When I finally got glasses that winter, it didn’t feel right to wear them. *This isn’t it*, I thought. Peering through the glasses feels like a virtual reality game. Everything is too crisp, like I’m looking through a high-quality camera and the saturation is turned all the way up. I feel like I can only move my head mechanically: side to side, up and down, like I’m nodding or shaking my head. I can only dance prescribed dances, like a head bob. I can’t move. I am the alien who watches. I sit in class and feel like an imposter. When I step from the sidewalk to the street, I misjudge the curb and step down *hard*. I no longer know what’s *my* world and what’s *the* world.

*  

Mama, what’s something you can’t live without?

Mama says, “If the house was on fire, there’s two things I’d grab. First, you. Then, my violin, and I’m running out of the house with you under this arm, and the violin under this arm.”

*  

We accuse Mama of being a witch. Each spring and every autumn, Mama spends an entire weekend buying an unbelievable number of fruits and vegetables. She washes them, cuts them, dumps them in vats for weeks, and then strains all their sticky sweet syrup. Our refrigerator fills with five glass jugs of viscous maroon. Dried coral keeps them from fermenting. Every morning Mama drinks her “enzymes” by pouring a half inch into a glass and diluting it with water. When I’m sick, she dilutes me with her enzymes.
Mama has an elaborate system to keep her from losing her health. There must be jugs in the fridge. She must drink a tall glass of enzymes every day. She must eat oat bran, flax seeds, and mixed nuts stirred into lukewarm water every morning for breakfast. She needs two hours before she leaves the house to complete the ritual. Sometimes she must wake up before sunrise in order to be ready on time. If she doesn’t have her enzymes—if the hotel cleaners unknowingly throw away her travel bottles while she’s on tour, or if airport security is wary of a Sprite bottle with dark purple liquid in it—then suddenly she’s hurt. All she can sense is the splitting pain in her gut. She can barely breathe. She clutches her stomach. She’s crying in the hotel bathroom.

When Jiji passed away, Mama blamed herself for not making Jiji drink more enzymes. She had tried so hard to keep his fridge stocked, but he never took to it like she did. *Drink it everyday!* She insisted, but he would forget, and every time we visited, he asked for coffee from America instead.

*

8 AM on a Friday morning in late September my roommate opens my bedroom door. I wake to the sound of the door’s creak and her call, “Natsumi?”

“Yeah?” I answer.

“They’re here,” she says.

“Who’s here?” I ask. I’m trying to remember what day it is, and what’s happening, and who could possibly be here.

“They’re here for the piano?” she says, sounding just as confused as I am. I am far too tired to feel anything.
“Okay, okay, I got it,” I say, and stumble out of bed. I open the door to three middle-aged men in matching red t-shirts. They smile and nod and say good morning, and I try to do the same, but I can barely see through my morning vision. I lead them to my room, my unmade bed and my clothing draped on my desk chair, and they swiftly grasp the piano from either side and maneuver it out of the apartment. They come back for the chair and the music stand. I tell them thank you, and have a nice day, and when I come back to my room there’s an intense emptiness in the space where the piano used to be. I do not know where to sit, so I climb back in bed.

III. Saving Objects

Mama keeps us safe with tokens of water in the appropriate corners of the house—a crystal beside the southeast wall. A fridge stocked with health juice. Ring fingers that dab on the skin beneath the eyes, not drag. Special medicine that’s syrupy and sweet and only comes out when your fever is so bad you can hardly see straight. No Advil.

Mama keeps plates safe for their passage to the America with thick wads of Japanese newspaper. The plates immigrate for their own safety, because Baba and Mama know that when Baba and Jiji pass away, men we don’t know will come into the house and throw it all away. As we pack the plates, Baba tells us where she got each one. The pretty blue plate is a gift from her student, the French teacup a souvenir from a trip long ago, and that set of spoons … where were they from again …

“Weren’t the spoons a wedding gift?” Jiji calls from the kitchen.
“Oh right … right,” says Baba from her perch at the dining room table. Her long arms stretch out over the table to steady her at it, and she slowly turns her head to face Jiji, who stands at the stove a few meters away.

“Shall we start with the vegetable soup?” asks Jiji. He stands and smiles proudly at his creation, apron on, ladle in hand, back straight. He turns to smile at Mama, Baba, and me.

“Yes!” Mama says. “That smells good! Jiji is amazing.”

Mama and I get up at the same time to help Jiji. We stand back-to-back in the kitchen as she reaches for the bowls above the sink, and I start pulling out chopsticks and spoons from the drawer in the kitchen island. Sit, sit, we say to Jiji, so he wipes his forehead with a handkerchief and makes his way around the island and over to bother Baba.

“Ne, ne, Baba, Baba,” he sings to himself and to her, his usual little nonsense song. “Yokorasho, yokorasho.”

Mama and I, well-trained and well-practiced, we assemble the soups. One of us at the pot, the other bussing dishes to the table.

“Do you want anything to drink?” someone calls.

“Water!” another answers.

“Tea later!” says the third.

“We have dessert too!” says the last.

When the table is set, we have at the table four brown bowls, eight chopsticks, mismatching cups of water and tea, prettier utensils for the elders, colorful woven placements, a
plastic cover for the table, four chairs with one special cushion, and four people: Jiji, Baba, Mama, and me.

When chairs are scooted in and we look at each other through the steam rising from each of our bowls, we open our mouths and say in unison,

“Itadakimasu!”

Then, arms across the table, reaching, handing, placing. The sound of the tv humming in the background, color in the corner of my eye. A view to the right of our balcony, and the clothes drying on the line, swinging in the Tokyo wind as we catch glittering glimpses of sunlight through our sleeves. Fresh air through the screen door. Light chatter hums of affirmation as we delight in the taste of the same potatoes, broth, and rice.

There is nothing that needs to be said because we are holding the same objects and eating the same food. No memory to be retrieved because each mind holds its own, and every bowl holds rice. I’ll remember this day with the dregs at the bottom of my teacup.

Objects that speak, objects we save, and objects that remember.
Part II: Jiji

Chapter 3: Talking to Jiji, Talking to Ghosts

I. Talking to Jiji

“Natchan.” 「なつみちゃん。」

“Huh?” 「は？」

“Are you cold?” 「寒い？」

“A bit…” 「ちょっと。。。」

“Should I turn on the heater?” 「オペンつけおっか？」

“Okay.” 「うん。」

My grandpa, Jiji, lifts his covers off himself and places his feet on the ground before standing up to pad over to the little space heater several feet away. I curl up on my mattress on the floor, which is perpendicular to my grandpa’s bed, and shrink further under my blankets. Still, I can feel the air on my shoulders.

Jiji straightens up again and climbs into his bed. It’s 5 AM.

Despite my growing up in Ohio, where the snow falls thick and fast and sometimes it is so icy that school gets canceled, Tokyo feels more frigid in December. Jiji says it’s because of the wet cold. Mama says it’s because there’s no central heating in most Tokyo homes, just hot air conditioning and little radiators that must be filled with water every few hours in order to keep running on steam.
Jiji lives in the Tokyo apartment that my mom grew up in. All that’s changed over the years is who sleeps where. Mama’s childhood bedroom—essentially a closet—is the room with the mechanical hospital bed where my grandma, Baba, sleeps when she’s home visiting from the nursing home. This is the first winter she’s spent away, so it still feels like she could be on vacation somewhere warm and nice. Really, she’s in a different mechanical bed a few bus rides away, being carted around in a wheelchair from breakfast time to TV time to lunch time to social time. I remember helping Mama massage each of Baba’s toes every night, Mama working from the tension in her hips to the stiffness in her calves, to her unwilling ankles, in hopes that the massage might coax some hidden part of her brain into reconnecting with movement. Baba’s Parkinson’s disease labors her every step. Before she moved to the nursing home, Jiji tugged her along with him wherever he could.

“Jiji, toilet,” she would call softly from the dining room table.

“Oi oi oi,” he would grumble back, as he moseyed over.

When Jiji was out, usually shopping for food at the local co-op, it took Baba hours to quiver from the bedpost to the bathroom. Sometimes we’d come home and find her frozen in time, shaking in the narrow hallway between one step and the next.

We moved Jiji’s bed from his original bedroom to the living room two summers ago. The walls of his former room were lined with bookshelves he refused to sort through, while dust piled on books stacked two rows thick on the same shelf. It was this way for thirty years until Jiji developed a worrisome cough, and so Mama called the boy cousins to come and move the bed to the living room where it might be less dusty.
“My boys always say, ‘How grandfather is always so well-dressed!’” my aunt remarks from the doorway. When she steps inside, she walks like she can’t put her full weight on any of the linoleum tiles.

It is certain the boys have never seen Jiji climbing out of bed in his underwear in the summer, or in his flannel pajama set in the winter to turn on the heat. Have they heard him cough? Really, he’s doing wonderfully for his eighty-nine years, but I think quietly that there’s no way he’ll be able to eat all the food they bring him as gifts.

I imagine him there, sitting at the head of the dining room table, alone, surrounded by un navigable boxes and bags of treats. By the time he finds what he’s looking for, the cookies or tea might have gone bad. He’ll sigh, bend his knees as he stands up, and place the expired sweets in the assorted garbage bags. Tokyo’s garbage system is wonderfully complicated, with a different type of waste for nearly every day of the week, but Jiji often lets those days pass without notice. He stacks the Instant Ramen cups in a little tower, and tells me how damn good they are, and how there are just so many different kinds. Sometimes it seems like the world is moving so fast outside the apartment, and sometimes it feels like time is buttery and soft and ever the same as long as we’re behind the apartment doors numbered 301 and 302.

“Natchan,” Jiji calls.

“Yeah?” I answer.

“Is the air coming towards you?”

“Not really. What about you?”

“Well, I’m way up here on this bed so I’m fine.” Jiji sucks in air.

“Don’t breathe in the air if it’s coming towards you.” He exhales in a quiet whoosh. “It’ll make your throat hurt.”
When I’m in the airport heading back to Ohio after this Japan visit, I cry quietly in the public bathroom after saying goodbye to Jiji. The artificial air catches in my throat like a dry wind so I hold my breath to keep from quivering. I keep seeing him smiling sadly then turning away to walk home, back straight, pace even, and always the gentleman.

* 

Jiji has always been afraid of popcorn. When I was a kid, I used that fun fact like a joke. But it’s not that Jiji fears the movie theater’s red-and-white paper boxes, it’s that he can’t stand the sound of it. I’m about six years old and my mom has told me that we can watch a movie tonight. I’m sitting on the stone step in our kitchen, playing with a push pin and watching my mom. Jiji sorts mail at the kitchen island, periodically asking my mom in Japanese, Is this important? (He holds up a bank statement) Do you want this one? (He holds up a magazine selling Shiseido skin care) Mama nods, and nods, and splashes oil into a large wok. Quickly, she dashes in corn kernels, shuts the lid with a crash, and violently shakes the pan. It sizzles, muffled, then there’s a pop. Then a pop, pop, then pop, pop! POP! At the loudest pop Jiji covers his ears and walks swiftly to the next room. I’m in the kitchen, running circles around the island, delighting in the chaos of the furiously popping corn. Jiji smells smoke, damp soil, and burning flesh. He feels the heat, he hears fires, and he covers his head.

When Jiji was seventeen, he ran out of his house with a pot over his head as fire fell around him. Seventy-six years later someone told me in class that this was history’s deadliest air raid.
I wonder what Jiji sees when he hears the popping of corn. I wonder if the heat radiating from the wok feels like heat that’s meant to kill. I wonder if, at eighty-nine, he still feels like a teenager with no dad, four younger siblings, and far too much to care for.

My body remembers things I don’t. My body is wary of crossing rivers on stones because it knows what it feels like to slip and fall hard. My body carries bruises from events my mind never attended. My body remembers what it feels like to get stung by a bee. When my body squats to retrieve garbage bags from below the sink, suddenly I am crouched in my grandparents’ Japanese style bathroom, huddled on the floor. I’m supposed to dunk water on my head with a bucket to get the soap off. The tiles are slippery and the bottoms of my feet squeak against the ceramic. I stare at the black hairs clustered around the drain in an impossible nest, and I look away when I am finally repulsed. The bath is steaming, but I can’t get in yet.

“Mama!” I call. “MAMA!”

My voice thuds against the walls. The room is square. The air is too thick.

*

I was out on a run when Mama called me and told me that Jiji—

I couldn’t feel my toes, but I walked in big circles around a soccer field until the sun set. It was the end of summer, and I was grateful for the warm wind, but when Mama and I hung up it was nearly dark, and I was stuck shivering in the shade.

*

Jiji was a teenager during WWII. His father died when he was just a kid, so Jiji grew up as the commander of his four younger siblings. He was the one who flattened the grass before the rest could walk on it.
Before he passed away, Jiji’s dad lived in the coastal city of Shima and owned a fishing boat. He made his living by hiring fishermen to command the boat and rope in hundreds of fish each day. After his death, the ownership of the boat changed hands, but the same fishermen kept climbing into the boat each day to earn their living at sea.

At sixteen years old, Jiji went to a trade school in Tokyo to learn about fishing and canning while his mother and four siblings stayed in Shima, far from the chaos of the big city and close to the water. Two years later, when he came home, the fishermen who once worked for his father welcomed Jiji back onto the boat.

“Let’s see what you really learned in Tokyo, college kid!” they teased him.

Jiji flushed, but secretly felt warm with honor that the men were willing to take him on, city-lish as he was now. Besides, food was scarce, and his mother was hungry. But once at sea, the harsh waters thrashed against the boat and Jiji’s stomach ached and turned, so that all he could do was stare straight and hold his line. Alas, Jiji caught nothing that day. Not a single bite, while the experienced fisherman drew in piles of bonito onto the deck.

When they touched land again, an older fisherman slapped Jiji on the back and gave him a faint, creased smile.

“You did good, kid. Give your mother our best,” and he handed Jiji the second largest catch.

I imagine Jiji sauntering home with the single catch slung over his back as the sun fades over distant hills. I imagine his mother swinging open the front door, and his youngest siblings running out to greet him. I can see his mama’s face break open with joy at the sight of the fish. Jiji is bashful yet proud. There will be a good dinner tonight.
II. Talking to Ghosts

1. Soul

I’m on a beach in Maine. It’s April. The wind blows sharp and cold and cuts my fingertips when I reach to brush the tangled hair from my face. The water is frigid, but El dips her toes in the water to make it known that she’s really here. I search the sand by our feet for pretty rocks and shells like I used to do when I was a little kid and my dad would send me a request from the beach towel baking in the sun for a “a flat, smooth stone, for skipping rocks” or a “Jupiter rock, striped like a tabby cat.”

My Mama always told me not to take rocks home from the beach. Their spirits belong here. It’s wrong to unmoor them. Her friend who sees ghosts in graveyards and knows when spirits linger in houses told her this. Mama doesn’t know if this is true—if the spirits of stones and shells will be upset with you if you displace them from their homes—but she listens to her friend. It’s better to be safe than sorry.

2. Memory

Six months later, I’m in Randolph, Massachusetts, and I want to visit the graveyard we drive past on the way to the train station so bad. When we finally board the train for Park St. Station in downtown Boston, my mind retreats to my memory of Japan, and I imagine that I’m riding a bullet train in rural country that glides smoothly over its tracks and where, through the windows, it is green and there are rolling mountains and rice patties and wooden houses with wooden roofs and old men and old women who dot the landscape, bent at the waist over crops. Farming villages are a blur of green and brown and tan and gray and then suddenly we are plunged into darkness as the train enters a mountain.
As we move fast across Massachusetts, I am reminded of how much I miss Japan. I miss walking through narrow streets and rounding the sharp corner near my grandparents’ apartment the cuts around a temple. I miss running around in the heavy summer heat, the intensity of the sun, the humidity and the steady, familiar whine of cicadas bearing down on me. I miss walking home from the Tsutsujigaoka station after dark, passing by the fluorescent lights of 7/11s and the lamps reminiscent of old Japan strung from shop to shop above the street.

When Mama sent me a picture of Jiji’s shrine all set up in my grandparents’ apartment in Tokyo, my eyes could only look at one thing at once—the pale pink roses in a glass pitcher, a large melon, Jiji’s heavenly name painted beautifully on a wooden plaque, and crisp red apples that look like autumn in Ohio to me.

3. History

Long before I lived in Cleveland Heights, and before Rockefeller owned much of the land that is now Cleveland Heights and East Cleveland, several Native American tribes lived and moved around this land. The Kaskaskia people, the Erie, the Mississauga … Every source I comb through online seems to know little about their time as the sole inhabitants of this land. All I can find are countless articles about Rockefeller—what he built, the money he made, how he vacationed—and a color-coded map of native land ownership that shows colors mixing in overlapping pools of land. I marvel at how there appears to be a border in the native ownership, where the region of the Mississauga bumps up against the region of the Erie and the Kaskaskia. I wonder if this land was really split. I wonder if the Mississauga decided they would stop hunting at the river or if there would be trade, partnership, or bloodshed. I wonder whose spirits come back to the creeks I stumbled through as a child.
I know my American imagination fills in the gaps of forgotten or unrecorded history. I remind myself that the Erie and their descendants are still here, just as I am here. Last Thanksgiving, my friend and I delivered two turkeys and a huge bag of potatoes to someone’s house on the west side of Cleveland at the behest of an Instagram post from the Lake Erie Native American Council that read, “Urgent: Donation Request! Turkeys (10-30lbs), potatoes, carrots, onions …”

4. Return

“Natchan, do you know the song, Toryanse?” Jiji asks. I sit up eagerly from the backseat of his car.


“Ooh, you’ve got a good memory,” he says, smiling towards the dark green mountains which rise up on either side of the winding road. Jiji hums the starting note of the ancient nursery rhyme, low and grainy, and I begin to sing.

Let me pass, let me pass.

Whose narrow path do I tread on here?

The narrow path of Sir Tenjin?

Please let me pass

“Those without good reason shall not pass”

I come to give my offerings

For this child’s seventh birthday

Going is easy but returning is frightening
Even in my fear let me pass こわいながらも 通りゃんせ
Let me pass 通りゃんせ

Jiji’s face lights up at the sound of the final chords and he grumbles with approval. I imagine that this old tune from his childhood vibrates his heartstrings. Old tune, old soul. Old tune, young lungs. I think Jiji must always have music in his mind. He cranks up Rachmaninoff Piano Concerto No. 2 and nods to the beat.

“You know this?” he asks. I shake my head.
“You like this?” he asks. I really do.

Every time we travel to Japan, my mom and I make a point to climb Takao-San—the mountain at the end of the train line. Temples line the path periodically, so whenever we make the climb, it feels like we’re making a pilgrimage to the highest point of land in the area. We stop at the best shrines for a quick pray. I pray at the temple which honors good luck and success in school. My mom prays for safety and security and a little extra cash. We walk for two hours uphill and make joyful conversation.

“Look at this placard, these trees have been here for two thousand years!”
“Who was here two thousand years ago? Who saw this tree as a sapling?”

Towards the end of the hike, Mama forges on ahead while I stop to stare through the trees. Nearest the top, I can see rolling mountains stretching for miles. On the clearest day, I can see Mount Fuji, looming so massively in the distance it looks like something I conjured in my imagination out of the swirling clouds on the horizon.

When the air is thinnest, I take my deepest breaths, and I wonder if those I prayed to are watching me now. I talk to my ancestors as I talk to myself. How will I do this? Keep me safe.
Keep me happy and healthy. Give me strength. I wonder if next time I am on top of the mountain I’ll be able to talk to Jiji too.
Chapter 4: Ghost Stories, Ghost Storytellers

Summer, 1944
Shima village, Mie prefecture

“Hello? … Hello?”

Sakiko called into the mess of bushes in front of her. Everything was still except for the twinkle of the creek that twisted its way through the trees and towards the big water. Her brothers had vanished into the woods in the seconds she counted before opening her eyes.

“Come out!” Sakiko couldn’t stand being the only girl anymore. One older brother, three younger brothers, they all treated her the same. They’d pinch her cheeks and run away while her face was still hot. They’d sing the same songs over and over again and throw pennies at her like she was an opera dancer on stage. And if she enjoyed her food too slowly, eight little chopsticks would invade her plate and steal the fish she was saving, best for last.

Sakiko sighed and stepped forward. She might as well pretend to look for them. Eventually one of the little ones would get impatient and jump out at her. She stepped softly around the roots and grasses on the ground, fitting her feet carefully in the shapes between the roots. Go quietly, quietly. Make them think you’ve disappeared. Make them wonder if they’re still being watched.

Suddenly, she heard shrieks coming from the shore. Four little boy heads popped out of the scenery in front of her, smiling big.

“The fishermen are home,” said Shigeo, the oldest.

“Dinner! Dinner, dinner!” cried Issau, the youngest.
“I knew you’d all come out eventually,” Sakiko said wryly, but the boys were already stepping out of their hiding places and hopping out of the woods. The five siblings wove between trees, over roots and under branches, each child careful not to be the one left behind. No stumbles or get teased. No heavy breath or the others will move faster. When they broke through the tree line, they gathered themselves into a run. Sparse grass filled with sand and got thicker, and thicker, till the children were pulling their legs out of the sand, eyes fixed on the boats arriving at the bay. Ten long boats were shoved up against the sand, as the six strong men in each boat pulled their bags of fish onto the ground. Sakiko heard snippets of their calls as their voices catch the wind.

“Big catch! … Yes, tuna …”

“For the send-off … Yes! Great.”

“An honorable celebration … Indeed.”

As the children neared the boats, Issau and Akira, the two youngest, slowed their runs and walked towards the radius of the men to watch them work and report on the day’s catches. Sakiko watched the younger boys. With them at just six and eight years old, it was important for her, at thirteen, to watch them. But she couldn’t take her eyes off the sea. The land of the bay curved elegantly in a huge half circle, as if someone had peeled a melon and left its rind sitting sideways on the table. Deep blue water lapped up against the shore, the bluest water in the world, villagers told her. Bluer than the sky. They told her Ago Bay was the keyhole opening to the deepest, widest ocean there was. But the big little islands dotting the water of the bay made the ocean seem small, since so much rock appeared to grow out of it. Sakiko thought of how the fishermen had to guide their boats, weaving between the island to make it to open water. They
said that once you made it to open water, the rest of the world dropped into the ocean. Shima, the little village that faced the rising sun and the sinking water. It scared her to think of how much water the ocean holds—how deep it could possibly be. Water that could swallow an island whole. Water that ate boats and the men in them, as they sank down indefinitely, to be lost somewhere in the crush of water with unheard memories and forgotten secrets.

Sakiko shook the feeling off and recentered her eyes on the younger boys, who still watched the men wind their ropes and sort their bags. She turned around, and Shigeo and Toru were nowhere to be found. They must have walked home for dinner. At twelve years old, Toru wanted to be just like fourteen-year-old Shigeo. He followed Shigeo so closely it was almost like having two older brothers, despite the year of seniority Sakiko had over Toru.

Always the watcher ... Sakiko thought to herself. Watch the kids watch, and watch the boy-men leave...
The sun was sinking, the orange colors reflected on the water fading into gray.

“Akira! Issau!” Sakiko called. “It’s time for dinner!”

“What’s for dinner?” called back Akira.

“I don’t know, let’s find out!” she yelled.

That was enough for Akira, always hungry. He stood up and tugged on Issau. Issau was clearly reluctant to leave, but more reluctant to be left behind.

They trudged up the shore, and Sakiko let the wind rustle her sleeves.

*

December 2022
Tokyo, Japan
Shibasaki House

The table was set. Mama wanted to make sure it was beautiful. Mama and I washed the pretty white tablecloth and stretched it over Yoko and Shigeo’s dining room table. We mirrored each other, stretching our arms out wide like wings, and gently floating the cloth from its weightless moment in the air to its resting drape on the table. Pale yellow light spilled into the kitchen and dining room from the sliding glass door that separated the room from the balcony. The rooms themselves were not separate at all—just a few floor tiles lay between the long room that held the kitchen and dining area. Adjacent to the kitchen and dining room, a sliding paper door opened to reveal the tatami room. Mama and I slept in the tatami room. This morning, we had to fold our mattresses, fold the comforters, and fold the soft towels we use as sheets, and shove them carefully into the big bedding closet because guests were coming over. Yesterday and the day before, Mama seemed worried that we wouldn’t have the time in Tokyo to properly
host her two uncles, Akira and Issau, in the apartment during our short winter trip. But we’d already sent several long and very formal emails back and forth with the great uncles, and they were going to meet each other in the big city, and they were going to make their way to their late big brother’s apartment.

Neither of them had been to Shigeo’s Tokyo apartment since long before he died. They remembered the apartment as the place where Yoko, Shigeo’s wife, used to present enormous feasts every New Year’s Day. For many years, the whole family made their pilgrimage to Yoko and Shigeo’s apartment, leaving only after hours of food courses, and hours of creating the assurance that this year would be a good year. This year, over a year after Shigeo passed away in the middle of coronavirus pandemic, the uncles were revisiting the home with white protective masks stretched over their mouths. Although mask-wearing is customary in Japan, it was starting to feel like a charade, where visitors to new homes would hide their faces, only to uncover their mouths for the hours of eating and drinking. When did the masks come back on? Why wear it only to take it off? No one seemed willing to ask these questions no matter where I went.

“Mama, are they coming soon?”

Mama turns toward me from her place at the kitchen counter where she stands, drying teacups with a soft cloth.

“They should be here any minute, Natchan,” replies Mama.

It was so nice of Mama to help me with these interviews. After Jiji died two Augusts ago, stories of the past, from his past, seemed to take on a mythical quality, where the edges of the stories felt charred at the ends, blackness overtaking each silhouette. Before he died, the stories he told me felt more pastoral. He’d tell me of his childhood, and I’d picture baby blue skies and
even bluer oceans. He’d tell me of his days as a businessman, and I’d picture a cartoonish
drawing of Shanghai, where the Jiji in my memory would scurry around in a fuzzy grey suit. Jiji
in my memory used to ram his body between the doors of a train so that he would make it to
work on time. Jiji in my memory looks at me while we sit together on the subway in December
2019, his eyes wide, as he suddenly slams his hands together and says, *I used to run into the
train like that. BANG. Did it hurt?* I ask. *Oh no, that didn’t hurt,* he replies.

The sound of the doorbell shakes Mama and me out of our reveries. Mama runs to the
doorbell microphone, presses the button, and says,

“Yes, yes! We’ll be right there!”

She scurries to the front door, and I follow, a few steps behind her. When she pulls open
the door, we meet two old men. I remind myself their names are Akira and Issau. Akira, the older
one, looks especially like a living Jiji. He hums and haws as he takes off his shoes. He’s hard of
hearing. I wonder if he knows he grumbles like Jiji.

Akira-San and Issau-San walk through the skinny apartment hallway to the kitchen and
dining rooms. They both step lightly and walk with intention. Akira in front, Issau behind. Issau
making sure Akira walks safe. Akira walking with confidence because he knows he will be safe.

When the gentlemen arrive at the dining room and adjacent tatami room, their eyes both
find the family shrine set up in the corner of the tatami room. This morning, Mama had lovingly
opened the doors of the shrine, revealing pictures of Shigeo’s parents, Yoko’s parents, Shigeo’s
brothers and sisters, and finally Shigeo, Jiji, himself, in the biggest frame in front of a recent
altar. Mama placed fresh incense in the burner, and I gave my ancestors a glass of water. Mama
bought some clementine and gave the family some fruit as well.
“Ho! It’s Older Brother!” cries Akira, quickening his steps towards the shrine.

“Yes, yes, Brother!” agrees Issau. “They’ve got everyone up there actually. It’s a one stop shop!”

“What?” cries Akira, even though he is only a step away. Issau catches up to Akira and gently leans his face towards Akira’s ear.

“It’s a one stop shop. We can meet our whole family at this altar.” Issau turns around to look at Mama and me and says, “Uncle Akira, his ears are far away,” meaning, he is hard of hearing.

Mama and I watch and smile as the brothers carefully kneel in front of the shrine, clap their hands together, and bow their heads to greet their ancestors.

*  
February 1945  
Tokyo, Japan  

Sakiko stood at the narrow sink in Uncle’s Tokyo apartment. Uncle sat at the kitchen table, leaning back against his chair with his long legs spread out in front of him. He held the day’s newspaper out wide in front of him, the length of his arms and legs making him look like an overgrown spider sprawled in the kitchen.

“Ne, Sakiko,” he said. “Sakiko!”

“Oh, yes?” She responded, twisting her shoulders to look back at him.

“Be sure you respond the first time,” Uncle said. “Now, are you just going to stand there or are you at the sink for a reason?”
The real answer was, she didn’t know. After arriving in Tokyo six months ago with Shigeo, Sakiko felt like she had nothing to do. Uncle gave her chores, and she did them. She stood at the sink. She sat in the chairs. No school till next year. Meanwhile, Shigeo had everything to do. In six months, he had studied for the entrance exam to the Tokyo University of Fisheries, become one of two students in their region to get in, and begun attending the school. Then the pair of siblings was sent to live with Uncle in Tokyo because Mother needed fewer kids in the house, and Sakiko could be a companion for Shigeo and a helper for Uncle. Not that either needed her, really. Shigeo made his first friend at the entrance exam, and Uncle needed the dishes washed, so they were washed.

“I’m sorry, Uncle,” Sakiko said. “I am not at the sink for a reason.”

The sun would set outside the little windows in Uncle’s home, and the patches of light on the walls would travel down, down, and down the walls. Uncle would read, then lay in his bed, and Sakiko would take his chair when he left, watching the colors move. Shigeo would come home late, weary, but smiling. He would tell Sakiko about the latest movements of the war. Tell her, less rice today, more next week. No new fish because the siblings no longer live with the water. At school today, they didn’t teach him about how to can fish, like they usually do. No, today, they lined up all the boys in the dusty courtyard and taught them how to bury bombs in the sand should they be sent to war. You’re all young, strong boys, the professors said. Many of you will be made to fight. Shigeo felt a jolt of adrenaline. For some reason, disaster always made him feel this way—almost giddy, but with fear. You all must know how to plant bombs, the professors said. You carry it like this—like a shield. Then, you run as fast as you can towards the enemy as they try to climb up onto our beaches. When you get as close as you can, ram your body into the sand. The bomb will explode in a few seconds. You will destroy the enemy. A skinny boy raised his hand from the
middle of the crowd. Yes? The professor said, calling on the boy. Um, well. *What do we do when the bomb explodes?* Shigeo’s giddiness almost turned into a laugh. He held his breath. The professor replied, *You die.*

*

Before they sent Sakiko to Tokyo, she thought she would be the last to leave Ago Bay. Last year, after she heralded the brothers up to dinner, the whole family gathered around their dusty kitchen table to eat. Mother sat next to Father, who was growing weak. He had gotten sick a few months ago and didn’t get better. Mother and the siblings each wondered quietly if he would ever get better. The children filled the rest of the spots around the table, and the family passed and rotated the food. Rice, fish, and pickled vegetables. They were lucky to have them. Lucky to own a boat, and lucky to eat one catch from the day.

“When is it?” asked Father.

“Tomorrow,” answered Mother. They looked up at each other.

“When’s what!” asked Akira, shoveling the rice from his plate into his mouth in one big bite.

“The send-off,” answered Shigeo, very seriously. “They’re sending ten men from our town to war tomorrow.” Akira’s eyes widened.

“They are?” he asked. “What will they do?”

“Eat the best fish,” Father answered. “Then return when the war is over.”

The next morning, the whole family got up early to go to the edge of town. Mother, Father, Shigeo, Toru, Akira, Issau, and Sakiko. Mother held a folded belt delicately in her hands.
She was the last woman to stitch a dot into one of the senninbari, the thousand person stitches. Nine more women would bring the other belts, all decorated with rows and rows of stitches from every woman in the village, made to tie around the waist of the soldiers and bring the luck of home with them to war. The family joined the circle of people around the ten men. Little red parcels, rice balls, and the belts, handed over, one by one. Cheers, whoops, stamps. Then, the men turned into soldiers, and they disappeared down the road.

* 

December 2022
Tokyo, Japan
Shibasaki House

After praying at the family shrine, Uncle Akira and Uncle Issau step from the tatami room into the dining room and maneuver themselves into the pair of chairs across from Mama and me.

“Thank you so, so much for coming all this way,” says Mama. I can only nod with a big smile on my face.

“Y-yes,” I manage. “Thank you so much.” I wish I had the words in Japanese to say, *I am grateful that you want to tell me about your childhoods. You can tell me anything you’d like. You move like Jiji. Thank you.*

Another doorbell interrupts me while I am still hunting for words in the corners of my mind.

“Ahh, that’s the food!” says Issau. He rises to address the door, but Mama jumps forward to save him the trip. I hurry after her, my reflexes still getting used to the standards of Japanese
politeness. A minute later, we re-enter the room with two big bags holding our lunches. Four wooden boxes and a wooden bowl. A pile of rice, and fish to place on top.

“We brought the family tree to show you, Natsumi,” says Uncle Issau. “But first, let’s eat.”
Figure 2 – Family Tree
March 9th, 1945  
Tokyo, Japan

It was a cool evening, and Sakiko sat perched in Uncle’s chair in his Tokyo apartment. The sun had slid all the way down the wall, pooled on the ground, then faded away. Sakiko felt happy because Shigeo came home early today. It was a Friday. They could eat breakfast together tomorrow morning and stay up late reading together. Uncle wasn’t home, perhaps visiting a friend, but it meant Sakiko could slouch in her chair and make big sighs and sit with her legs completely relaxed, with no one to watch her. Well, except for Shigeo. Now that he was a university man, Sakiko noticed that he started to look at her next to the pretty girls working at the grocery store. Oi, stand up straight! He would whisper to her when they went shopping together. C’mon we’re in Tokyo now. Sakiko’s face would blush, and she’d clasp her hands in front of her stomach. Sakiko would try to smile small and look dainty in public. At home, though, it didn’t matter. That boy shared a bathtub with her, for goodness’ sake.

“Hey Sakiko,” Shigeo said. The images in her mind shook away and revealed Shigeo standing by the kitchen counter. “Do you want some tea?”

“Oh, sure. Thank you so much. Can I help you?”

“Oh, no no,” Shigeo smiled at her. “Let me make it for us.”

Shigeo carefully picked up the kettle and brought it to the sink to fill with water. As he turned the faucet, the distant wail of the air raid siren pierced the walls. Shigeo immediately turned off the faucet and looked up.

“Sakiko, we have to go to the bomb shelter. Quick!”
“Do you think I can bring my—”

“No!” He exclaimed, grabbing his jacket. “We might only have a few minut—”

*

BANG! The building shook. It was already here.

BANG! BANG! Explosions five blocks away … three blocks away. Shigeo grabbed a big wok and saucepan from the cabinets below the sink. He handed Sakiko the wok, kept the smaller pan for himself, and ushered her out the door. Their feet found the pavement outside, and they started running side-by-side. Fire hit the sidewalk on their left. Fire hit the sidewalk on their right. Sakiko knew Shigeo was running slower for her. Huge curls of smoke seeped from the explosions on every block, and people ran through it from all directions. Fires caught fires caught fires. Shigeo through the smoke. Sakiko couldn’t feel her legs except for the pounding of her feet on the pavement.

“Run, Sakiko! Run with me!” Sakiko could hear Shigeo scream, but his voice from under the pot made it sound like he was shouting from underwater. Sakiko thought she could hear the rush of the Sumida River, and the splashes and sizzles as people all over Tokyo leapt into the water to stop the fire on their skin. Her eyes focused in front of her, and Shigeo was looking back. The red light behind his head darkened his face, but his eyes locked with hers in the dark…

*

Ago Bay. The sun rising from beyond the water. Red orb sliding up between the islands. Or maybe, the light looked like the orange and yellow stage lights reflecting off the opera’s stage and bathing Shigeo’s face in warm light. In this memory, Shigeo tilted his head back with glee,
laughing. He was ten years old, and Sakiko, a little younger. The audience stamped and whooped and clapped at the opera dancers on the stage. Watchers threw little coins onto the stage in front of them to laud the dancers. Watch this, said Shigeo, turning towards Sakiko with his eyes twinkling. He pulled a one-yen coin out of his pocket, drew up his arm, and launched the coin at the dancer who wore the devilish mask. The shiny silver ring flew through the air and bounced off the dancer’s mask with a barely audible clink! Shigeo and Sakiko exploded into laughter. She looked down and saw that he was holding out a coin for her. She smiled, grabbed it from his hand, and made her own attempt at hitting a dancer. Sakiko’s coin sailed low and straight, bouncing off the dancer’s shins. The dancer smiled and bowed, honored to be shown so much appreciation in such a small but well-cultured town. Shigeo and Sakiko just looked at each other in the orange light and laughed.

*

December 2022
Tokyo, Japan
Shibasaki House

“Yes,” says Uncle Akira. “When we were little, Shigeo showed us how to throw coins at the opera dancers. Of course, to the dancers it was just praise, but to a couple of little boys, it was a great sport.”

“But Mama,” I ask on the phone with her a few months after my chat with Uncle Akira and Uncle Issau. “Where was Sakiko during the Tokyo firebombing? I know Jiji ran out of his uncle’s house with a pan over his head, but where did he run to?”

“I don’t know where Sakiko was,” replies Mama.
“If she was living with Jiji, don’t you think they would have escaped together? Don’t you think he would have mentioned running away with her if they were together?”

“Maybe …” says Mama, contemplatively. “But Natchan, we couldn’t ask about these things when Jiji was alive.”

“And we I can’t ask about them now either,” I sigh.

“Its trauma, Natchan. To-ra-ma.”

“I know, Mama.”

“I think Jiji was living in Otaku, a southern neighborhood in Tokyo. I think Jiji was lucky, and the bombs didn’t fall right there.”

“I thought you said the bombs fell everywhere. Where did he go, then?”

“I think he went to the Gokugo. The big hole.”

“A bomb shelter?”

“Yes, that.”

“Was it far away?”

“I don’t know.”
March 9th, 1945
Tokyo, Japan

Shigeo and Sakiko ran out of Uncle’s house, pans over their heads. The air raid sirens wailed overhead, over and over and over. They could see smoke rising from the densest parts of the city, red light vibrating in the air. *Run, we have to run.* Forward and forward towards the edge of the city. Other humans peeled out of their houses and ran on the streets with them. Sisters, brothers, fathers, children. They ran together towards the end of a street that lifted into grasses and trees. They leapt into the woods, over the roots, and under the branches, like they practiced as children, and found The Hole. The opening of The Hole was rimmed with large stones, and from the outside Sakiko and Shigeo could see that the ground slanted down into an
underground hallway. Light stopped at the entrance, but they couldn’t, so they entered the darkness.

* 

March 2023
Tokyo, Japan
Shibasaki House

“Oh, Sakiko. It is a pleasure to meet you,” says the voice of Shigeo.

“And you as well, Shigeo. It has been so long,” says the voice of Sakiko.

“I’m afraid I’m a poor host these days, but there is fresh water in our offering cup. My daughter is visiting.”

“That is lovely. Lovely indeed.”

From far above, the voices watch Miho’s black hair bend as she kneels before the family shrine.

“Miho is a good daughter. She travels so far to care for your wife.”

“So is your daughter, Kaori. I watched her care for you intently before you decided to join me.”

If they had faces, the voices would smile at each other.

“Does it frustrate you that you cannot communicate with them?”

“It used to. But now I am content to watch.”

“But they have questions…”
“And they are meant to keep asking.”

“What would—”

“A song.”

“—stories—untold—?”

“—not forgotten—”

“---truth—?”

“—memory—imagination—”

“—return?”

“—again.”

“—at—?”

“—an end.”

*

December 2022
Tokyo, Japan
Shibasaki House

“You see,” says Uncle Issau, “I was just a child when the war happened. The only thing I remember is playing hide and seek in the air raid shelter, then being carried there one time when the siren actually went off. Uncle Akira might remember more?” He turns to Uncle Akira.

“What do you remember from the war?” asks Uncle Issau, leaning in towards Uncle Akira.
“You have to understand,” says Uncle Akira, “That we lived in a little village called Shima. Yes, Shima like ‘Island.’ We would watch the fisherman pull in their boats as little boys. We would catch birds by putting sticky sap on a stick and swinging at them. Not to eat. We released them after. But I was small, very small. The Japanese people are connected by genes to each other, and to the ancient tribes that once traveled to this island. I read an article about it. Look, this is our family tree. Isn’t it fun to read all the ancient names? We are at the edge of this paper. I think this great, great uncle was the one who owned a boat. Well, then he lost it, but we kept living.”
Coda

While this project began as a collection of nonfiction stories centered around my family’s and my own history, I unexpectedly turned to fiction writing in the final chapter, “Ghost Stories, Ghost Storytellers.” After the passing of my grandfather and my great-aunt Sakiko, and after extracting tiny fragments of childhood memories from the interviews I conducted with their living brothers, Akira and Issau, I found myself wanting to write fiction because of the genre’s power to give interiority to people whose memories are inaccessible or incomplete. Although my interviews with Akira and Issau were invaluable for understanding the environment that my grandfather and great-aunt grew up in, the living uncles were still young boys when they lived in Shima and could only provide a few stories about their early life and their vague memories of WWII. Thus, in my final chapter, I used a mix of fiction and nonfiction writing to flesh the inner world of Sakiko and write from the perspective of the now deceased Sakiko and Shigeo. At the same time, I wove in stories about the process of interviewing Akira and Issau to make explicit the process of transmitting and transfiguring a family story. I included pictures of the materials that Akira and Issau used to tell me our family stories because I appreciated how these images ground the narrative in our family tree, in our geographical history, and in Japan as a whole. In sum, I hope that my brief use of fiction will add narrative power to the versions of real history I received from Mama, Baba, Akira, and Issau.

While I hope that using fiction in portions of “Ghost Stories, Ghost Storytellers” will humanize and soften stories I gathered about people who have passed away, I worry that my fictionalization of Sakiko’s and Shigeo’s early life conflicts with one of the core missions of this project, which is to piece together my family history by weaving scraps of memory with the moments I witness in my life. Although this worry remains at the forefront of my mind, I hope
that my engagement with both fiction and nonfiction will allow me to transmit my family stories in such a way that preserves the stories created by the original storytellers, while also deepening the characterizations of individuals who are situationally more difficult to capture.

Finally, I am left with the questions: How do I stop writing a story like this? Does a story about oneself and one’s lineage ever end, or does one just stop writing? After working on this piece in a variety of forms for months, or really for years, it seems odd to try to put an end to it.

In my last hours of writing I sit on my bed, late at night, surrounded by the objects that Jiji left me. Or rather, surrounded by the objects that Mama picked out for me to have when she was trapped in Japan in the middle of the pandemic, grieving alone after the sudden death of her father. I sit with a little red jewelry box that hold Jiji’s pearl and gold necktie pin. I sit with two of his handkerchiefs, the smell of his cologne still trapped in the plastic Ziplock bag that Mama packed them in. I sit with a necklace that Jiji picked out for me from a gift catalogue only a few weeks before he passed away. These objects remind me of all the little stories I haven’t told yet. I didn’t write about how the calendar in Baba and Jiji’s apartment rests indefinitely on the month Jiji passed away. If I look at it when I’m sleepy enough, I can almost forget what year it is. I didn’t write about Jiji’s hesitation to throw away bits of Mama’s hair he cleaned up from his carpet before she flew back to America. It hurts too much to think about what those strands of DNA meant to him in his last year living.

The objects on my bed remind me that although this project is about a lot of things, it is largely about losing Jiji. This project is about the things I missed out on knowing, understanding, and asking. This project is about listening hard after loss. This project is about trying to remember. This project is about trying not to forget.
Acknowledgements

I am so lucky to be surrounded by so many wonderful adults. First, I am immensely grateful to have gotten to work closely with Professor Belinda Kong throughout this academic year on my Honors Project, and in previous semesters a class student. Belinda, thank you so much for your patience, kindness, and willingness to embark on a creative writing project with me. Thank you for bearing with me, making sense of the things I tried to say, and most importantly, for guiding me through this project with your incredible and inspiring scholarship. I am so lucky to have gotten to learn from you and look up to you all year.

To my readers, Professor Brock Clarke and Professor Zahir Janmohamed, thank you so much for your sensitive and thorough feedback throughout the critical moments in my project. It is such an honor to have my work read by two professor-writers whom I greatly look up to, to learn from your feedback, and to get to know you both throughout this process.

Finally, thank you to my family for being the heart of this project. Thank you to Baba, Jiji, Akira, and Issau for all the time you spent with me and for sharing as much of your lives as you could with me. Thank you for meeting me where I am. Thank you for trusting me with these stories.

Dad, thank you for listening to me, always. Especially in English. Sometimes I wonder if I learned to think by getting to talk to you, because you always let me think out loud. You showed me by example how to wonder, suppose, and imagine. Thank you for infusing the world with wonder. I learned to look because of you.

Mama, this project wouldn’t be possible without you. Thank you for letting me ask you hard questions and for always challenging me. Thank you for letting me see the world through your eyes. Thank you for speaking Japanese with me and for me. Thank you for sharing everything with me: your thoughts, care, memories, values, hopes, pains, and every days. I am grateful to be grown and raised by you.
Works Consulted


Additional Readings


i Kogawa, epigraph.
ii Kogawa, 25.
iii Kogawa, 26.
iv Kogawa 27.
v Kogawa, 26.