

Japanese Blood in the Heart of the Gothic:
An Anthology of Gothic Stories from the Japanese Diaspora

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Abstract

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Japanese Blood in the Heart of the Gothic is a fictional anthology of Gothic short stories from across the Japanese diaspora. Though the authors are fictional, they represent real Japanese communities outside of Japan and the real sense of otherness that comes from settling in a new homeland. The authors and their stories vary in historical time period, subject and style; but, the Gothic and its destabilizing uncanniness run through them all. This anthology is a layered cake of a project. It's a collection of creepy stories. It's an experiment in defining mixed-race Japanese American story-telling. It's a statement on belonging. It's a love letter to a community.

This project is in its first stage. The second stage will include authors and stories from South America as well as repatriated authors who write as outsiders in Japan.

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An Anthology of Gothic Stories from the Japanese Diaspora

Edited by Amy Hirayama

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Introduction

Dr. Erin Goshikku

*There is something dark in my heart. I cannot seem to exorcize it but through writing...
and still it returns. -Amiko Tamashiro*

From her rooms in the cottage of Mrs. Hendrika Bakker, Amiko Tamashiro wrote these words to Frieda Kroes, her correspondent and friend of twenty years. The view out her windows was bleak - the ruins of a church burned in a fire that swept the town in 1802, a field that lay fallow in winter, a great expanse of gray, Dutch sky. The damp gloom of her surroundings permeates the stories of Amiko Tamashiro. Her position as an outsider in Dutch society contributes to this sense of darkness. When Amiko Tamashiro and her husband Ken left Ito, Japan in 1752, she did not know she was traveling to a new homeland, one where she would live without the company of her husband who died shortly after their arrival. Though she found charity and friendship among the parishioners of the Christian Reformed Church in Delft, her profound difference acted as a buffer between Tamashio and her adopted community.

Like many of the writers in this anthology, Tamashio turned to writing as a way to create a space for her own belonging. Amiko Tamashiro's three collections of short stories are some of the earliest examples of Gothic writing from the Japanese diaspora. Japan has its own rich tradition of *kaiki*, tales of the uncanny, from which Amiko Tamashiro and many other writers in this collection draw inspiration. But it is their position outside of Japan that lends a unique voice to these writers.

The Japanese diaspora is scattered around the globe with its largest concentrations in North and South America. These migrations out of Japan were largely instigated by economic downturns in the country, as well as the need for cheap labor in North and South America. In Brazil, coffee plantations struggled as the number of Italian immigrants who usually worked the fields began to shrink. In the United States, the Chinese Exclusion Act limited the cheap labor force that was essential to the economy, leaving an opening for Japanese labor. Eventually, these laborers formed communities and settled down with families. While many of these communities maintained strong ties with Japan, and insulated themselves from the culture of their new homelands, over time their children and grandchildren integrated, and the culture of the Japanese diaspora evolved into something all its own.

This anthology is a survey of writers from the diaspora whose work finds a home in the Gothic. The writers in this collection reached only modest recognition and represent voices from a variety of historical time periods. This anthology showcases works from writers whose styles, interests and backgrounds demonstrate the variety that exists within this seemingly narrow category of literature. It is by no means an exhaustive collection as the work of many Japanese writers from the diaspora has yet to be translated to English.

Most of the writers in this anthology represent major migrations out of Japan to Brazil, Peru, Hawaii and the west coast of the United States. The exceptions are Amiko Tamashiro, whose work is foundational when discussing the Japanese Gothic outside of Japan and Ikue Natsukawa, whose stories were written during her imprisonment at the Manzanar internment camp during WWII.

A note on terminology: the term “Japanese” is used as a blanket identifier for all of the writers in this collection. The intent is not to diminish the variations in Japanese identity among the writers, but to join them in their Japanese lineage. That being said, it is important to acknowledge that the writers in this anthology represent Issei, Nikkei, Sansei and Yonsei generations; some are mixed-race Hapa writers; some have their own system of nomenclature from the language of their home country. Paz Tamaki, for instance, refers to herself as *coloniajin*, a post-war term for Japanese expatriates in Brazil. Preceding the stories are brief biographies that go into more detail on each writer’s specific connection to Japan and ethnic or cultural identifiers.

Why the Gothic?

The authors in this anthology approach the Gothic from different historical contexts, cultures and literary styles. Many of the authors rely on familiar tropes and archetypes - the woman in the attic, vengeful spirits, dark and stormy settings, foreboding architecture - while others introduce unusual literary elements into their vision of what the Gothic can be - the wavy perception of psychedelic substances, saccharine sweetness plastered onto the feminine, the hauntings of injustice and violence. What unites these very different takes on the Gothic is the uncanny.

The diasporic experience is heterogeneous. For many families who left Okinawa and found a new home in Hawaii in the early 1900s, the elders believed assimilation would give the next generations the best chance at success. This meant giving their children American names, encouraging them to pursue higher education and not passing down the Japanese language. In Lana Kaneshiro's recollections of growing up in Hawaii, she explains how her Japanese vocabulary is limited to the words she heard the most - numbers, food-related terms, swear words, and variations on "trouble-maker." This story is similar for many diasporic Japanese families in Hawaii.

This story looks different in Brazil where insulated communities of agricultural workers maintained their Japanese culture and traditions in their new homeland. These communities had their own political structures and leadership, Japanese schools and mutual aid associations. (Unfortunately, many communities also maintained the strict hierarchical and sexist social structures they knew from their lives in Japan.) At the time, this community building was often framed as an unwillingness to integrate into Brazilian society, an attitude which overlooks the exclusion and racism that necessitated Japanese farmers to turn to each other for support and success.

Despite the differences in settling in Hawaii, Brazil, Peru, the United States and other hubs of the Japanese diaspora, there is a shared sense of the uncanny. In his paper, "The Uncanny," Freud highlights the idea of that which is *heimisch* - familiar, native, belonging to home - and the *unheimlich*. In his description of the uncanny, Freud turns to psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch's definition, "that in which one does not know where one is" (Freud, 2). Being part of a diaspora means leaving the familiar and establishing home elsewhere, a situation ripe for Jentsch's description of the uncanny. This disorientation is a major part of uprooting from a

homeland. There is physical disorientation that comes with learning an unfamiliar landscape, navigating new streets and landmarks, and adjusting to a different climate. Before one grows accustomed to their new surroundings, it is possible to literally not know where one is. A sense of the uncanny can occur as one wanders a new city, unsure if they recognize a landmark or if they're seeing it for the first time. There is a loose grasp on the understanding of a space that leaves room for doubt, uncertainty and even fear. Where am I? How do I get back? What if I can't find my way home? Am I safe here? It is in this space that the uncanny flourishes. Over time, most people adjust to new surroundings and gain their bearings. Cultural disorientation, however, can linger through generations. While one may recognize the necessities of home in a new place - somewhere to sleep, food, clothing, dishes - there is always something off about them. There's rice here, just like at home; but, the shape of each grain is slightly thinner, it doesn't smell exactly the same, it's not quite as sticky. How do you measure degrees of stickiness?

Another important feature of the uncanny is the double. For members of a diaspora, a new homeland is a double of the home they left. That's not to say that the new place is identical. What makes the double uncanny is the disorientation of approximation. This is like home, but not. They do the same things we do, but they do them differently. I'm also a mother raising children and doing my best to provide them a good future, but I'm not the same as the mothers here. Why aren't we the same?

The uncanny has two sides. For members of the Japanese diaspora, the landscape and culture of a new home feels uncanny. For the citizens of their new homeland, these immigrant communities are viewed as uncanny due to legacies of racism. Freud uses the example of the automaton when explaining the uncanny nature of the double. The uncertainty if a being is

human or an automaton can instill existential fear. Will it hurt me? If I love it will it love me back? What does it mean if I come to depend on it? Is my connection to it real? Is it alive? Is it like me? Will it replace me? This uncertainty translates to humans looking at each other across cultures and is especially pernicious with groups among whom power is distributed unevenly. Japanese people in the diaspora were regularly met with the type of discrimination that comes from fear and mistrust of the other. Will they hurt me? If I love them will they love me back? What does it mean if I come to depend on them? Is my connection to them real? Are they like me? Will they replace me?

Producing a feeling of the uncanny through cultural and phenotypical differences does not go away once one grows accustomed to a new homeland. It is passed down through generations, as is the discrimination that accompanies it. This is why third, fourth, fifth generation people with Japanese ancestry can still feel like outsiders in the countries they call home. The dominant culture is constantly reminding outsiders that there's something off about them.

The constant reminder of the outsider's uncanniness and ongoing feelings of a new homeland as uncanny fuel the creativity of the authors in this anthology. Nestled within the dark arms of the Gothic, the stories in this collection revel in the ways writing gives us power. Through writing, outsiders have the power to exact revenge, to make people listen, to be seen, to unleash and to mourn.

Dr. Erin Goshikku, PhD. is a researcher scholar on the life and works of Amiko Tamashiro. An excerpt of her forthcoming book, Amiko Tamashiro: Emergent Gothic and the Literary Hybrid, can be found in the Amsterdam University press journal, Jaarboek de Achttiende Eeuw.

Amiko Tamashiro

(1760 – 1812)

Delft, Holland

Born in Nagasaki in 1760, Amiko Matsuo was the daughter of merchant Junichi Matsuo who primarily sold porcelain goods and lacquerware to Dutch traders. Amiko Matsuo's father allowed her an education in the hope she would use it to assist her future husband when he took over her father's business. She studied arithmetic and calligraphy and learned to read through studying the writings of Confucius. She also acquired rudimentary Dutch while observing her father's business. At age 16 Amiko Matsuo married Ken Tamashiro, an apprentice to her father. Shortly after Junichi Matsuo's death in 1780, Ken Tamashiro traveled to Holland with his wife in order to establish new trading partnerships. While their marriage was arranged, it appears Amiko Tamashiro held great affection for her husband and he in turn welcomed her counsel in the business.

A few months after their arrival in Rotterdam, Ken Tamashiro died of a bronchial infection, an event Tamashiro references only briefly in her letters. After her husband's death, Tamashiro turned to the Christian Reformed Church in Delft which offered her lodgings at the

home of a widowed parishioner and employment as a cleaner. It is unknown why she chose to remain in Holland. It's possible she was unable to access her husband's money, which would have made it extremely difficult for her to secure passage back to Japan. There is no record as to whether or not her husband's business dealings were successful, so perhaps they were already short on funds before his death.

In her letters, Amiko Tamashiro tells how she was rechristened as Anna Thomsen by her benefactors at the church, and that when not attending services, she occupied much of her time with reading and writing in both Dutch and Japanese. Writing as Anna Thomsen, Tamashiro published three collections of stories to little acclaim. Her first collection, *Snow Maiden and the Winter Moon (Sneew Meisje en de Winter Maan)* (1785) appears to be an attempt to appeal to the Christian sensibilities and moral codes of her new homeland. Virginal maidens find themselves in various states of peril at the hands of lecherous men. Righteous resistance and steadfast faith return them to the bosom of safety.

The lack of interest in her first published work seems to have freed Tamashiro's artistic and creative constraints. Her second collection, *The Silk Thread and Other Tales (De Zijde Draad en Andere Verhalen)* (1790) coincides with her translation of Akinari's *Tales of the Moonlight and Rain*. While the virginal maiden still features in several stories, she now has agency and the power of the supernatural world to aid in her exploits. This second collection revels in the weird and the grotesque. Perpetually bleeding fingertips, possessed embroidery tools, breasts that produce mud instead of milk, naked ghosts, serpent tongues, and kimonos that elicit uncontrollable desire are but a few of the dark and supernatural forces in *Silk*.

In her final published collection Tamashiro shifts again from the extremity of the grotesque to more melancholy tales as if her supernatural beings have grown weary of the rigors

of vengeance. The specters in *River of Silt, Field of Stones* (*Rivier van Slib, Veld van Stenen*) (1796) spend much of their time wandering landscapes much like those in Holland. The malaise and discontent found within *Silt* inspire a different sort of dread when compared to the dread of evil and the supernatural in Tamashiro's previous collections. It is a dread of restlessness, of misdirected purpose, of unrequited love. It is a dread that comes from realizing that vengeance may not bring about satisfaction or justice.

The CRC church in Delft records the death of Anna Thomsen on January 17th, 1812, sixteen years after the publication of *River of Silt, Field of Stones*. How she spent her final years remains a mystery. There are no records of Tamashiro marrying or giving birth. Her burial plot was paid for by an anonymous donor and is currently maintained by a small Japanese club devoted to preserving the memory of this lost daughter.

The Talking Doll

by Amiko Tamashiro

In the town of I—— in K—— province, there lived an artisan named Yuuto. He came from a respected family and learned his trade from his father and his grandfather before him. Though he was reasonably skilled at crafting lacquerware, he had more interest in the luxuries his income could afford him than in elevating his craftsmanship to the work of a true master. As such, his wares enjoyed only modest custom and he lived in the constant frustration of one whose satisfaction is always just out of reach.

Yuuto had a wife, Hiina, a small, quiet woman who maintained a clean and comfortable home. She tended each new luxury Yuuto brought into their dwelling with care and reverence. Fine woods were regularly waxed and polished. Sweet incense was housed in lidded boxes and arranged in neat rows. Ceramics were regularly dusted with the softest strips of cloth. Rich silks were aired just long enough to imbue them with the fresh scent of the breeze but never so long as to cause fading. Hiina went about her work with such quiet diligence Yuuto sometimes longed for a companion who was more than a housekeeper. Having no patience for longing, Yuuto took a mistress.

Aka was a bright chattering songbird compared to the silent Hiina. When Yuuto told her of his frustrations as an artisan she stroked his cheeks and cooed assurances. She laughed at everything, filling his sullen home with joy. She may have been careless, swinging her arms while dancing about the room, or dashing across the floor in a silly game, bumping into Yuuto's prized treasures and leaving fingerprints in her wake, but Yuuto didn't mind. Aka was alive, not some timid mouse scurrying about the corners.

The more time he spent with Aka, the more Yuuto resented his wife. Why did she never laugh or tell entertaining stories? Why did she never ask him about his struggle to attract more customers? Why couldn't she greet him with a playful smile instead of that silent bow? The silence in his house, once peaceful and calming, became a heavy irritation. To fill the silence Yuuto yelled orders to Hiina. Not so much miso in the soup! The saltiness is disgusting! Sweep the path outside the door! Do you want me to slip? Lay out my other robe! Do you want me to freeze to death? Hiina met each demand with quiet efficiency. While he was endlessly dissatisfied with his wife, Yuuto could not complain about her compliance.

Despite his yelling, Yuuto still found his home too quiet, so he sought ways to provoke his wife into speech. He began by tipping over the iron teapot, sending hot water hissing onto the coals. Hiina looked up from her cooking and her mouth twitched, but she didn't make a sound. Instead she mopped up the water and stirred the coals. Yuuto's dinner was late that night as the hearth took the rest of the evening to dry.

If she remained undisturbed by inconvenience, perhaps she would speak to protect another creature, lest it come to harm. When the feral tomcat visited their doorway, as he often did on summer evenings, looking for fish bones, Yuuto kicked the animal, sending it skittering through the dust. Each time it scurried away for a few days, only to return for bones, keeping a

wary eye on Yuuto. At first Hiina uttered a displeased “hmpf,” when Yuuto kicked the cat, but eventually she taught it to come before Yuuto returned home, avoiding his kicks altogether.

One day the feral tomcat misjudged the time of day, letting out a loud call for his fish bones before realizing Yuuto sat just inside the door. Resentful over the cat’s extended absence, Yuuto threw the iron teapot with such force and accuracy that it struck the animal’s back and broke its spine. Yuuto himself was startled by his strength, and with some discomfort, he watched as the creature mewled and scratched at the dirt until it lay still. Hiina, meanwhile, sat wide-eyed and silent, her hands clasped to her mouth. When Yuuto woke the next morning, the cat was gone and there was a patch of damp, sifted earth next to the willow tree.

For some time after the death of the tomcat, Yuuto stopped provoking Hiina. His mind was occupied by the memory of dirty claws, scratching at the ground pointlessly and the way the cat died with its mouth wide open.

But as with all memories, this one faded over time and the annoying silence once again pricked at Yuuto’s temper. He now heard Hiina’s silence as condemnation for his cruelty toward the cat. Day after day he imagined what his wife must be thinking. That he was a fool who picked battles with harmless animals. That he was too stupid to be more successful at his business. That she should have married someone with more honor. How dare she pass judgment without uttering a single word?

If Hiina would not speak to him, he would strike her, then at least her cries would fill the silence. With each passing week his blows became heavier. Hiina shielded herself from Yuuto’s fists and feet, occasionally uttering a shocked grunt or yelp of pain, before falling silent once again. Who was she to look down at him so? Were her thoughts so precious she dare not share them with her husband? It was in the midst of these simmering assumptions that Yuuto grabbed

the iron teapot from Hiina's hand and with one swing, hit her temple. Her blood mixed with scalding tea in a pool beneath her robes.

Yuuto was not a man without remorse. He told his family Hiina fell from the ladder as she climbed to the attic. They offered their condolences and helped him arrange a proper blessing from the priest. Yuuto's father was so saddened by the death of his daughter-in-law he composed this verse:

spring sakura fall

their beauty wrapped in silence

winter came too soon

Being newly widowed, Yuuto found comfort in the arms of Aka. His home soon filled with such levity and carefree pleasure that it wasn't long before Yuuto proposed marriage. On the night of their betrothal, as Aka and Yuuto roared with laughter at one of Aka's stories, a third voice laughed with them. "Yuuto, who is here?" Aka clutched her robes and slapped her lover's arm. "Are you hiding another mistress?" she teased. "Never, sweet Aka!" Yuuto replied. "Let us have tea."

Aka knelt to pour the tea as a voice cried out, "Mistress! Mistress! With that same foot you massage so tenderly, he kicked the feral tomcat! He kicked me too, mistress!" Aka froze and looked at Yuuto. "What is the meaning of this?" she asked. "Who is hiding in your attic?" Before he could stop her, Aka rose and climbed the ladder to the rafters. "Who's here? Come out!" she demanded peering through the gloom. Draped across a wooden trunk was a white doll stitched from homespun cloth. Its head hung over the edge of the trunk giving Aka an upside-down view of the doll's delicate features. She had small black eyes embroidered in silk, fine lashes, a faint

hint of a nose and pink cheeks stained with dye. It was the doll's mouth that gave Aka a fright. It was wholly out of proportion with the rest of her face. A swath of red silk bloomed so large it covered the bottom half of the doll's head. Who would create such a grotesquerie, Aka wondered as she approached the doll.

She turned it over in her hands. It was heavy, filled with sand or something finer, rice flour, perhaps. Aka dropped the doll back onto the trunk and searched the rest of the attic as Yuuto stood and watched. No one was there.

Before they reached the bottom of the ladder the voice cried out again, "Mistress! Mistress! With that same teapot he killed the feral tomcat! He snapped its back! It died in pain!" Aka looked at the iron teapot sitting on the hearth. "Yuuto, is this true?"

"Of course not, Aka. Someone is playing a terrible joke at a poor widower's expense. Stop it! Do not use my dead wife for your games! Now stop!" Yuuto stomped around the house searching for the culprit. He ran outside to see if someone was on the roof or hiding in the willow tree.

When he returned inside Aka soothed him with another cup of tea and assurances that she did not believe the slanderous voice. In the morning they would think about the business rivals who might be threatened by Yuuto, although they both well knew there were none. For now, they would try to rekindle the merriment of an engagement celebration.

Aka slept poorly. From her place at Yuuto's side she heard heavy, muffled thumps in the ceiling. She tried to convince herself it was only a mouse, but then a voice whispered through the knothole above her, "Mistress! Mistress! With that same teapot he struck my head and killed me! There, Mistress! My blood is still in the woodgrain!" Yuuto stirred as Aka clung to his side. "Do not wake him, Mistress! You must listen to me! Whatever you do, Mistress, don't stop talking!"

Amuse him! Fill the air with jokes and tales to make him laugh! Sing songs to make him weep!
Do not allow for a moment of silence or he will kill you too! Talk, Mistress! Always talk!”

Poor Aka woke the next morning pale and trembling, the whispers still fresh in her mind.

“Aka, my love, why are you so quiet?”

At Yuuto’s words, Aka froze. But that wouldn’t do, she must talk!

“Ha ha ha! I’m not quiet! No, no, I’m merely thinking of what tale to tell you next. It shall be a good one, Yuuto.” Aka paced the room, her eyes lingering on the teapot every time she passed the hearth. Yuuto settled himself on the floor, ready for the mirth and laughter that always came with Aka’s stories. “Ah, ah, there was a man who, ah ah.”

“Who what, Aka? Who stuttered?” Yuuto chuckled at his own joke.

“Ha ha ha. Very good, Yuuto. No, ah, a man who, ah, ah, who had a cat.”

“No, Aka, let’s not talk of cats.”

“Very well, a joke, then. Yes! A joke!” Aka fell silent as she combed her mind for something to make Yuuto laugh, or even smile. She wrung her hands and bit her lips, but she couldn’t remember any of her stories. The longer she was silent the more fear overwhelmed her. Was that annoyance on Yuuto’s face? Was he already growing impatient with her lapse in story telling? How close he now sat to the teapot! It was one thing to kill a cat, but could he throw it hard enough to break a woman’s back?

“Come, sweet Aka, what agitates you so? Is it the pranksters from last night? It was nothing. Calm yourself, my love. Let us eat. Shall I prepare the tea?” Aka watched Yuuto carefully as he handled the teapot, but he seemed his regular, good-natured self.

As the days passed, the whispering voice became more adamant. “You’re too quiet, Mistress! Talk! Talk all day long!” The more Aka listened to the voice at night the more she

strained to speak during the day. To distract herself from the fear and silence, Aka tended to the house. Yuuto noticed a change come over his household. Gone were the broken dishes and smudged fingerprints the carefree Aka had always left behind. Gone was the raucous laughter that drowned out the sounds of the wildest winter storm. Yuuto began to brood. The silence crept over him like a rising tide until he could no longer breathe. Over another silent supper, Yuuto swung his arms in frustration and shouted at Aka. “Speak up! Why don’t you talk to me anymore, Aka? Aka!” He brought down his palm in a swift slap across Aka’s cheek.

That night the voice whispered, “And now he has his hands on you, Mistress, beware! Those are magic hands! One minute they’re hands and then suddenly they’re fists. Punish him, Mistress! Or let me do it! But you must leave at once! Then suddenly the fists are iron and you will die in pain! Mistress! Punish him! Punish him!”

While Yuuto slept, Aka gathered her belongings and stole from the house in silence. When Yuuto awoke he found the doll from the attic lying next to him on the futon. Its red mouth brought back the memory of the feral tomcat and he shoved it quickly to face away from him. Aka must be playing a joke. He got up to look for her by the hearth, but it stood cold and her clothes were gone.

“A story! Yes! A story for Yuuto! There was a man who kicked the feral tomcat and broke its back with the iron teapot. He hit my head with that same teapot and he killed me!” The voice came from the futon where Yuuto had left the doll. He peered at the lump of cloth, but it remained motionless and silent. When he turned his back, the voice continued, “More stories, husband? More? There was a man who kicked the feral tomcat and threw the iron teapot at it so hard it broke the poor thing’s back. And then he struck me too, and killed me.” Yuuto rushed at the doll and heaved it off the bed. Its head flopped to the side and the red mouth mocked him. As

long as the doll was with him, as long as he stared at that mouth, gaping red like the feral tomcat, the voice disappeared. The moment his eyes left the doll the voice returned, chattering day and night, repeating its story again and again. He threw the doll away, tossing it into the river, burning it in the hearth, burying it beneath the willow tree; but, each night it returned while he slept. He tried leaving his house and staying at an inn, then leaving the town and even the province altogether, but it was no use. The doll followed him. Sometimes he heard the thumps in the attic before the voice began the story again. Often he woke while she was midway through the tale “- he stuck and killed me too! Punish him!”

Young Hantaro and his Wife

by Amiko Tamashiro

Young Hantaro wouldn't give his wife a child. She was a good wife, although her miso was too salty for his taste, and she once allowed spots of black mildew to form on their winter futon after a particularly rainy season. Young Hantaro's wife did not plead for a child. That was not her way. But she asked persistently for many years, and every time Young Hantaro said not yet.

And so, his wife went down to the river and scooped great heaps of silt into the bamboo basket she used for rinsing rice. Kneeling next to the water she licked thick, gray drips of silt that slid down her wrists.

She sat on the floor next to the hearth and spooned silt into a chipped rice bowl and ate it until the bowl was empty. The basket was still heavy with silt so she spooned more into a larger bowl, mixing it with rice flour until the gray color lightened to the shade of a pigeon. She stirred in sea salt, chopped spring onion, and a large brown egg until the paste became the shade of sun shining on mud. Young Hantaro's wife dragged white fish through the paste and gently laid them in hot oil. She set a pot of silted water to boil for rice that bubbled gray and cloudy. With the hashi at her lips, she breathed in the scent of silt and river before she took a bite.

Every morning Young Hantaro's wife walked to the river. She beat their clothes against the rocks. She pulled tender greens from the banks. She gathered water in pots. And she scooped silt into her basket. When Young Hantaro sat down to a meal, he now found two versions at the table. Grilled eggplant with miso and grilled eggplant with miso silt. Soup with mushrooms and kabocha and silt soup with mushrooms and kabocha. Tart, crisp radish pickled in rice vinegar and silt-pickled radish.

Young Hantaro knew the villagers whispered about his wife. Some even offered advice for how to make her stop. She should go to the shrine and make an offering. She should drink tea made from bitter herbs. She should submerge herself in the hot spring eight times a day. He should beat her. He should forbid her from going to the river. He should send her away. But apart from the silt, Young Hantaro had no complaints about his wife and she no longer asked him for a child, so he carried on doing nothing.

Over time, his wife's belly began to swell. Young Hantaro was resigned and quietly begrudged his wife. Another mouth to feed would be a burden, and the noise would disrupt his precious sleep; but, his wife ate so little beyond the silt that he could afford to feed another person, and eventually the child would be useful in the field. Besides, his wife would take charge of the child and he would only have to tolerate its presence. Perhaps he could learn to make due with a child.

As her belly grew, Young Hantaro's wife acquired new tastes. She added sand from the river's shore to her steamed greens. Young Hantaro could hear her grind the grains between her teeth. When she prepared clam soup, she ground the shells with a smooth stone and swirled the paste into her bowl. One afternoon, when he arrived home early, Young Hantaro observed his wife combing the riverbed, picking up one stone after another until she had collected two rocks,

round as eyes and black enough to reflect the sun. She placed them atop her rice as she would the umeboshi in Young Hantaro's bowl. She swallowed them whole.

By late spring she was large and heavy. When Young Hantaro brushed against her belly it felt hard, like an over-filled sack of flour straining at its seams. She walked slowly, each step a deliberate movement. She spent her days preparing. She wove a basket of reeds so tightly interlocked that it could hold water without losing a drop. She gathered every scrap of cloth she could find, cutting moth-eaten robes into perfect squares. She filled clay vessels with her own silt concoctions – river silt mixed with natto, sand and rain water, clamshell paste with kinako – and sealed the lids with wax. Young Hantaro found these preparations strange, but he did not know about such things.

His wife wanted no midwife when the time came to deliver the child. She walked down to the river and was gone for some time. When she returned, she cradled a small, wet package wrapped in dripping cloth. Young Hantaro assumed his wife had cleaned the child in the river. His wife peeled back a corner of the cloth to reveal an oblong mound of silt. There were raised nubs suggesting arms and legs, and one end of the mound had a rounder shape, like a head. The two black pebbles his wife had swallowed were now embedded in the head of clay. At first Young Hantaro thought it was some sort of madness, that his wife had gone down to the river and formed this thing out of the silt she usually feasted upon. But then a small fissure split open at the rounded end of the mound and it let out a gurgling wail, like the cry of some drowning animal. It was indeed his wife's child, a child of mud and sand and river water. She named her Sayo.

As the days passed, Young Hantaro's wife doted on her child. Instead of milk, her breasts produced a creamy mud that sustained Sayo through her first months. As the child grew, Young

Hantaro's wife fed Sayo from the sealed jars. She rocked the child to sleep and placed her gently in the woven basket. And she followed Sayo with scraps of cloth, mopping up the smudges of mud and silt she left in a damp trail.

Young Hantaro was bewildered by the affection his wife had for the mud child. How could she love that writhing loaf of sand with its grotesque nub limbs and cold, stone eyes? He certainly made no claim over the child. No, this child was entirely his wife's. As much as he begrudged his wife's doting, he recognized her happiness. The child satisfied her.

Despite Young Hantaro's disinterest, Sayo quickly grew attached to her father. Her black eyes followed him from the basket as he moved about the room. She giggled wetly when he stepped into a puddle of her silt. When she cried, she reached her nub arms in his direction, seeking comfort. Often Young Hantaro woke in the morning to find a patch of damp silt staining his clothes and he knew that the child had climbed from her basket and nestled into his side during the night.

Resisting the child was easy. Young Hantaro still found its muddy face and sluggish movements unnerving. The noises it made, even those of pleasure or amusement, made his stomach turn. They were phlegmy, congested bursts and garbled, burbling discharges of sound. And the mess! A dusty residue covered every surface in the house, for though his wife mopped up after the child with her chest full of rags, the silt was so fine that some of it always remained.

When he could tolerate it no longer, Young Hantaro told his wife to get rid of the child. Horrified, she clutched Sayo to her chest and begged him to be reasonable. How could he ask such a thing? He argued that it was not a child, but a scoop of dirt or a bucket of sand that belonged in the river where it came from. He told her if she did not give up the child he would

turn them both out. While Young Hantaro threatened her life, Sayo bubbled thickly and stretched her nubs toward her father, unaware of what was being discussed.

Young Hantaro's wife wept bitterly for some time, but eventually agreed to return Sayo to the river. She asked that Young Hantaro allow her one more night with her child. He agreed so long as it was gone before he returned from the field the next day.

That evening his wife prepared a silted feast – bitter melon braised in mud, clay-baked trout, lotus roasted in charcoal and sprinkled with purple-black mussel shell dust, cloudy silt broth with toasted earth mochi and sweet sliced apples rubbed with sand and sugar. Sayo offered her father bites of her food and formed her clay face into strange shapes in an attempt to make him laugh. In response, Young Hantaro turned his back on the child and finished his food in silence.

Before they slept, his wife begged him one final time to let her keep her child, but Young Hantaro would not be persuaded. The shame and embarrassment of bringing something so grotesque into their home was too much for Young Hantaro. What would happen if they kept it? Would it grow? Would it want an education? Friendships with other children? Would it expect him to provide a dowry and find it a husband? He would be the laughingstock of the village, offering up a mud puddle to some young bachelor. No amount of dowry could compensate for a mud wife. No, he would not be persuaded.

That night, as Young Hantaro slept, Sayo pulled herself from the basket in search of her father, whom she loved without prejudice. In her desire for his nearness, she climbed the futon and hauled herself onto his chest. Young Hantaro stirred, but did not wake. Sayo's weight pressed down, squeezing the air from Young Hantaro's lungs. She laid her head on his cheek and fell asleep, lulled by Young Hantaro's heartbeat. As her body relaxed, her mud spread, pooling

on her father's chest, filling his nose and mouth and sliding down his throat. Young Hantaro struggled, but the thick silt was deep inside his lungs and in his weakened state, the child was too heavy for him to move.

The villagers determined Young Hantaro died in a mudslide that miraculously spared his wife who slept beside him.

The Tailor's Daughters

by Amiko Tamashiro

While rinsing long cuts of cloth in the river, the tailor's daughters argued over the merchant's son. Kuro laughed cruelly at Mitsu's birthmark, a large brown oval beneath her left eye. "Not even the pigs think you're beautiful with that egg on your face. How can you think Hideo would choose you over me?"

As Kuro bent to wring the water from a length of cloth Mitsu gave her one quick kick to the backside and she splashed into the river. At first Mitsu laughed at Kuro whose white arms flapped like a mad bird. She would have to wear her soggy clothes for the rest of the day.

It wasn't until Kuro drifted to the middle of the river that Mitsu saw the textile wrapped around her sister's arms and neck. A sodden flap shrouded her face and Mitsu saw a small oval of the cloth sink and rise as Kuro tried to breathe through the weave of the fabric. Soon the flailing stopped and Kuro's arms bobbed on the ripples as she drifted down the river. Mitsu stood and watched.

When her sister's body was no longer in sight, Mitsu plunged into the water, swimming along the path Kuro's body had taken. But it was no use.

Mitsu ran to the village shouting, “Kuro fell into the river! Help!” The villagers brought ropes and launched their boats. “What happened, Mitsu?” they asked.

“Kuro fell by the rocks. Maybe she hit her head. I tried to help her.” Nothing Mitsu said was a lie, yet nothing Mitsu said was fully true. The villagers searched as far as the rapids, which were not safe for their small boats. They sent word to the towns downstream in case someone pulled Kuro from the river. The tailor and his wife waited three weeks before all hope for Kuro’s safe return was lost. It was spring and the water was deep and wild.

With no body to cremate, the tailor sewed a white doll from soft cotton cloth. It was the same size as Kuro. He stuffed the doll with buckwheat and bones from a small pig. He stitched black hair cut from a horse’s mane onto the white doll’s scalp. He embroidered black silk eyes and dark pink lips onto her face. The tailor’s wife rubbed ume juice onto her cheeks. They dressed her in a white silk kimono and slipped small green shoes onto her feet.

After the cremation, Mitsu picked her sister’s pig bones from the ashes and placed them in a jar.

Without the company of her sister, Mitsu became restless, a bit of dry grass uprooted and blowing in the breeze. When she passed the household shrine that held Kuro’s urn, Mitsu’s throat felt scratchy and her eyes watered, as if clouded with ashes. Concerned for her only daughter’s health, the tailor’s wife cupped her child’s face. “Mitsu, are you sick? Why do you cough and shed tears every day? What is happening to your birthmark?” The tailor’s wife rubbed Mitsu’s mole, which had turned the gray of Kuro’s ashes.

When she went to the river, Mitsu saw bodies floating in the water. At first she saw animals. There was a drowned cat with its mouth frozen wide open. The next time there was a flock of flightless blackbirds, their feathers broken by the rocks. The time after that Mitsu saw a

dead deer with white eyes and stiff legs that rose and fell beneath the water. Eventually the churning rapids taunted her with the flash of a slender arm, a knee bobbing above the surface, and tangled black hair.

The tailor complained to his wife, “Since our dear Kuro’s death Mitsu has become sullen and lazy. See how quickly she returns from the washing? Look at our clothes. They are still soiled. My customers will not buy from a dirty tailor. Talk to her, wife.” No amount of talking improved Mitsu’s washing. The floating bodies made her sick whenever she approached the river. Eventually the tailor’s wife took over the washing and left Mitsu with even less purpose.

Mitsu now spent her time wandering back and forth, back and forth, from home to the shrine of the goddess Kannon. She offered fresh water from the river and blush pink camellias and she pleaded with the goddess, “Kannon, goddess of mercy, let my sister return unharmed.” Her pleas went unheard for, though Mitsu longed for her sister’s return, she knew Kuro was dead and she knew the water she offered was tainted by the floating bodies. The dishonesty in her pleas was an insult to the goddess and Mitsu’s guilt weighed heavily on her head. Flakes of dust lifted off from her ashen mole and the river appeared choked with more bodies than water.

Mitsu continued to visit the shrine. This time she trekked into the woods with a small cup and a pair of her father’s shears in search of a better offering. She followed the river upstream. She walked until her muscles ached and sweat ran down her face. The further she went, the fewer bodies Mitsu saw. She finally reached a place where only dead leaves floated on the surface of the water. Mitsu collected a scoop of water in her cup and carried it with great care back down the river. As she walked with slow, steady steps she searched the woods for an unblemished camellia flower. When she found one the lightest shade of pink she carefully clipped it with her father’s scissors and cradled it in her palm.

At the shrine Mitsu prayed, “Oh Kannon, goddess of mercy, I beg you, lift this heavy shame from off my head. I never meant to harm my sister. It was a terrible accident. Please, here is water from high up the river where no one washes. It is clear and cold and nothing floats on its surface but fallen leaves.” It was still not good enough.

Mitsu’s mole overtook her cheek. Its surface cracked like dry mud, and when she opened her mouth, small, gray clods crumbled onto the bolts of cloth in the tailor’s shop. “Mitsu, wash your filthy face,” the tailor scolded his daughter. “It’s enough that your mother must do your chores. Now you make even more work for her.”

Mitsu gathered three rice balls, her small cup and the shears and returned to the forest. It took longer this time before the river was clear of bodies. Limbs bumped over the rocks and collected along the shore. Black hair wound around white fingers and snarled in the rapids. Kuro’s gray face rose and fell in the swells of water. Mitsu walked with her eyes on her feet, staying as far from the river as she could without losing its path. At sunset on the first day the river still frothed with bodies. Mitsu ate one of her rice balls and slept under a tree.

It wasn’t until the third day that Mitsu no longer saw bodies in the water. At dusk she reached the source, a mountain spring that burst forth from a rock. She washed herself in the spring. She avoided bathing in the river, too disgusted by the dead bodies tainting the water. The spring was bracing and sweet. In the morning Mitsu filled her cup and walked directly to Kannon’s shrine. She traveled even more slowly to avoid spilling the water and to search for the perfect camellia. The one she found was white, but not the death white of the bodies. It was the white of a star.

Mitsu brought her offerings to Kannon. “This water is from the mountain spring. No bodies have touched it. It is pure, like you, goddess. And this camellia is smooth and unblemished without even a crease in its tender petals.” The goddess finally answered.

“You, daughter, are a coward. You stole a child away from her parents and would not grant them the solace of knowing what became of her. But you have lost a sister, and your suffering is great. I will not reward you, but I will give you a choice. You may choose a new form, daughter, that you may live the rest of your days without the burden of purpose and without burdening your family. You have until sunrise to think upon your choice.”

Mitsu wandered the forest as a cat for several hours until she remembered the dead cat in the river. She did not wish to be a bird, for though flight would be a gift, she could only see sodden feathers and twisted wings bobbing on the water. Life as a deer would have suited Mitsu, if only she had no memory of the stiff legs and white eyes. As the sun rose, Mitsu remained undecided. She cried great tears that pooled at her feet. The mole on her cheek eroded under the stream of salt water until nothing remained of Mitsu but a pool of silt and tears. The pool dried in the heat of the summer sun and the dust blew away.

Lana Kaneshiro

(1919 – 2005)

Honolulu, Hawaii

From an early age, Lana Kaneshiro was praised for her ability to talk story. Her nephew, writer Hank Kaneshiro, recalls the legend of Auntie Lana at the age of three, sitting on the picnic benches at Ala Moana beach, pretending to smoke an unlit cigarette and talking story with the fishermen. Born in Honolulu, Hawaii in 1919, Kaneshiro was the middle child of seven. Her family lived next door to her mother's sister and seven more cousins.

After completing her pharmacy technician certification at Kapiolani Community College, Kaneshiro worked at Longs Drugs until she retired in 1992. Her job in the pharmacy connected her to the people in her community and inspired her storytelling. Her customers were devoted and many continued to bring their prescriptions to her Longs branch even after they moved away from the neighborhood. People loved to hear her talk.

Writing down her stories did not interest Kaneshiro until her nieces and nephews badgered her into taking a creative writing class at the Kaimuki-Waiālae YMCA. While she enjoyed telling stories to her classmates, the work of all that writing held no appeal. Upon his

return from graduate school at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Hank Kaneshiro convinced his Auntie to let him do the writing while she talked story. She agreed.

Over the course of the next decade, Hank and Lana met on the weekends at a Zippy's restaurant and talked story over spaghetti plate lunch and coconut naples (pastry turnovers). Hank recorded their conversations and transcribed them word for word before beginning a laborious revision process where he shaped the recordings into narratives. The next step in the process was to read the stories back to Lana for her feedback.

What's notable about their collaboration is the absence of Hawaiian Pidgin in the final version of Lana's stories. Kaneshiro was adamant that her nephew write her stories in "proper English." This was a point of contention between the two collaborators. Hank believed much of the charm of his aunt's stories was in the nuances of her dialect. Lana, however, was raised in an era where Pidgin was not celebrated, but instead discouraged by educators and authority figures who ridiculed it as uneducated. Many of the elders in her community also insisted young people use standard English because of the discrimination that accompanied talking Pidgin. Since her stories were first published, Pidgin has been recognized as a sophisticated, organized, creative creole language and the movement to remove the stigma from talking Pidgin is well-established. Hank Kaneshiro is currently working on transcribing new versions of Lana's stories that stay closer to the original recordings of her voice.

Uncle

by Lana Kaneshiro

Uncle told us, with great solemnity, she was once a sumo champion. (Uncle was actually an Auntie, but we never called her that. I don't know why.) She said she reached the rank of Maegashira and that she was so fat she couldn't wipe her own ass. This was normal, and there were younger sumos whose job it was to wipe the champions. Uncle was still fat, but none of us wiped her ass for her.

To prove it, Uncle showed us pictures she cut from Japanese newspapers in the 50s. In one, great slabs of men stood in long aprons around a dirt ring. In another, two sumos were locked in a frozen collision, ripples of fat forever caught in a storm of flesh. In my favorite, a sumo was captured mid-flight as his opponent tossed him to the ground. The faces were hard to make out. The newspapers were faded and smudged. They could have been pictures of Uncle. It was hard to tell. We mostly gawked and snickered at those giant bare okoles.

Grandma said it was bullshit. Grandma loved to say bullshit. Her church lady friends allowed her this one indulgence in her otherwise model life. Together they served the coffee and cookies after service each Sunday. They organized the food drives and ice cream socials. They visited the sick congregation members in the hospital and sewed new aloha shirts for the folks in

the nursing home. They stayed away from the teenagers, mostly, leaving that ministry to the youth pastor. He listened to rap music.

“That’s bullshit. Your uncle went to Las Vegas and lost all her money and was a janitor. She never did any sumo champion bullshit.”

Uncle said Grandma was senile. That was only a little bit true. She did mix up our names with the names of her four chihuahuas. And sometimes she left food out on the counter overnight so that in the morning it was a pulsing mass of sugar ants. And one time, when Junior lost his tooth, she put a different tooth under his pillow instead of a quarter. Maybe \\she didn’t understand the Tooth Fairy.

What she couldn’t deny was that Uncle was fat. Sumo fat. Her slippahs were crushed to sheets of blue rubber. Grandma made her aloha shirts because nothing in the stores fit her. She had red patches of chaffed skin on the insides of her arms and between her massive thighs. Her face was a small island of features afloat on a puffy sea. Her knees and hips ached constantly and it hurt her to walk. She was fat, but not haole fat. She didn’t look like one of those creamy tourists poached in our tropical steam. She was a solid, strong fat.

Around Junior’s twelfth birthday party, we noticed that Uncle had grown. Perhaps it had been happening for a while, slowly, without us realizing it. When she reached out to grab another scoop of rice, three of her buttons popped off and landed in the mac salad. We could only find two of them at first and Grandma broke a tooth on the third. By the next month, none of her clothes fit and with shame she asked Grandma to make her new shirts. We teased her once or twice, but she only smiled and let out a weak, ha, so we stopped. We loved Uncle and we wanted to help.

“Hey, Uncle, come do aerobics with me!”

“Hey, Uncle, would you like some of this papaya?”

“Hey, Uncle, can I make you some ginseng tea?”

“Hey, Uncle, let’s go swimming.”

“Hey, Uncle, show us some of your sumo moves.”

She did it all. She drank teas and ate fruit and exercised. She stopped eating rice and joined the YMCA. But still she grew. When she could barely squeeze through the doors of the bus, Grandma told her to go to the doctor.

Dr. Johnson checked everything. Her blood pressure was high, but her blood sugar was normal. There was no sign of diabetes or liver disease. Her thyroid was fine and her kidneys were functioning normally. According to the doctor, it was probably a lifestyle issue. He told Uncle to watch what she ate and exercise regularly.

“That’s bullshit,” Grandma declared when Uncle came home. She sent her to the herb man in Chinatown. The herb man gave Uncle tins of dried leaves and bark for tea and a salve for her chafed arms and legs. The salve worked. The red patches healed and the skin became callused and thick, able to withstand the friction of Uncle’s movement. But the relief was dimmed by her continued fattening. No matter how much tea she drank, Uncle kept growing.

After a while, Uncle started getting sick. Even though she was huge, up until then she could still mow the lawn, trim the hedges, help the old neighbor lady next door jump start her Nissan once a week, walk a couple of the chihuahuas and keep us kids occupied when Grandma wanted us out of her hair. When Uncle walked back up the hill with two of the Chihuahuas on leashes we whispered that she looked like the moon rising over Diamond Head. But now she stayed on the daybed sofa in the living room all day. (Grandma called it that, but it was really just a twin mattress on a metal frame with lots of pillows on it.)

We brought her food, but she didn't want most of it, only the nori from the musubi. She peeled it off the rice and dipped it in soy sauce. Eventually we just bought those big plastic cans of seasoned nori and left them stacked by the daybed sofa. Uncle didn't want to drink water any more, only miso soup. She drank it by the gallon until Grandma said the miso paste was costing too much. Uncle asked us to mix water and salt together instead.

One Sunday Grandma's church lady friends stopped by with the youth pastor. (The real pastor was busy visiting Mr. Fernandes in the hospital and then he had to lead the society meeting after that. Plus, I don't think he liked Uncle.) The church ladies helped Grandma set up lunch on the coffee table in the living room while the youth pastor sat on the folding chair next to Uncle. We all ate in the living room and everyone talked about the tsunami warning that happened last week, the traffic on the Kam highway and how the papaya at the Food Mart was better than the papaya at the farmer's market. No one mentioned Uncle's unusual meal of salt water and nori.

It wasn't until we were clearing the table that the youth pastor finally asked Uncle how she was doing. It was a dumb question. By now, Uncle's skin was mottled with tiny white freckles. Her face was so swollen that her eyes looked like raisins pressed into a malasada. Each finger was so puffed it pushed up to the one next to it, so her hands looked like mittens. We knew it hurt her to keep getting fatter, but she didn't complain. From time to time she just moaned quietly. Uncle said she was doing fine under the circumstances. The youth pastor said that was good news. As he said his goodbyes, he picked up Uncle's hand and then dropped it with a startled yelp.

"Hey Uncle, are you playing tricks?" the youth pastor asked. He rubbed his palm. "Your skin is so rough. It's pokey, like little needles. Are you hiding something in your hand?"

Uncle showed her hand, but nothing was there.

The church ladies offered to send over some lotion, put the leftover lunch in the refrigerator, wiped down the coffee table and left with the youth pastor.

After they left, we studied Uncle while she slept. She was having a hard time breathing. Grandma ran a finger along Uncle's forearm. "Feel," she told us. We each took a turn gently stroking Uncle's skin. It was rough like the skin of a pineapple. When we looked closer we could see tiny spines sticking out from each white freckle. They looked like hairs, but if you pressed them they were sharp and hard. Junior pushed too hard and Uncle stirred.

"Hey, look at her teeth." Uncle's mouth gaped and we saw only four large teeth, two on the top and two on the bottom. "What happened to the rest of them?" Junior asked. "Let her sleep. I'll call the doctor in the morning." Grandma pulled the king-sized sheet over Uncle and we left her alone.

That night, Uncle's moaning was louder than normal and we kept hearing a click click, click click, like dominoes tapping against each other. Grandma went out to check on her first, and then she called us all to come. We tumbled into the living room in our rumpled pajamas and found Grandma standing next to the daybed sofa. The mound of Uncle wasn't there. Beneath the sheet a small, round bump the size of a volleyball pulsed, wheezed and clicked.

"Junior, lift the sheet," Grandma said. The rest of us huddled behind him.

"No way, Grandma, you do it."

She pinched the edge of the sheet and flung it to the end of the daybed sofa. We all recognized her eyes right away. It was Uncle. Uncle was a pufferfish. She looked at us and blinked her raisin eyes. We knelt next to the daybed sofa. The white freckles were still there, only there were more of them and the spines were longer. Her pursed lips revealed those same

four teeth, tapping together as she opened and closed her mouth. Junior lifted one of her fins and found smooth scar tissue from her years of chafing.

“Grandma, she’s gonna die if we leave her on the sofa,” Junior said.

Grandma stood up. “Junior, go soak the sheet in water. Tammy, empty the shoe bin by the back door and bring it to Junior. Bunny, bring a can of nori. Megan, find my keys. The rest of you, go get in the car. Even though she was small, Grandma and Junior struggled to move Uncle into the box. They finally rolled her onto a pillowcase and heaved it into the shoe tub. Junior poured a little more water on top of her before he and Grandma dragged the box to the car. With Uncle cradled in the wet sheet, Grandma drove us to Waikiki. There weren’t so many tourists out at that time of night, just a couple whispering to each other in the sand and a guy smoking at a picnic bench.

Grandma and Junior probably could have moved Uncle by themselves, but we each took a section of the pillowcase and slowly walked her down to the water. We waded in till the water hit our knees before lowering Uncle into the sea. We said our goodbyes and promised to come swimming with her as the moon rose over Diamond Head.

The Jade Pendant

by Lana Kaneshiro

She found it in a tangle at the bottom of the velvet lining in Grandma's jewelry box. The memorial service was over, the plans for Grandma's burial and headstone had been arranged. The refrigerator was full of Styrofoam boxes from the church ladies - chicken long rice, mac salad, bibinka, Portuguese sausage casserole, shrimp cocktail, teri beef. The kids would eat it over the next few days as they cleaned out Grandma's house. Someone bought a case of Bud Light and left it in the fridge. They would use paper plates and cups. The rice pot would stay on the counter until they were done with everything.

Junior got everyone organized. He set up three card tables in the living room – one for valuables they would discuss and distribute fairly, one for Salvation Army, and one for things that might be important to the family. Rochelle and Betty were in charge of the bookshelves of family photos, dusty leis of dried flowers, plastic hina dolls from the thrift store to which they would return, greeting cards, fake fruit, recital programs, stacks of TV Guides, year books and phone books. Janice was assigned to clothes. There was the dresser in Grandma's bedroom, the trunk of Ojichan's uniforms, the hall closet and a couple of mystery boxes stored under the stairs. Those were probably completely mildewed. The twins agreed to go through the garage. Uncle

KK was bringing his van to haul away most of the furniture to the dump. Scott volunteered to do the kitchen, but Auntie said hell no and he was sent to help the twins. That left Josephine with the bathroom. It was a two-person job, but there was only room for one in the tiny space, unless someone stood in the bathtub, which was where Josephine started.

The soap-scummed tiles were covered in suction cups. Every scrubbing tool the kids had ever given Grandma for Christmas or her birthday or Mother's Day hung from a grubby rubber nub. There were plastic puffs in rainbow colors, long-handled back scratchers, souvenir washcloths, homemade crochet rags, a sponge shaped like a panda, three soap-on-a-ropes (all from Scott), natural and artificial loofahs, a pair of skin-buffing gloves and a disintegrating sea sponge. Josephine popped each suction cup off the wall and dropped everything into her garbage bag.

Sitting on the back of the peach-colored toilet was Grandma's jewelry box. It was the size of a tub of margarine with a ceramic lid covered in painted roses. When Josephine opened it Romeo and Juliet's "What is a Youth?" plinked out its metallic tune. The red velvet inside the box was still soft. Josephine sat on the floor and dumped the contents onto a clean towel where they fell out in a mound of gold-colored chains, tarnished pendants, broken brooches, and clip-on earrings Grandma hadn't worn since the 50s. Taped to the inside of the lid was the jade pendant, its thin gold chain clumped into knots. The pendant was light green with hazy swirls of cream drifting across its surface. Josephine un-taped it and held it to the light. She couldn't decipher the carvings on its front and back. Was it Japanese? Why didn't she pay more attention in Japanese lessons all those years? Was it just a design?

Josephine ran her thumb over the surface of the pendant. It was cool and smooth and her fingers naturally followed the swooping grooves carved into both sides. The longer she held it

the more the pendant warmed to her touch. Now it felt like the sun coming up at dawn, a gentle warmth waking up her hand. Now its temperature matched the heat of Josephine's blood. If she closed her eyes she could imagine the pendant was part of her body, as natural as a finger.

"What's that?" Scott filled the doorway and leaned over Josephine. Before she could close her fist, Scott snatched the jade pendant from her palm. "Sneaking things for yourself, José? What else did you take, huh? Maybe I'll hang onto this for safe keeping." As Scott held the pendant to the light of the fluorescent bulbs framing the vanity, he stopped his chatter. The knotted chain tumbled loose as if by its own will, tired of its coiled, cramped disarray. His black eyes reflected the cool green of the stone and he let out a soft, "Hmm."

"That's mine, Scott." Josephine's voice echoed against the shower tiles.

"Yours? Don't be greedy, baby sister."

"Not mine, that's not what I meant. It goes on the table."

"I saw you. You weren't rushing out to put that on any table."

Junior appeared at the doorway with Grandma's worn address book. Its spiral binding was bent and the cardboard cover had faded to a pale brown. He had a pencil behind his ear and a ballpoint pen in hand, marking one of the pages in the address book.

"What's going on?" As Junior stepped into the bathroom, Scott crowded closer to Josephine who stood up and shifted toward the sink, knocking over a dusty tub of Vaseline.

"Scott's trying to steal the necklace. He probably wants to give it to that rubbish girlfriend."

A duet of snickers came from behind Junior. The twins poked their uncle out of the way and Junior stepped into the bathtub to avoid their harassing fingers.

“You don’t need fancy jewelry to buy the heart of that one. Just buy her a pack of menthols,” said Juju.

“Or a can of Vienna sausage to remind her of your little dingaling,” Carla chimed in.

“Shut up, you two. Mind your business, this is grown up talk.”

“Eh! Why are you talking to my girls like that?” Auntie Betty’s belly smooched between her daughters and everyone pressed further into the bathroom. Scott leaned into Josephine who climbed onto the toilet and sat on the tank with her feet on the rim of the open bowl. Carla and Juju took synchronized steps toward the sink and pressed themselves against the wall to make room for their mother. Junior stood on his tiptoes to make himself the tallest person in the room.

“Tell your girls to shut up about Christy.”

“Juju, Carla, stop teasing your uncle about his friend.”

“Goddammit, Betty, she’s not my friend, she’s my fiancée! How many times have I told you that?”

“Now Scott, let’s just calm down.” Betty used her soothing voice, the one for cranky children and her ancient Chihuahua, Bitsy. “Why don’t we all take a few deep breaths and talk things out?”

“I agree with Betty,” Junior chimed in from the bathtub. “Let’s discuss this like adults.”

“Yes, thank you, big brother, I can handle this from here.” Betty’s soothing voice came from between clenched teeth.

“I didn’t say you couldn’t handle this, I’m just agreeing with you.”

“Agreeing with me and trying to take over like you always do.” The siblings watched the eldest sister and brother volley.

Junior returned, “Oh, like you had things handled after Grandma fell and broke her hip on the day you were supposed to take her to the senior center?”

Betty’s voice cracked. “Don’t you try and blame me for Grandma’s accident. You know I was at the urgent care for Bitsy’s allergic reaction. And I called Rochelle at least a dozen times to ask her to come instead, but she couldn’t be bothered to pick up her phone.”

“I couldn’t be bothered to do what?” Rochelle appeared over Betty’s shoulder.

“Oh nothing, Roche, Betty is just pinning the blame on you for Grandma’s fall,” Scott said from the wall by the toilet. He leaned his head against the window and folded his arms. Josephine scowled. She’d probably be the one who had to clean the greasy smudges left behind by Scott’s dirty hair.

“Oh stop, Betty. You know I got called in to work an extra shift.” Rochelle was never one to rise to Scott’s provocation. “What are you all doing in here?”

“Nothing. We’re wasting time because of a silly necklace Josephine found that we’re going to put on the valuables table so we can all get back to work.” Some of Junior’s authority dimmed as his proclamation came from the bathtub.

“Okay, Mr. Bossman, king of the shower,” Juju murmured to Carla who was resting her arm on a stack of Grandma’s threadbare towels to keep the built-in shelves from pressing into her back. Carla giggled and rolled her eyes at her uncle.

Junior ignored them and continued, “Let’s go, people. Everybody out, back to your job. Scott, go put that necklace on the table.”

No one moved.

The jade pendant swung gently between Scott’s fingers.

Rochelle broke the silence. “Well, I think we should just let Josephine have it. It’s not like it’s even real, anyway. She’s the one who helped out Grandma the most. And if it is valuable, fine. Josephine deserves it.”

“You’re only saying that because you don’t have children of your own,” as Betty turned to address Rochelle with fists on her hips, she elbowed Juju in the nose.

“Ow, Ma!” Blood dripped down Juju’s lip and splashed on the tile floor. Carla passed her a towel.

“Juju, baby, you okay? You’ll be fine,” Betty continued as her daughter bled quietly, “I just think if the necklace was special to Grandma, then it should be passed down through the family. And Josephine doesn’t even have a boyfriend, so we don’t know if it will stay in the family like it should. That’s all.”

“That’s pretty convenient since you’re the only one with kids, Betty. Getting knocked up in high school doesn’t make you a paragon of wisdom, you know. I love you, girls, you know that,” Rochelle said to her horrified nieces. Scott’s laughter filled the bathroom.

“You think that’s funny, Scott?” Betty squeezed next to the sink and jabbed her little brother’s chest.

“Yeah, Betty, I think that’s funny.” He pushed away from the wall and maneuvered himself toward the bathtub, grabbing the shower curtain as he stumbled on the Vaseline tub that was still on the floor. Half of the curtain’s rings popped off the rod. “What else is funny is all of you getting so righteous about this stupid necklace. Grandma liked me best, you all know it. She would want me to have the necklace.”

“That necklace should not go to the person who convinced Grandma to stop taking her medicine and scam her with his girlfriend’s bogus herbal supplements club,” Josephine said from the toilet.

“Scott, what is she talking about?” Junior asked.

“First of all, those supplements are not bogus. Second, you all saw the side effects from the poisons those doctors were giving her. The supplements are natural. Christy was doing Grandma a favor. She even gave her the family discount, not that any of you ever treat her like family.”

“Are you telling us that Grandma stopped taking all of her medicines? Josephine, why didn’t you say anything?” Junior craned his head around the edge of the shower stall.

“It only would have upset her. I talked to her about it every time I came over, but Scott and Christy had her so brainwashed she wouldn’t listen to anything I said.”

“You still should have told us.” Betty began to cry. Carla handed out another towel.

“Knock it off, Betty. There’s nothing we can do about it now. What’s done is done. Scott, give the necklace to Josephine and let’s finish packing up the house,” Rochelle tried to leave the bathroom, but Janice stood in her path.

“Here you all are. What –”

Betty ignored the new arrival and shouted at Rochelle, “What’s done is done? We just found out our own brother killed Grandma and, and,” she dabbed her nose with the frayed edge of the towel, “and you want to just keep packing?”

“Junior killed Grandma?” Janice asked.

“No, I did not kill Grandma. Why would you think Betty was talking about me? She’s talking about Scott and Christy.”

“Who’s Christy?”

“My fiancée!”

“Why would your fiancée kill Grandma? Should we call the police?”

“God, Janice, you’re such a space cadet,” Rochelle said.

“I’m sorry, you’re the ones conspiring in the bathroom and talking about murder.”

“This is serious, Janice,” Junior took the pencil out from behind his ear and waved it around. “We need to get to the bottom of this.”

“Get to the bottom of what, detective?” said Rochelle. “We all know that Scott got Grandma to stop taking her meds and take supplements instead and that Josephine didn’t tell anyone. It was a shit thing to do, but Grandma didn’t die from supplement poisoning. She died after she broke her hip.”

The grandkids’ voices layered on top of each other like too many T.V.s playing at once.

“She died from heart failure, which probably wouldn’t have happened if she’d been taking her medicine.”

“That medicine was killing her. Didn’t you notice how she got her appetite back? That was the supplements.”

“She got her appetite back because you kept bringing her malasadas and junk food.”

“Everyone, knock it off!”

“At least she was eating. Starving to death on that no-flavor diet you fed her is probably what made her dizzy in the first place.”

“Stop it! What would Grandma say if she could see you now?”

“It had nothing to do with her death. She wouldn’t have fallen if you’d been there to watch her like you were supposed to. Do you know how much work it was to come over here all the time? And you couldn’t come for one afternoon?”

“It was an emergency! Bitsy would have died!”

“And so you let Grandma die instead? Real nice. I guess our new Grandma is a chihuahua.”

“Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!”

The air was thick and damp. The room felt small with all those bodies crushed together like sweaty mangoes. Everyone’s forehead was speckled with beads of sweat. Some had small pinpricks of perspiration. Others had trembling pools on the verge of running in salty rivulets. It smelled. Stale cologne, not enough deodorant, garlic breath, dusty decorative soaps, mildew. The leaky faucet dripped its rhythm and each drop of water slid down the rust-stained porcelain, pooling along the rim of the drain. The ancient box fan in the bedroom hummed a nasal tune that traveled down the hall and into the silent bathroom. The cardboard box of bathroom items had tipped over in the shuffle of bodies and fallen loofah puffs dotted the floor. The half-hung shower curtain drooped. The fluorescent lights contoured the bags under everyone’s eyes and deepened the shadows of their frown lines.

Gradually, each sibling noticed the glow from the jade pendant was gone. Without that pinprick of cream green light, the bathroom was dim, grim.

“Where is it, Scott?”

All eyes turned to baby brother.

“What?”

“Don’t play dumb,” Junior said. “Just give it back.” He lunged for Scott’s fist which he’d stuffed tightly into his jeans pocket. Scott tried to shove Junior away, but Betty grabbed his other arm and the trio lost their balance, falling over the edge of the bathtub. The pile of bodies knocked the twins who slammed into the towel shelf. Carla and Juju both clung to the shelf, which came loose from the wall and sent a mountain of threadbare towels sliding to the floor. The tangle of towels cascaded over the sink and nudged the cold-water faucet on. In her haste to turn off the water, Josephine slipped on the tub of Vaseline, split her lip on the rim of the sink, and somehow got lodged beneath her siblings. The jostling of Josephine made Scott’s fist pop out of his pocket.

In the glow of the pendant, everyone’s face was cast in a pale green, the whites of their eyes stony and tinged with the emerald cream. Before Junior could snatch it from his hand, Scott ripped the pendant off the chain and swallowed the stone lozenge.

After they sold Grandma’s house, the grandkids stopped speaking to Scott. Or Scott stopped speaking to the rest of them. No one remembered how the end started.

Later, they heard from Scott’s daughter that he’d died from gallbladder cancer. She invited them to his service, even though Christy didn’t want them to come. But they were all old now, Junior was older than Grandma when she died, so they came anyway.

At the reception, Scott’s daughter said it started with jaundice and a pain in his gut, but it took the doctors too long to realize it was jaundice because he was more green than yellow. When they did the scan, they found a lump tucked up under his liver. By the time they did the biopsy his gallbladder cancer was at stage four. He could have tried chemo and radiation, but he

went for Christy's supplements instead. She was a triple diamond-level seller now, after all these years. The supplements put Scott's daughter through college.

Scott's daughter said he donated his body to science. This surprised the grandkids and they realized they didn't really know Scott after all these years.

They asked Scott's daughter why her brother wasn't at the funeral, and she told them it was the weirdest, thing – when the medical students were studying Scott's body, they found a foreign object right where his tumor was supposed to be. It was a green stone, worn smooth, maybe by the bile from his gallbladder, with a hole at the top. The medical school returned it to the family, and the siblings argued over what should happen to it.

They weren't on speaking terms anymore.

Kelly Higa

(1976 - present)

Los Angeles, California

Kelly Higa is a social worker in the Sawtelle area of west Los Angeles. She went to high school in southern California with sisters Wendy and Amy Yao, founders of the riot grrl band Emily's Sassy Lime. Although not a member of the band, Higa has credited the Yao sisters with encouraging her to write unapologetically and from her own perspective as a Japanese American kid growing up in the 1990s.

After completing her undergraduate studies at California State University in Los Angeles, Higa earned her master's degree from the USC School of Social Work. The short stories included here come from her collection *We Followed All the Advice and Look Where It Got Us*, which she wrote in response to her frustration working as a counselor at a women's crisis center. While guiding her clients through the bureaucracy of assault, sexual violence and abuse Higa was witness to the ways women are re-traumatized as they seek help, healing and justice. It was not unusual for clients to give up on the process altogether in order to protect themselves.

In 2002, Higa put an ad in the classified section of *The Track*, a free alternative newspaper that covered local news and art in west Los Angeles. Her ad read:

Been assaulted at the club/bar?
Want to re-write your story?
Call Kelly ***_***_****

It was simple and effective enough for Higa to receive an average of ten calls a week while the ad ran. Higa says she spoke with every caller at length to explain her project and determine their interest in participating. In her explanation she made sure the callers understood that she was offering art not therapy, that participants were free to drop out of the project at any time and that writing experience was not required.

At the start of every new collaboration Higa asked participants to fill out a questionnaire to give them a place to start their re-written narratives. The questionnaire consisted of three questions:

- 1) How do you feel about what happened?
- 2) What do you wish had happened?
- 3) What do you want to happen?

Over the course of three years Higa spoke with over 150 callers ranging from ages 14 to 68. The callers came from diverse racial backgrounds and from across the LGBTQ spectrum. Some callers left the project before completing their stories, while others engaged in long-term collaborative relationships with Higa. Some of them met Higa in person and others chose to maintain their working relationship through phone calls, emails and letters.

The following set of stories is from a collaboration with a woman who used the name Liz. In 2003, Liz contacted Higa after seeing her ad in *The Track* and they began to meet two to three times a month. Over the course of their time together, Liz and Higa drafted a long,

rambling epic telling the story of Bubblegum Baby, a character devised by Liz. As the project evolved, Liz and Higa eventually decided to break the story into smaller, separate narratives.

Bubblegum Baby

by Liz as told to Kelly Higa

Bubblegum Baby pops her knuckles.

Bubblegum Baby is not a whore, but she does like fucking.

Bubblegum Baby's bod is a curated pink conglomerate.

Bubblegum Baby's bod is pliant, wrapped in stretchy pink lycra and dusty rose velour.

Bubblegum Baby's tits are filled with polymer syrup.

Bubblegum Baby is sculpted by Billy Blanks and five-mile runs four times a week.

Bubblegum Baby is fucking pissed that she can't go back to the bar where they make her favorite cocktail with just the right ratio of lemon juice to simple syrup.

Bubblegum Baby is glad she spilled her last cocktail all over the fucker's white shirt.

Bubblegum Baby drinks alone now.

Bubblegum Baby carries mace now.

Bubblegum Baby bites off a huge chunk of the fucker's cheek and chews it till it becomes a sticky wad of pink.

Bubblegum Baby chews so long the cheek chunk softens and stretches till she can blow bubbles with it.

Bubblegum Baby pokes her finger into the bloody hole on the side of the fucker's face and says, "You should get that looked at. It might get infected."

Bubblegum Baby double doubles her refreshment, double doubles her enjoyment and bites the fucker's other cheek clean off.

Bubblegum Baby giggles and smacks the fucker's ass.

Bubblegum Baby won't bite the fucker's ass even though it's a lush bubble butt, because, god, who knows where that thing has been.

Bubblegum Baby's mouth is full of cheek.

Bubblegum Baby offers the fucker a cocktail napkin for the blood and says, "Chin up dude."

Slippery Bitch

by Liz as told to Kelly Higa

When she's hungry, the Slippery Bitch finds a lap to sit on.

It doesn't take very long.

There's usually one in the darker corners.

She's well-adapted to the darker corners.

She dives into crevices to find what she's looking for.

She's been called a bottom feeder, but the Slippery Bitch could give a flying fuck what she's been called.

She knows what she likes.

The Slippery Bitch likes the bigger laps.

There's more to eat.

She's a bit of a glutton.

This one's nice and big.

The muscles aren't too decayed.

After circling a few times, she sits.

This one puts an arm around her waist, pinning her in place.

The Slippery Bitch doesn't like this.

This one looks like a biter.

Even though she's still hungry, she'd rather not be bitten, so the Slippery Bitch tries to leave.

This one hugs her close and puts his tongue into her ear.

He grabs her hair.

He grips her dress.

He bites her neck.

The Slippery Bitch knew it.

She can spot the biters from leagues away.

It's in the eyes.

This one's fingers slide through her hair and come away with a fist full of slime.

He adjusts his grip around her waist, but the Slippery Bitch is viscous.

His hands dive, searching for purchase.

He wants a handful of hair, a loose bit of dress, the bones in her wrist.

He uses his teeth.

When he bites her shoulder his mouth fills with goo.

It coats his pink lips and gets in his nose.

He's bitten off more than he can chew.

Or swallow.

The Slippery Bitch slides off his lap while he chokes on her glutinous cloud.

International Velvet

by Liz as told to Kelly Higa

Ovina Mosura wears a black velvet dress, slinky as caterpillar skin. The dress has yellow polka dots the size of silver dollars, spaghetti straps thinner than angel hair and a long, hidden zipper that starts at her armpit and ends at her hip. The dress makes her pet-able. So she's heard. A million goddamn times. She got it at the thrift store in Chinatown. It cost \$3.50, which left her enough for the black boots and riding crop.

When she was in middle school Ovina Mosura went to Christian horse camp. Her horse Huckleberry was a real sinner, the big stupid jerk. She hated that horse, but she prayed for him anyway.

Dear God, please help Huckleberry repent for his disobedience and finger biting.

Dear God, make him pay.

At Christian horse camp Ovina sat on the mess hall porch and stared up at the eaves after dinner. She ate mostly biscuits and honey butter for two weeks. The beef stew tasted like horses. The apples were mealy. Get back on the path, Huckleberry, or I'm chopping you up for stew meat!

What a bastard.

In the crevices of the eaves, Ovina watched the moths. Or when there were no moths, she stared at their cocoons. Creamy yellow sleeping bags. The moths looked so stupid when they were moving. Ovina wanted to yell at them to calm down. They looked like they were always hyperventilating. They looked like they had always just stubbed their toes.

When they were still, some of them looked better than butterflies. Especially that white one. The tan ones had nice patterns, but they were matte and powdery. Ovina liked the white ones with their crushed velvet capes and feather boas.

A gentleman sidles up to the bar and asks, “What are you drinking?”

“Vodka hackberry.”

“Fancy.”

“Hmm.”

“That’s some dress. Velvet makes everything so pet-able. So soft you want to take a bite.”

“Hmm.”

The thing is, they didn’t even use riding crops at Christian horse camp. She learned how to use one on her own. That thwak was the perfect sound. She cleaned the one from the thrift store with bleach because there weren’t any horses around for miles and miles. It was short enough to slide into the black boots, but she didn’t usually carry it with her. When she did, it was just for emergencies and special occasions. She didn’t have it with her now. She didn’t need it because she was wearing the velvet dress.

“Are you Korean? We have offices in Japan and I’m pretty good at distinguishing different Asians. You have rounder eyes. I hear people say you all look alike, but that’s some racist bullshit, right?”

“Hmm.”

“I thought maybe Japanese at first, but you’re a little taller, judging by your legs. So, what’s the story with this dress? You have to know how good it looks. Like it was tailor-made for you. Like it’s your own skin.”

He leans in so close Ovina can see the water in his eyes and the spit on his tongue. He slides his hand down her velvet thigh.

Ovina sucked the counselor’s dick after Bible study a few times. They had Bible study every evening. Everyone sat around the campfire with their highlighted Bibles. The more worn yours was the better. If you had bookmarks from the Christian bookstore marking your favorite passages that was the best. People usually cried about how grateful they were for the love of our Lord Savior Jesus Christ.

He was beautiful. He wasn’t really a Christian, but Ovina promised not to tell anyone. Maybe she wasn’t really a Christian either.

Huckleberry for sure wasn’t a Christian.

He admired Jesus as a historical figure, and was fully supported His message of unconditional love. He liked that he could talk to her about things like this.

It wasn’t her first time sucking a dick or anything. And she didn’t mind it at all, even though she would have been fine with just the kissing part. He wasn’t very good at anything else.

He liked how soft her hair and skin were. She was pretty much in love. On the last day of camp he didn't look at her.

If she had her riding crop she'd thwak the gentleman's wrist. Then she'd use the end of it to tilt his chin up. "Eyes on me, stud," she'd say. If he touched her again she'd bring the crop down across his thigh hard enough to make him worry. Thwak!

She didn't have it though. His hand was hot and curious. The downstroke was a smooth ride across yielding fibers. On the upstroke his hand met the stuttering resistance of velvet's nap.

"It's rougher than it looks. Maybe a little like you, huh? Do you prefer it smooth or rough?" The gentleman rubbed his palms together. Ovina sipped her drink and rolled her eyes. The gentleman's palms were red.

"I think your dress rubbed off on me. Maybe it's not as expensive as it looks. See that? There's fuzz all over my hands."

Ovina fished an ice cube out of her drink and let it melt on a napkin. She handed it to the gentleman.

"Here."

For the rest of the summer Ovina slept in her sleeping bag. Sometimes she stayed in it for days at a time. She ate a lot of salad. When she emerged in the fall she was longer. She'd burned all her baby fat in the sleeping bag. She wore mostly black.

"I think I'm having an allergic reaction." Blisters rose on the gentleman's palms.

“Have you been jerking off too much? When I went to Christian horse camp one of the counselors told the boys if they masturbated they’d get warts on their hands.”

Ovina laughed.

“It’s not funny. Jesus Christ, it’s really starting to burn. It’s so hot in here.”

“You’re so hot, even with that rash.”

The gentleman unbuttoned his collar. Ovina leaned in closer.

“Seriously, your bone structure is like, architectural,” she said.

The gentleman wheezed. He leaned a forearm on the bar and bowed his head. Ovina reached out to stroke his pecs. The gentleman grabbed her wrist, but he wasn’t trying that hard to hold her back. Ovina pressed her palms into his muscles. The gentleman tried to talk.

“Not enough air.”

That might be what he said. Ovina could barely understand him. Maybe he said, “You have soft hair,” or “I like my bottom bare.”

The blisters were now on the gentleman’s cheeks and lips. Some of the blisters wept. His eyes were swelling shut. The bartender came over.

“What’s wrong with him?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he’s allergic to hackberries or something.” Ovina picked up her purse and left.

Yellow Fantasy

by Liz as told to Kelly Higa

A woman walks into a bar.

She orders a drink and the bartender says,

“Do you want to open a tab?”

She says yes.

She drinks her favorite cocktail

with just the right ratio of lemon juice to simple syrup.

She orders another.

And another.

She gets a little tipsy,

but it's a special occasion.

She's celebrating.

The woman pays her tab

and leaves the bar.

She walks home alone in the dark.

Amy Hirayama

(1980 – present)

Shoreline, Washington

Amy Hirayama was born in 1980 in unincorporated north Seattle, now the city of Shoreline, where she still resides. After exploring several different vocations – carpet store receptionist, deli meat slicer, commercial interior and exterior house painter, massage practitioner – she found her way to education. Hirayama briefly lived in Honolulu, Hawaii and worked as a classroom assistant at Ka’Elepulu Elementary School in Kailua. Her experience in the classroom led her to an eight-year stretch as a public middle school humanities teacher. Like many educators, Hirayama cites fatigue, frustration and deep injustice within the school system for her eventual exit from full-time teaching. Privately, Hirayama says the public school teacher part of her died of a broken heart.

Despite leaving the profession, Hirayama credits her time as a classroom teacher for igniting a desire to write. Many of her early works began as models of writing assignments she created for her students. She also expresses gratitude to her students for helping her develop her work through their candid feedback.

The influence of education and pedagogy can be seen in the theme of family legacy that runs through Hirayama's work. She is interested in how knowledge and culture are not only passed from an older to younger generation, but how information is exchanged between the generations. The pieces included here touch on ideas of ancestry tinged with a persistent anxiety that one cannot live up to the expectations and hopes of those who came before them.

As a mixed-race writer of Japanese descent on her father's side, Hirayama's work often grapples with the murkiness of the in-between. Japanese-American with no Japanese language. Okinawan, but filtered through the culture of Hawaii. German, Irish and English with Asian phenotypes. Far from being distressed by this ill-defined space between, Hirayama sees it as a rich landscape of possibility. The use of humor when addressing large topics of race, gender, injustice, belonging and family characterizes much of Hirayama's work.

In the Dark We Look More Japanese

by Amy Hirayama

In the dark we look more Japanese and that's when Mother loves us. When winter comes to our house in the woods she lights white candles and hums Takeda Lullaby. While water simmers on the wood stove she mixes flour, sugar and peeled persimmon for the small cakes to steam in bamboo trays. By candlelight she spoons soft sweets into our mouths and tells us we never need to fear the night, not while we're with her.

Sometimes there's scraping at the windows, but Mother keeps the curtains drawn so we don't see whose nails carve the glass.

Mother's hands are cracked and weeping at the seams. It's some sort of rash, she says. The cold weather makes it worse, but it's not contagious, so at night when she caresses our cheeks, flakes of skin speckle the pillow. In the warm glow of candles, round bellies full of steam cake, white comforters pulled up to our chins, we sleep. The scraping, the hoarse whispers at the crack beneath the door, the rustling on the thatched roof, the rattling of the sliding doors lull us to sleep. We are not afraid of the dark.

When morning comes Mother says our fleece is white as snow. She stares at our eyes. "So blue," she says, "Not what I expected." We know she thought we'd look like her. Black

polished marble eyes, skin that takes the sun, straight hair heavy as flowing water. “You have my earwax,” she says as she scrapes the thin metal spoon along the canyons of our ears. “But where did you get this hair? Where did they get this hair, Mendel, you liar liar pants on fire?” she singsongs while spooning rice porridge into a bowl for herself. We find our own breakfast on the pantry shelves. Old bread.

“Go to White Grandmother’s house, I need to make a potion.” She doesn’t look at us as she grabs our visors and hucks them at our chests. “Get me three hairs from the Grandmother’s chin, the crust of a wolf’s left eye, a helper’s good intentions, and a bag of Niko Niko Calrose rice, we’re almost out. None of that Safeway Select garbage. The white paper bag with the cartoon boy.” She turns away and we stand for a moment, looking at each other before we steel ourselves, pull the visors low across our foreheads and slide the door just enough to peek at the snow outside.

Despite the visors, with their stained, softened cotton and frayed edges, our skin will burn. By the time we get to White Grandmother’s house our cheeks will be pink and the undersides of our noses and chins will sting from the sun’s reflection in the snow. On the way home, the tender, damaged skin will pull away and fluid will start filling brand new blisters. It’s okay. They only hurt a little while. At night, when Mother loves us she presses cool cloths to our cheeks and smooths her salve across our skin.

We scan the route and run from shadow to shadow. Light needles into the canopy, impaling the woods with ferocious heat. It burns pock marks in the snow. The trees are unhealthy. Deep gashes in their trunks have let in diseased mites. Their roots are not strong enough to dig down deep and so they creep across the forest floor, living logs searching for sustenance. Sometimes we think they’re breathing.

When we arrive at White Grandmother's house, the huntsman sits on the front stoop with his head in his hands. There's blood. And he's crying. We don't know what to do, so we step around him.

White Grandmother's house smells like cinnamon, cloves, ginger and Secret deodorant. She never wears makeup, her white hair is cropped close and she smiles all the time. There are quilts on the walls, the chairs, the sofa, the beds and stacked up in all the closets. She made them with her fancy new sewing machine. Hand quilting inflames her arthritis. White Grandmother does not come to greet us as we enter yelling, "Grandma! Are you hoooooome?"

We know she's in the bedroom, but we peek into the kitchen, the bathroom, and even up the chimney before we tiptoe down the hall.

The wolf's pelt is mashed into a ball and there are bloody boot marks in the fur from fevered, panicked stomping. We hear the dry scritch of a million of legs scrabbling against thousands of armored bodies. Beneath her quilt White Grandmother undulates with the steady rhythm of breath, only each breath rises and falls from a different place. As we tug at her quilt, a bug falls off the bed. We pull down the covers to find White Grandmother is now a mound of centipedes. Her shape is still there beneath the writhing bodies, but none of her is showing. We grab the broom and brush them to the floor. We grind them beneath our heels, but their shells do not break. We flush them down the toilet, but they swim against the current and climb up the slick porcelain. We gather them in pillowcases and burn them in the hearth, but they wriggle out of the flames and climb up the bedposts and back to White Grandmother.

We cry over her body, hoping our tears of loving sadness are secretly a pesticide. They are not. We give up. We're only children.

Before we turn to leave, we remember Mother's potion and we cry even harder. Is there any crust in the dead eye of that blob of wolf all crumpled on the rug? Will Mother mind if the crust comes from a wolf that's dead? Did she say it should be alive? Should we know better? We scrape the yellow flakes into a baggie.

With one last look at the mass of White Grandmother we curse those dirty centipedes for hiding all her chin hairs. And then we curse some more because once we've started we can't stop. We throw a lamp, and kick the wardrobe. We smash her mirror with a music box. Finally, we lob hot angry spit at the centipedes.

They hiss as spit dissolves their bodies. We watch their shells curl and crackle. They break themselves in half and half again. They scuttle and we spit and spit and spit until our mouths run dry. We grab lemons from the fruit bowl and bite into them like apples, mashing flesh and skin between our teeth and working pulp under our tongues. We spit along the window sills, at the threshold, around the cracks in the floorboards until finally, White Grandmother's breath comes only from her chest. As she rises, husks and legs shake loose from her hair and nightgown.

White Grandmother is gray paper that's been folded and folded too many times. She leans on the walls and furniture to reach the kitchen. She makes us tea, and gives us sugar cookies for the walk home (we can't eat right now). "You saved me, you know. You carry that with you now. I'm just sad my poor wolf came to such an end. Those centipedes have been after my family for generations. One by one they find us. My poor wolf agreed to let me hide inside of her, but then the huntsman came to rescue me. Did you see what he did? It was terrible to hear her cry from inside." White Grandmother stops because we are stricken.

“It’s getting late. Are you expected home soon?” We tell her Mother sent us out on errands and it’s time for us to leave. She folds us tightly into her paper arms and presses bottles of sunscreen into our hands. “These are enchanted bottles that will stay full for seventeen generations, so slather it on thick before you go outside. I can’t believe she sent you out here with just these silly visors.” As she talks we eye her wiry chin hairs. Even though we were so brave with all the centipedes, we feel shy about asking now. We wring our visors in our hands and shuffle our insect-dusted feet. “What is it, my loves?” We tell her it’s nothing. She crumples down to look us in the eye. “What is it?”

White Grandmother plucks out four hairs - an extra one just in case - and drops them into a baggie. “Is the huntsman still here? That Hunty has always been a crier. Maybe we’ll get lucky.” When we peek out the screen door, he’s gone, but a puddle of his tears pools in the worn wood of the bottom step. She spoons them up and lets them drip into a doubled plastic baggie - just in case. She fills a tupperware with the right kind of rice.

Soft taffy shadows stretch across the snow. The sun still scalds, but our slathered skin stays intact. We share crumbs of sugar cookies with the trees and we think we hear them sigh.

When we get home it isn’t night, but we see that Mother’s lit the lanterns. We peek through the windows and see children at the table. They look like us, but they are shadows with hair and eyes a few shades darker than their lightless forms. They have claws. Mother smiles as she talks to them in gentle, fuzzy murmurs. She spoons soft cake into their mouths and they gaze on her with love. We duck when they glance toward the window and we hear Mother’s soothing tones.

“It’s alright. Don’t be afraid.”

The children cling to her and she strokes their black hair. They sit in the rocking chair together and Mother's smile is so soft, so different than her daytime smile for us. She doesn't show them her teeth.

We wait until the sun is gone and the other children leave. Then we wait a little longer to make sure it's dark enough. Mother meets us at the door and helps us with our boots. "My brave things!" she cries when we tell her about the centipedes. She hugs the baggies to her chest and kisses our cheeks and hair. There's hot chikuzenni on the stove and Mother blows on our bowls before placing them before us. While we eat she hums and cooks her potion.

By morning her hands will be silk, until she does the dishes and they start to dry and crack again.

Tanuki

by Amy Hirayama

When I woke up I was a tanuki. My eyes were round and googly; my stubby snout turned up to the sky; my big boobs were covered in fur. And the balls! Two big danglers covered in fuzz and highly impractical. I kept banging them on things. Tanunki can shape-shift, but I didn't know how to do that yet. There were also the urges. I wanted to be in the woods. I wanted to get drunk. I wanted to fondle that goofy scrotum, but not in a sexy way, just, like, I don't know, like when you want to rub a fuzzy peach or pinch a baby's cheek or pat a fresh-made mochi.

I couldn't stay in the house, so I grabbed that bottle of sake Dean gave me for my birthday, clawed open the back door, and ran into the bushes to think. I didn't want to go too far, in case I changed back; but if I stayed in the backyard, the neighbor's cat Zelda would eventually find me and we'd have to fight.

The woods, I had to be in the woods. Hamlin Park was just a block away. I could smell it; cartoon scent plumes made come hither gestures and snaked up my nose. I should have been thinking about how to change back into an unemployed suburban housewife, but I didn't. I ran to the park.

When I found the hollow log I knew this was where I was supposed to wait. I sank into sweet cedar needles while the urges to get drunk and stroke my balls still buzzed in my fur follicles. Who would I be trying to impress by resisting?

You know what's great about fur? No Asian flush! The sake polished everything to a crystalline clarity. This was where I was meant to be. I must wait and my purpose would reveal itself. The forest would keep me company. My balls would give me shelter. (Did I mention how stretchy those little buddies were? Like, let's build a lean-to and cover it in this furry hide stretchy.) I slept. For days.

I dreamed a foxy fox lady took me by the hand and said, *You're a spirit guide now. You're one of us until you've fulfilled your duty. The trees have imbued you with their wisdom. The sake has purified your heart. You're ready.*

It was his soft crying that woke me up. This was it! Time to guide! I peered out of my hollow log and there he sat, blond and blue-eyed, his arms covered in tattoos: a sexy geisha with massive breasts, a ninja with an American flag mask, a bible verse translated into kanji text, a bonsai tree in the shape of a dick.

Oh for fuck's sake.

I scooted back into my log and waited for him to leave.

The Ancestor

by Amy Hirayama

So, I went to this meditation retreat, and the lady was like, take some full breaths deep into your belly, allow your breath to travel all the way to the tips of your fingers, blah blah, you know. And then she told us to invite our ancestors into the space and to let their wisdom guide us and to listen to them. And the whole time I'm thinking, what? I even asked her, what if I don't know who my ancestors were? I know I'm half white and half Japanese, but that's it. I don't have any old family albums or manila envelopes full of old passports and old travel documents and old chunks of baby hair. I don't even have a birth certificate! (I did, but we lost it in a move and Mom never bothered to get another one.) The lady told me everyone has ancestors, it's the reason we're all here today. Okay fine, that's some deep shit. Then she told me to just keep my mind and heart open and extend the invitation. So I was like, okay. I pictured some Japanese granny in a yukata working in a field. She looked pretty nice, actually. Someone who would make me help her in the garden and then feed me rice balls and pickles. It turned out to be a pretty good meditation. By the end I almost felt like she really was my obachan and she was impressed with what I had done with the advantages her hard work and sacrifice gave me. I

could almost feel her callused, brown hand pat my knee with firm affection at the end of our hard day of hoeing.

After the ancestor thing, we were supposed to drink a ton of water and then do some walking meditation on the grounds around the retreat center. It was a cool place. Lots of fat, old cedar trees and tons of moss everywhere. A little stream with flat stepping stones and a bench near it. They even had one of those labyrinth path things. I walked along the trail next to the stream and was kind of annoyed because I could hear someone behind me muttering and totally not getting the whole silent meditation project. I stopped to casually look at the water and see who was back there. It was this kid who looked like she was about fourteen, wearing one of the bathrobes from the rooms. She glared at me and said, “Why you invite me here?”

I had no idea who this girl was. “What?”

The girl stomped closer and I could see the muddy hem of the retreat center bathrobe which just touched the ground. They were going to make her pay for that. She leaned in with a sneer. “I said, Why...did...you...invite...me...here? stupid, fat girl?”

“Whoa. Bitch, I don’t know who you are, and I definitely didn’t invite you here. Kids aren’t even allowed at this retreat. Shouldn’t you be in school or something? Go find your mom, or whatever.”

Before I could wave her away and continue my walk, pop! She ran up and slapped me across the face.

“You say such filthy words to your Obachan, debu debu, girl? Stupid girl?”

“What the hell? You can’t hit me. What is wrong with you? And Obachan? How old are you, like nine?”

“I thought you would not be so stupid. This is what I spent all those days in the factory for? This is what I ate rice bran porridge for? For a stupid, fat girl like you to sit and pay some lady to tell her how to take breaths? You need some Yankee white lady telling you how to take breaths and be quiet?” The girl was stomping back and forth, jabbing her finger at me.

This was not what I came here for. I took a deep breath, got mad for feeling self-conscious about my breathing, let it out, and walked away from the deranged girl in her dirty bathrobe. There was no need to engage her. I was here to find peace, calm, etc. I could just do my walking meditation later.

Back in my room I continued my breathing, tried to check my phone before remembering I gave it up at the registration desk on the first day, drank some more water, looked everywhere for my bathrobe, gave up, flopped on my bed and stared at the ceiling. I’m not saying the girl had a point, I liked Willa the meditation instructor, but I couldn’t stop thinking about paying some white lady to tell me to breathe. Teenagers are so judgmental and idealistic. We can’t all go to Nepal or India or whatever, for the most “authentic” experience. It’s not like that girl had any idea how stressful my life was. And who was she to mock my self care? If she didn’t like it she could go run her own retreat for rude, crazy adolescents and they could sit around and post pictures of themselves to prove how enlightened and wise they are and then feel bad about themselves because someone else’s picture looks more wise and enlightened than theirs. I couldn’t delve much deeper into my enlightenment envy revenge fantasy because someone started pounding on my door.

“Open the door, debu debu!” There was no way I was opening the door. I waited. The banging continued, shaking the photo of a bamboo forest on the wall. “Debu debu! Stupid girl!

Let me in! Open the door! Open the door! Open...the...dooooooooooooor!" She was going to freak everyone out.

"What do you want?" I growled as quietly as I could through the tiny crack I opened in the door. I've been told my angry glare is very intimidating. Hers was too.

"Why did you invite me here? Hm? Why? Because that Yakee lady told you to? You do everything Yankee white ladies tell you to? Hey, stupid girl, breathe like this. Hey debu debu, give me your money. Hey stupid, fat girl, eat all the sugar and get so fat."

"Helloooo? Is everything okay here?" A woman poked her head out of the door across the hall. "It's just that, it's a tiny bit loud, and I was really looking forward to some quiet time, and we all signed that peace agreement when we registered, which I'm sure you remember, but just in case, one of the agreements was that we would maintain indoor voices at 40 decibels, which is kind of controlling, I think, but I get the point, and we all agreed to it, right? Anyway, I just wanted to check and make sure everything is okay."

"Who is she? Do you know this fat lady?" Before she could continue I yanked the girl into my room.

"Sorry, we'll be quiet."

"Thank you so much. I don't want to be that person, but your friend was so loud."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Okay, well, thank you. I really hope it doesn't happen again. Again, I hate to be that person, but you might want to check your copy of the peace agreement, just to remember what we all agreed to. And the age policy too."

"I will, thank you."

"I'm happy to lend you my copy if you can't find yours."

“It’s fine. Mine’s right here by the door. Thank you.”

“Okay, well you have a great evening.”

“Thanks, you too.”

“Thanks, you too,” came a nasally sing song from my room. The girl had taken off the grubby robe, folded it neatly and placed it where my missing one had been. She was now dressed in my sweatshirt and leggings, which made her look even more like a child.

“Was that my robe?” She ignored my question and started pulling out everything from my suitcase.

“Why did you thank that stupid lady?” She was holding up one of my sports bras, which could have wrapped around her chest twice. I grabbed the bra, but she didn’t let go.

“Because,” I tugged, “if you don’t thank people like that they keep talking, and get all worked up.” I let go of the bra before it ripped. She was strong.

“That’s stupid! You thank the dog for shitting on your shoe? You thank the mold for ruining your rice? No!”

“Okay, so what would you do? Call her fat and slap her? Get arrested for assault? Go to juvie? How old are you, anyway?”

“She is fat! Like you, debu debu, stupid. What’s this?”

“It’s a sleep machine. I have insomnia and it makes white noise.”

“White noise, you’re white noise.” The girl laughed at her own joke and dumped my underwear onto the carpet.

“Okay, haha, I’m super white, Ms. Authenticity Police. Are you going to tell me who you are and why you won’t leave me alone? I’m sure there are fatter, dumber women here for you to harass.”

“No, no one is as stupid and fat as you, probably. You called me here. And I came because you are my granddaughter. I am so disappointed. Maybe that’s why you called me here. To make you less disappointing.”

“You’re my grandmother.”

“Oooo-baaaaa-chaaaaaan. Don’t you even speak Japanese, or are you too Yankee like all these other Yankee ladies?”

“No, I don’t speak Japanese.”

“Disappointing.”

My rude, teenage grandmother knelt on the carpet in a way I’d never been able to, despite the yoga.

“Okay, Obachan, what would you do to make me less disappointing? Let me guess. I should get married, buy a house, have a couple of kids and take care of my parents when they get old.”

“If you’re so smart, why are you here, hm, stupid? You know how to make your ancestors proud, so why aren’t you doing it? Get married? Yes. Have kids. Yes. And soon because you are already too old. There’s no more time to waste. House, sure. You have a boyfriend?”

“I’m kind of dating a couple people.”

“What does that mean? You have a boyfriend or you don’t have a boyfriend? Who are a couple of people?”

“Clint and Ryan are two guys I see pretty often. They’re nice.”

“Clint and Ryan? Yankees?”

“Actually, no. Clint is half Taiwanese and Ryan is Japanese. His grandparents are from Okinawa, I think.”

“Okinawa? Okinawa isn’t Japan. That’s all backward country folk. He’s probably a pig fucker.”

“Obachan! You cannot say things like that.”

“We say things like that all the time. The Okinawans don’t care. Maybe that’s why Ryan likes a fat girl like you. He’s a pig fucker.”

“He’s an orthodontist. And Clint works in an art gallery.”

“Do you know what the men were doing when I was your age? They were serving their country as heroes and martyrs. They were expanding an empire. We all were. My brothers died in battle. My own obachan led a brigade of neighbors to train with bamboo sticks for when the Yankees invaded. I wasn’t sitting around. Oh, I’m so lost. Oh what should I do with my life? Oh, everything is so hard. I went to Toyokawa by myself. I worked and slept in the factory with the noise and the dirt and the lice. Do you know how hungry we were? I gave everything I had for my country.”

Oh shit. Was she talking about the war? Martyrs, like kamikaze pilots? Empire expansion like the Nanking massacre? Like Korea? Like comfort wives and babies tossed onto bayonets? Shit. Shit! I really should have signed up for that Zen de-escalation seminar. Maybe some Kundalini would help. I closed my eyes and focused on my breath. I visualized my chakras. I swear I saw this intense orange mist hovering over my crown chakra where it definitely should not be. It was fine. Becca, the Kundalini instructor, totally walked us through clearing our

chakras yesterday. I wished I had checked out one of the mini gongs at the reception desk. I would have preferred a set of singing bowls, but those went fast.

Pop! Obachan slapped my cheek again.

“Goddamnit! Stop hitting me!”

“What are you doing? Why are your eyes closed?”

“I’m meditating! Maybe if you tried it you wouldn’t be so fucking angry and violent!”

She stood in front of me with her arms crossed, frowning.

“Angry and violent is good, stupid. Angry and violent makes you strong, like me. Angry and violent means you get the better spot in the bunkhouse, away from the drafty window. When the manager comes to touch the girls in the factory, he knows not to come to you because you’re the angry and violent one. Angry and violent means no dumb Yankee lady bosses you around in the hallway.”

“Obachan, you shouldn’t have to be strong to not be sexually assaulted. Men are the ones who shouldn’t go around touching people.”

“Men! Pfffft. What do you know about men with your pig fucker and your art whore? Men always touch, men always take, stupid. They don’t change. You think they will stop? No, they will not ever stop. So be angry and violent. What are you doing here? They are teaching you how to be weak and you are already so weak. Look at those fat arms.” Obachan pinched the flab over my triceps hard enough to make me wince.

“Enough with the fat shaming, okay? My body is none of your business.”

“Shame, yes! You should feel shame, debu debu. Eating Yankee garbage all day long, fattening yourself for your pig fucker. So much fat, no muscle makes you weak. You need to feel shame so you will get skinny and strong like me.”

“No. No. You’re not strong. You know what you are? You’re a bully! You make people feel afraid. You scare them into giving you what you want. You’re just a spoiled child who uses anger and violence as an excuse. That’s so emotionally manipulative.”

“Emotionally manipulative?” Obachan laughed so hard she had to sit down. “You think I had time to make little plans for manipulating emotions? You know what’s emotionally manipulative? Yankee war propaganda. Do you think we don’t know how the Yankees tried to poison the brains of everybody with their slanty eye propaganda? Do you think we don’t know about the concentration camps you made for the Japanese?” She wiped tears from her eyes. “You think I spend all my time worrying about feelings? Oh, how do I feel? Oh, am I too angry? Oh, how does she feel? Is she sad because she wants the good bunk too? Does she think I’m not a nice girl? Oh, will the manager be sad if he can’t put his hands up my shirt? Oh, will the enemy not like me anymore if I don’t let them steal all the food from my village?” She kept laughing until she exhausted herself.

“You know what? Whatever. It’s clear you’re a deranged war criminal or something, so it’s not like I even care if I’m a disappointment to you. In fact, I hope I am a disappointment to you because that means I’m not out celebrating the murder of innocent babies.”

“Okay, good, that’s good debu debu. See? You’re being strong. You’re disrespecting your Obachan, which is no good, but at least you’re not saying sorry sorry for every breath you take.” Obachan had a satisfied smile on her face. “Let’s go to sleep, debu debu. Obachan is tired.” The teenager crawled under the covers and turned off the bedside light. It was not a large bed. My room was only supposed to be for one person. And it was only 6:30.

“I’m going to go eat dinner, Obachan.”

“No dinner, fat girl. You sleep.” She rolled over and tucked the duvet under her chin.

In the dining room I collected my organic Canadian quinoa (which is ethically grown, does not contribute to poverty in Bolivia and Peru, and 5% of all profits go to South American farmers), vegan dal with an anti-inflammatory and detoxifying spice blend patented by the retreat chef, sustainably-harvested Pacific sea vegetables (6% of all profits go toward cleaning up the great Pacific garbage patch) and carbon neutral almond milk (hand-pollinated by volunteers from UC Berkeley's agriculture department to prevent the depletion of overworked bee colonies) all served on biodegradable dinnerware. The organizers of the retreat encouraged us to sit alone so we could focus on eating mindfully, noticing the texture, temperature and flavor profile of each bite. The meal time pamphlet in our rooms suggested chewing slowly with gratitude and putting down our spoons between each bite to pause for a moment of their trademarked micro-meditation. After a few bites, most of the women usually started talking and eating normally.

My thoughts quickly turned from gratitude to what to do about the problematic teenage war criminal elder sleeping in my bed. She wasn't right. This retreat was proof. For the first time in months I was sleeping through the night and my acne was clearing up. Don't even get me started on my poops. Silken chocolate mousse. There's no way that would have happened if I was walking around like some battle-ready bitch. She had no idea how strong I was. I'd like to see how long she could hold purvottanasana with those spindly little arms.

When I was nearly finished eating, Becca, the Kudalini instructor, came over to my table.

“Hiiiiiiiiiii. I hope you're enjoying your meal. The dal is so complex this evening, don't you think?”

It reminded me of dirt. I'm pretty sure the chef had no idea how to actually make dal. I wasn't an expert, but my neighbors were from India.

“So complex. I’m enjoying it, thanks.”

“Great! So, I’m glad I ran into you because it seems there’s a little bit of a question about a guest staying with you? I’m sure it’s some kind of misunderstanding, so I just want to engage in open dialogue as per the peace agreement to clear things up, okay?”

I saw my neighbor from the across the hall watching us from her table. She pretended to concentrate on her food when I looked at her.

“Okay, totally. It’s actually a family emergency, so I didn’t know she was coming. My grandmother’s nursing home lost power and it’s pretty close to here, so they brought her here just until the power is back. I’m sure it won’t take much longer.”

“Okay, yeah, I see. Your grandmother, you said? It’s just that we heard it was a child staying with you. And really, I don’t mean to confront you at all. You’re not in trouble or anything. I’m sure we can get to the bottom of this. It’s a liability issue more than anything, which is why we’re so explicit in the contract about the age restrictions for our retreat. We just want to make sure everyone stays safe. You understand, right?”

“Absolutely. I’m so sorry.” I heard myself apologizing. Obachan’s smirking face flashed through my head. “I totally hear you about the liability. Maybe I can sign something to say I’ll take full responsibility? And I’ll make sure she stays in my room. And I can pay extra if that would help?”

“I wish it were that simple. And again, you’re not in any trouble, so you don’t need to get defensive.”

“I’m not defensive, I’m just trying to explain and find some sort of compromise.”

Becca held her hands up in front of her. “Okay, okay. Let’s remember the decibel limits.” She brought her voice down to the soothing coo of a horse whisperer. “I know! Could you maybe

call the nursing home and see if your grandmother could stay with another one of the residents? Maybe she has a friend whose family would take her in?"

"Honestly, Becca, I don't see why it's such a big deal for my grandmother to rest in my room for a little while. She's not going to eat anything, she won't come down for twilight yoga or dream designing, you won't even know she's here. In fact, you wouldn't have even known she was here if it weren't for *somebody* deciding it was her business to snitch like she had some hot tip for the FBI." I glared at the hall neighbor who refused to make eye contact. "Obachan is a war veteran and assault survivor and she's been through a lot. Don't we care about our elders? Or is all this ancestor invoking only woo woo bullshit? What kind of an ancestor will she be if I don't even take care of her while she's still alive? Do you want to be known as the wellness retreat that kicked out an elderly person of color in the midst of a family emergency? Hmm, Becca?"

Becca smiled and patted my hand. "Okay, hon. I really want to be sympathetic to your situation. I do. For now let's keep this between us and I'll see what I can do. We don't want the other participants to experience any sort of interruption in their wellness and healing, right? Haha."

"No, we wouldn't dream of it. Thank you so much, Becca." I almost flipped her the bird as she walked away, but that would only mean Obachan was winning, so I took a deep, cleansing breath and ate my last spoonful of cold quinoa. I was determined to still get the most wellness as possible out of this retreat.

I couldn't believe I threatened that poor woman. What was I thinking? She was just doing her job and I did sign that peace treaty or whatever. Obachan would have loved the whole scene, all except for the parts where I said sorry and thank you. She had to go. All that money I paid

would go to waste if Obachan haunted me for the rest of the week. Maybe if I did some sort of offering or a sage smudge? I'm pretty sure I saw that for sale at the front desk. What would appease a nationalist, fat-phobic victim-blaming spirit? Fruit? Booze? The blood of a Yankee? Before I could stand up to compost my tray, my hall neighbor sat down across from me. She folded her hands on the table. "Hi. I saw that Becca talked to you and I feel that it's so important for me to be totally transparent and tell you that I'm the one who asked her to check in with you."

I picked up my tray and started walking to the bins. "It's fine. Don't worry about it. Have a good night."

"No, really. I would love to dialogue with you about this. I would love to hear how my actions impacted you and I would like to share how your actions impacted me. I mean, that's why we're here, right? To practice living with integrity and wholeness? You can't be well if you're not whole, right?" She followed me to the compost cans and then out the door. "I think we'll both feel so much better once we've talked and cleaned up some of the toxic energy between us."

"Okay, fine. Why don't you go first."

"Really? Thank you ahead of time for listening. The past few months have been really stressful for me and I have been looking forward to this retreat for a long time, you know? So when I heard you and your friend making all that noise I just kind of went back into that stressed state of mind that I've been working so hard to escape." We paused at the ice machine at the end of our hall. "And then when I confronted you, I felt like you didn't really care, which made it feel like I wasn't being seen or heard. And I'm going to be honest, that hurt. Still, when I told Becca about your guest, I was not at all trying to be vindictive or anything. I really just wanted

someone else to check in and make sure everything was okay, you know? And I'm so glad I did, because I heard you tell Becca that it's some sort of family emergency and you shouldn't have to go through that alone. And now we can support you in finding a solution where we can all enjoy the rest of the weekend as fully as possible! Whew! I feel so much better already! Thank you for letting me speak to you so honestly. Okay, I would love to hear how you've been impacted. Is there anything you'd like to say to me?"

I stood in silence, micro-meditating to the whirr of the ice machine.

POP! I slapped her across the cheek so hard it made my hand sting, and I ran back to my room as fast as I could.

"Obachan! Obachan! You're never going to believe what I just did!" I hurled myself through the door, laughing with untethered panic. The bed was neatly made, my overturned suitcase was re-packed and my shoes were neatly lined up by the door. Obachan was gone.

Bento Box Poetics

Amy Hirayama

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The Bento Box

In its most basic form, bento is a Japanese meal served in a box divided into compartments. It usually contains a combination of rice, protein, vegetables and fruit. There are different forms of bento for different occasions from a quick meal at the train station to an elaborate



celebration dinner. Bentos come in disposable plastic trays, vacuum-sealed containers with cartoon characters and expensive lacquer boxes. There are regional specialties and side dishes determined by the season. They are usually made by women.

My thesis is a fictional anthology of Gothic short stories from across the Japanese diaspora. This anthology serves as a container for the creative writing I've engaged in over the past year. "Anthology" is the bento box and the written food within is from the Japanese diaspora and it is Gothic. I envision the elements of my poetics as the different compartments of a bento box. Those elements work together to balance and enhance each other the way a tart umeboshi brings out the sweetness of rice or a pickled cucumber cuts the oil of a fried potato croquette.

The idea of many dishes coexisting in one, cohesive meal also speaks to my identity as a Hapa (mixed-race Japanese and white) woman from the Pacific Northwest. I know who I am and

I am proud of my identity. Having two kids and wanting to teach them what it means to be Japanese American via Hawaii has pushed me to project confidence in my culture. Both of my daughters are half Dutch, and easily pass as white. I want them to feel their one quarter of Japaneseness deeply, even if it is not written on their faces. I want our Hapa version of Japanese culture to be part of their lived experience, not just a fun fact about their heritage. But no matter how much I immerse myself and my family in Japanese and Japanese American culture, there will always be doubt and questions of “enoughness.” Am I just a scoop of rice and a couple of edamame hanging out on a plate? That’s not very Japanese. There is something comforting about the bento box as an identity. All of these dishes get to socialize in one container, yet still maintain their individuality, allowing for the possibility of mixes and matches in every bite. That’s me!

Hapa Japanese American Storytelling

I think a lot about the Hapa Japanese American story. What is a mixed-race Japanese American story? Is everything I write a mixed-race Japanese American story by default? I’m not obsessed with defining my writing, but I do like the idea of blending my research on Japanese storytelling and literary culture with my study and admiration of writers outside of Japan. That makes it feel like me - a *mélange* of storytelling influences and traditions that I use to make something new with deep connections to something old. Being mixed-race is the embodiment of something that has been happening since life started wiggling around on this planet. We’re often framed as new and exotic when we should be viewed as walking reminders that everything is mixed - cultures, histories, identities, families and gene pools. Asian-fusion, baby! There is no

purity. Or if there is, it can't be passed through a single generation without being corrupted.

(Even the idea of purity shifts over time, not that that stops people from using it to violent ends.)

My anthology of Gothic stories owes a lot to Japanese kaiki, or tales of the uncanny; but, that's not where my anthology began. It started with Ann Radcliffe who I met in Dr. Joe Milutis's class, *The Gothic*. Or maybe it started when I read *Jane Eyre* in 8th grade while sitting on the locker room benches reading a few pages to postpone having to take off my clothes in front of the other girls. All that is to say, it started with white people. I love these deeply white Gothic stories! The moody skies and desolate wandering across desolate moors, the fingers scratching at the window, the women in the attics, the black dresses drenched by rain. I'm into it! (The unbridled racism, misogyny, colonialism not so much.) While my Eurocentric education had gaping holes and left me with a lot of blind spots, it also primed my American self for connecting to the Gothic outside of the western tradition. I still have work to do, filling in those educational gaps; but, in the meantime, I'm using what I've got as a rich resource that I have the power to transform through imagination, a spirit of gratitude, and literary alchemy.

From the deep white Gothic I moved toward the strange, uncanny stories within Japanese literature. I explored stories from the 1700s to stories published in 2021. While it is a study in storytelling, tropes, syntax, theme and other craft elements, it is also a study of myself. As I read the stories of Ueda Akinari, Hikago Jokichi and Yukiko Motoya I think about where I fit in this Gothic lineage. How do these stories help me better understand my own family? How will these stories inform how I raise my daughters? After a year of immersing myself in Japanese Gothic literature, I still feel like an outsider. Not only am I at peace with that, I celebrate the outsider's opportunity to form her own space of belonging through writing. (I acknowledge that this is not

always possible for outsiders. I am incredibly lucky to be able to celebrate my difference when countless others struggle to survive because of their status as outsiders.)

Being Japanese, but not being born into Japanese culture means I have threads of culture, but not the full tapestry. I see my writing as a way to design and weave the rest of the textile using the American, Pacific Northwest, Hawaiian and Okinawan threads passed down from my family. Since this is my design, I get to choose what else I bring into the tapestry. Humor, food, Gothic sensibilities, joy, race, education, hope and love are all woven into the pattern. This is how I consciously create a Hapa Japanese American culture for my daughters. This is Hapa Japanese American storytelling.

I Am Not Myself

My anthology currently includes the work of four authors - Amiko Tamashiro, Lana Kaneshiro, Kelly Higa and Amy Hirayama. I'm Amy Hirayama, but maybe not the one featured in the anthology. I wrote all of these stories, but all of these stories were written by different authors, one of whom is only sort of me. The Amy Hirayama that is me is afraid of writing stories. Until I began this project, I had not finished a short story since I took an undergraduate creative writing class at Washington State University in 2000. Twenty-two years ago! I started a lot of stories, even drafted a terrible novel, but I eventually gave up imagining myself as a finisher of anything longer than a poem. Amy Hirayama is a hardcore quitter. Jobs, friendships, projects, commitments, obligations - when the going gets tough, I'm out, dude.

This deeply-ingrained quitter identity stifles my creative output. What's the point of starting anything if I'm never going to finish it? It just gets added to the graveyard of abandoned projects. Fortunately, I met Sky O'Brien who introduced me to Italo Calvino who told me

something about Jorge Luis Borges that dissolved that quitter identity like rice paper on a tongue. When stuck in a years-long writer's block, Borges had the idea "to pretend that the book he wanted to write had already been written – written by someone else, some imaginary unknown author, working in a different language, a different culture – and then to describe, summarize and review that imaginary book," (Calvino, 60).

Once the thought of other authors writing my stories entered my imagination, I started hearing voices. The creative process was more akin to dictation as opposed to forcing my authors to exist through my own will. These women already existed and my job was to learn about who they were, not inventing their backstories. Not only did they already know themselves, they knew what stories they wanted to share. All of them are prolific storytellers and writers. The pieces included in the anthology represent only a sliver of their bodies of work. I'd be remiss not to mention Ikue Natsukawa, Olivia Oshiro, and Paz Tamaki, the three authors who will eventually be part of this anthology. I imagine as I continue to work on this project, even more authors will join them.

When I talk about this project sometimes it's unclear that these authors are fictional. And I like it that way. They're not real. (But they're totally real.) I think about how they would interact with each other, who would get along, what their daily lives were like, and what they might think of me. Would they recognize my Hapa self as part of their Gothic family? (How depressing if I can't even elbow my way into belonging in a literary lineage I specifically invented as a place for me to belong.)

At times, wrangling all of these voices into one anthology feels overwhelming. I'm supposed to be in control, right? I take comfort in knowing I'm not the first person to do this. There's Borges, yes, but it's Fernando Pessoa and his chorus of heteronyms (writers created by

one author that have their own identities, lives, histories and writing styles) who understands my project most intimately. When describing his heteronyms he explains, “I’ve divided all my humanness among the various authors whom I’ve served as literary executor... I subsist as a kind of medium of myself, but I’m less real than the others, less substantial, less personal, and easily influenced by them all” (Ciuraru). So far, I only have seven authors, so I maintain a sizable chunk of my humanness; but, I recognize that feeling of being less substantial than the authors in my anthology. I am in awe of their journeys as writers and I am becoming a better writer because of their influence. The variety of experiences, voices, and writing interests also allows me to show the wide range of what it means to be part of the Japanese diaspora. This matters to me, especially growing up in an “all-Asians-look-alike” culture. As much as I appreciate the Asian aisle of my local Safeway, we each deserve our own version of Uwajimaya instead of being lumped into an Asian cultural monolith and packed onto a few shelves next to the taco seasoning and matza ball mix.

Material and Spiritual Stuff

I see my authors as part of a collection. They’re part of an anthology, which is a collection of stories, but they’re part of a growing collection of voices I can use to write. So what is this instinct to collect many voices and stories instead of focusing on a single narrative from a single author?

There’s a legacy of stuff that’s been passed through my family, especially on my father’s side. The stuff itself is largely worthless - old kites, one-, two- and four-person tents, giant pieces of foam, two broken typewriters, a box of that accordion-folded printer paper with the little holes on the margins, film canisters of sand and dirt from every continent, bicycles, hard shell suitcases from the thrift store, all of the toenails Dad has lost after running marathons, remnants of

Hawaiian print fabric from the 90s that Auntie Kimi brought home from her work as a seamstress. The actual objects have far more meaning and usefulness to the original collector. The legacy is the compulsion to gather and keep.

Grandma Hirayama told me that during World War II they were so poor they saved everything. She remembered saving the wads of cotton stuffed into the tops of pill bottles until she had enough to make a pillow. For as long as I knew her, her house had a set of encyclopedias lined up on a low, built-in shelf under her living room window. I never saw anyone touch them. They were more furniture than reading material. The little statues, pictures of family and dried leis that lined the surfaces in her house never changed, they only gained new companions. When Grandma died I got a tiny ring with green stones in the shape of two flowers that I never saw her wear, a gold necklace with a Japanese symbol charm that no one knew the meaning of that I never saw her wear, and a gold bracelet with swirling, vaguely Asian arabesques engraved on it that I never saw her wear.

Mom and Dad both have their own rooms that they use as offices, sort of. Mom's is a crafting room that she cleans and organizes once or twice a year. If I ask, "Mom, do you have any pipe cleaners?" She can readily tell me, "Go look in my room on that shelf next to the mirror in one of the small white tubs."

Dad has never organized his room. Why would he? He knows where everything is. The closet that my sister and I shared as children is completely full of Dad's stuff now. He built a shelf above his desk because his desk got too crowded. There's a folding Costco table where he keeps the bags of dried fruit that Kyoko seeks out every time she comes to see Ji-chan. There's a full dresser, full hooks on the walls, and a full system of little shelves and drawers he built himself. That's just his office. There's also The End Room, which still has the split pea shag

from my childhood, the attic, the floor to ceiling built-in cupboards by the back door and the shed.

When I was on a cross-country bicycling trip, I got a call from my Dad who told me that someone blew up my mailbox, but not to worry, he had an extra one in the shed and he already installed it. This is why my own closet is brimming, the perimeter of my office is slowly closing in as the piles of stuff grow, and my floor to ceiling bookcases are beyond capacity. I don't need everything right now, but maybe I will, or someone else will...eventually. It's better to be ready.

My anthology is crowded. Once I said, this is what I'm doing! the voices of fictional authors rushed at me, demanding to be included. My legacy of stuff kicked in, leaving me with an elaborate bento box of writers from across time and continents. They offer different flavors and textures. Though my cooking and presentation skills are limited, my vision is ambitious. The preparation is labor intensive, painstaking and time consuming. Despite the range of literary dishes, they all come together in their compartments to make one special feast.

My legacy of stuff also appears throughout my stories in the objects I include. Just like the compulsion to gather and keep, I hardly notice the way many of my stories are jam-packed with objects until someone points it out to me. I like to think this family legacy, born out of very concrete needs, made its way into my DNA and now I'm genetically predisposed to fill my poems and stories with stuff.

Even the way I describe my work depends on stuff as a metaphor. I like touching things. I like learning, knowing and understanding through texture, temperature and physiological



responses. I need bento boxes, foods, tapestries, textiles and threads - material objects to help me make sense of the world.

The Body in Transition

I am very aware of the physicality of my characters. Their bodies are sites for storytelling. Their bodies are inextricably linked to their spiritual and emotional lives. Sometimes their bodies are fragile and break violently. But more often their bodies adapt and transform sometimes to blend in, sometimes to hide, sometimes to fulfill deep desires, sometimes to reflect their inner turmoil, sometimes to finally become their full, complete selves. This fixation on the body is not something I noticed until I had written well over half of the stories for the anthology. Once it was brought to my attention (thanks, Rebecca!) I thought about Gloria Anzaldúa's belief that "writing is a gesture of the body, a gesture of creativity, a working from the inside out" (Anzaldúa). My connection to my body is so enmeshed with my creativity that bodies pour out of my brain and onto the page. At least, that's how I imagine Anzaldúa's quote working in my writing process.

The idea of a body in transformation is something I've thought about for as long as I can remember. I have a vivid memory of a [milk commercial](#) from the 1980s where a girl talks to her future self in the mirror and the future self gets progressively hotter, proof that drinking milk leads to a hot bod and sexy boyfriend. My round dumpling of a self-imagined conversations with future me. I wanted so badly for future me to be thin and look amazing in a strapless dress and high heels.

Round dumpling me is even rounder and squishier than I was at nine, and I know nine-year-old me would be devastated. Hopefully I would be able to convince her it's possible to be

happy anyway and that strapless bras are really uncomfortable. Even though I'm happy, I still dream of the next transformation. When I was running regularly, I fantasized about how fast I could go if I just trained a little more and lost a little weight. I could see what that runner's body would look like so clearly. When I was pregnant, I couldn't wait to not be pregnant, for my body to go back to what it was like before. Of course I knew it would never go back to the way it was, but that small, delusional part of myself hoped it would be even stronger, healthier and thinner. Now that I'm studying karate, I dream of a future body that can do knuckle pushups and kick as high as someone's head without tearing a muscle. As grateful I am for my body, and as confident and proud as I feel in my skin, I can't stop dreaming of transformation.

Physical transformation is part of growing from a child to an adult; but, thanks to a patriarchal disgust for women's bodies, this process is often portrayed as mysterious and gross when it comes to the cis female body. (There's no shortage of patriarchal disgust for trans bodies as well.) What better material for the Gothic story? Instead of recoiling from the body, I want to tap into the Gothic tradition of using the fear of the unspoken, the pain, the blood, the freaky cycles of the moon to leave readers in awe of the power within women's bodies. Weakness as strength. The grotesque as beautiful. The bizarre as normal.

What does physical transformation mean for people who are part of a diaspora? When I was in elementary school I desperately longed for my mother's hair. It was long and wavy and the most beautiful brown that shone auburn in the sun. I didn't hate my own hair, I just thought its darkness and its straightness were boring, and its slipperiness made it impossible to do anything cool with it. After a good amount of begging, my mom let my sister and me get perms. We looked really stupid.

Looking dumb for a few months is hardly a devastating consequence of transformation for the sake of blending in. Oftentimes it is one's physical appearance that is the first thing that people notice, and when you are an outsider, standing out can be dangerous. The incarceration of Japanese Americans during WWII was facilitated by the racist ease with which people with Asian phenotypes can be culled from white citizens.

Part of the reason I am drawn to stories of physical transformation comes from the fantasy of changing physical differences that are often used against people into sources of power. In Japanese folklore, the tanuki is an adorable troublemaker who uses its shapeshifting abilities to confound humans and protect nature. The kitsune, a fox with the ability to transform into a human, often a beautiful young woman, is another creature whose power and wisdom are linked to its ability to physically change at will. How different would it be to move through an unwelcoming world with the ability to become something or someone else in order to protect oneself or receive the advantages given to those with cultural and historical privilege? What would it feel like to live without fear? What would one do with all of that free emotional energy usually spent figuring out how to navigate the crueler facets of a culture? (It's not lost on me that this strain of imagining asks the outsider to change, which is unfair to the highest degree. What does it mean that imagining a welcoming world feels less realistic than imagining morphing into a fox?)

Female Arts

For the past twenty years my mom has hosted a quilting group in her living room. Every Tuesday Mom cleans the house, bakes a batch of something decadent, and sets up for the Quilting Ladies. They work on their own projects, design and sew quilts together that they later

donate to a women's shelter, they laugh and they talk. With needles hovering over cotton they share their health struggles, their family complications and celebrations, their loves and losses. They consult each other on sewing techniques, color combinations and batting preferences. They talk about menopause - a lot. Without the materials of quilts - thread, needles, sewing machines, binding, backing, batting - some of these women might still be friends, but many of them would never have met each other and they certainly wouldn't gather with such regularity.

Like quilting, weaving and other textile arts are often connected to women. It was my mother and grandmother who taught me how to sew. A woman from church gave me the tools to hand twist wool into yarn. My mother-in-law bought my daughter her first sewing machine. Of course textile arts aren't limited to women - my dad hems his own pants, my uncle is an accomplished knitter and weaver, and one of my favorite fabric designers is a man. And of course labeling certain arts as "female" can create an unwelcoming culture for anyone who does not fit into rigid, cis notions of gender. That being said, in my own family culture and upbringing, it is the women who are the most skilled at sewing, knitting, crochet, textile design and tailoring, and it is the women who pass down their knowledge and skills.

What I appreciate about these arts is that they are forms of caregiving. Quilts, afghans, homemade clothing, wall hangings, table runners, doilies and stuffed animals are made to keep us warm, protected, comforted and to bring beauty into our homes. The makers infuse their work with their time, personalities and love.

Feeding someone is another form of caregiving that can become an art, as the bento box demonstrates. These portable meals are most often prepared by women for their partners and children. There are entire blogs devoted to the kawaii bentos women prepare for their children's school lunches.

This female connection to bento boxes feels right for an anthology of stories written by women. I did not set out to include only female authors. I heard their voices and saw glimpses of their lives. It wasn't until later that I realized they were all women. There is no denying that the interests, concerns and experiences of women play heavily into my anthology; but, it is the experience of being part of the Japanese diaspora and the attraction to the Gothic that I hope come through as strongly as their shared gender identity.



What does it mean to understand my poetics through a material object crafted by women for the care and nourishment of others? Part of the drive behind taking on a project with so many voices and writing styles is entirely selfish. I want to build a lineage that doesn't exist; where I feel welcome; where my experiences are not unique; where I can find the comfort that comes from a sense of belonging. Perhaps this lineage can bring comfort to other Hapa Japanese Americans and maybe even other Japanese people in the diaspora. Maybe my work can function as a love letter to mixedness - mixed-race people, mixed families, mixed cultures, mixed identities. I love that although this lineage of Gothic Japanese diaspora fiction is a fabrication, the anthology is very real, and once it's complete it becomes a real part of my own lineage.

From the mix of my life experiences, culture, interests and imagination to the physical object of a written text and back into a reader's imagination. What a journey! It reminds me of the quilt patterns my mom looks at on Pinterest. Some woman on the other side of the world designed a quilt, created the physical object, posted it for my mom to see and then she made her

own version. On each trip from imagination to object new perspectives, skills and ideas are brought into the mix. Sometimes the end result looks exactly like the original, sometimes it's an entirely new interpretation and sometimes it's a disaster.

At times writing this anthology feels like tiptoeing on the edge of disaster. My inexperience and limits as a writer jump out at me as I struggle to structure a story, build tension or find the right balance between dialogue and narration. The number of author voices and stories feels daunting. Figuring out how to write satisfying endings is an ongoing wrestling match. And yet, that brink of disaster is also a thrill. I'm growing as a writer. I'm discovering unexpected passions (don't get me started on the hagfish). I'm connecting to other writers through my excitement for this project the way the Quilting Ladies connect through their love of sewing.

A Few Musical Notes

I received the record *Miyoshi Sings for Arthur Godfrey* as a wedding present. It was a joke because my husband has red hair and I'm half Japanese and there we are, lovingly portrayed in this album cover. It was also a joke because at the time we didn't own a record player. (Is there a hint of racism in this vignette? Totally. But, without that whiff of racism telling someone this



would be a hilarious wedding gift, I would never have learned about Miyoshi Umeki, accomplished singer, actor and the first person of Asian descent to win an Oscar. And I really love this album. Racism co-existing frustratingly with joy - what am I supposed to do with that?)

I listened to the record for the first time in 2022 and it's beautiful! When I was in high school I was obsessed with Ella Fitzgerald and my love hasn't waned. There is something in her voice that cuts straight to my guts and marrow. The ease with which she weaves her voice around the rhythm and melody of a song is incomparable. While other kids were memorizing the Spice Girls catalog, I was learning a hefty chunk of the American songbook through relentless use of the repeat button on my CD player. Listening to Miyoshi Umeki gives me those Ella Fitzgerald chills, but it does something more. The combination of the music that has been part of me since late childhood and the image of a Japanese woman feels special. It's a little like that feeling I had when I had a Hapa professor for the first (and only) time. There's a recognition, a sense of ownership and pride. Hey! You're like me! Look at us!

As I think of writing as a bodily process moving from the internal to the external, my experience of music is also a bodily function moving from the exterior to interior. Music enters



Miki Matsubara

my body, tucks itself between my muscle fibers, liquifies in my lymph, hitches a ride on those little zaps of electricity between my synapses and finds its way back out again through my writing. The soundtrack for much of my writing over the past year has been pop albums by Japanese women from the 60s, 70s, and 80s. I am grateful to Meiko Kaji, Yoshiko Sai and Miki Matsubara above all others. I don't understand the lyrics to their

songs, but not being able to speak Japanese made it easier for me to listen to their music while I wrote. I am not able to pinpoint where their music shows up in my writing, but I am certain my stories would not be the same if I had listened to something else.

Another way music functioned in my process was as the voice of one of my fictional characters, Bubblegum Baby. The moment I heard the song “Little Deer” by the artist Spelling, I knew that was the voice of a character in one of my stories. The first time I heard that voice I pictured sugary pink girliness and a lack of shame or embarrassment for living as a walking caricature of femininity. The more I listened to the song, the richer my appreciation for the flexibility of Spelling’s voice and storytelling in her lyrics became. Repeated listenings challenged my snap reaction to excessive saccharine sweetness and my writing about Bubblegum Baby reflected this as my understanding of the character and her desires deepened.

Music opens new avenues of creativity I can’t access on my own. It allows me to connect to a culture I feel distant from because of cultural barriers and my inability to speak Japanese. It’s another medium for mixing and Hapafying my writing.

You Are What You Write

The bento box as an organizing structure makes sense to me because it is also a way to structure my understanding of my identity. I’m a tasty human bento. There is something alluring to me about the idea of art existing as something neutral, divorced from its creator. It would be cool if readers approached my writing without automatically thinking, oh this will be a woman’s story, or a Japanese poem, or a fat, forty-one-year-old mother’s libretto. I’m a sucker for T.S. Eliot’s New Criticism thought that, “...a poem, in some sense, has its own life...its parts form something quite different from a body of neatly ordered biographical data; that the feeling, or

emotion, or vision, resulting from the poem is something different from the feeling or emotion or vision in the mind of the poet.” There’s something romantic about my work standing on its own merits without the help or hindrance of my identity and intentions. But I’m also a human bento.

By including the biographies of each author in my anthology, I claim that who we are, where we’re from and what we do play important and noteworthy roles in what we write. I initially wrote the biographies to help me see these authors more clearly. The more I researched their time periods, diasporic experiences and writing influences the more details I added to their fictional lives. I eventually reached a tipping point where there were enough specific details for the authors to feel like real people to me. In some cases, knowing who they are helped me figure out what their voices sound like and how they tell a story. In other cases, I heard their stories first and worked backward, learning what kind of person would write such a story and what experiences she had that informed her narrative choices. I include the biographies in my anthology because I want the readers to not only make connections between the authors’ lives and their writing, but so that they’ll know who these remarkable women are.

The biographies are almost a mini thesis within a thesis, the sprinkling of black sesame seeds on the pillow of rice in a bento box. They put the different stories into historical and cultural context, but they also speak to the variety of definitions of what it means to be Japanese. Japan has a reputation for being a rigidly homogeneous society. (This in itself is a mistaken understanding of a country with many different ethnicities, languages and cultures.) The biographies of my authors illustrate how Japanese-ness looks different outside of Japan and in different regions around the world. The Japanese diaspora in Peru looks very different than the diaspora in California. I could introduce the Japanese diaspora through an essay, but it’s more memorable to be introduced to a person. Learning about a culture through a personal connection

to someone makes us feel more invested in that culture. The abstractions of migration, culture, belonging and family become concrete. Despite being fictional, I hope my authors reach out to create real connection.

And so, my hold on the romantic notion of art in a vacuum gives way to pride in being tethered to my writing. Because it is my singular blend of humanity that informs my writing, because I rely so heavily on my identity as inspiration for stories and poems, because I'm so proud of who I am and where I come from, I want to walk through this world hand in hand with my art. That doesn't mean my writing is autobiographical. I'm proud of my imagination and the wild places it can take me. Attributing my ideas solely to moments pilfered from my own life diminishes the creativity I work so hard to nurture and expand. No one else can write what I write because no one else is me. Knowing some of who I am might help a reader connect to my writing more deeply or lend a sense of ownership and authority over my subject matter. And knowing some of my writing might reveal glimpses of who I am. Art in a vacuum does not allow for this exchange.

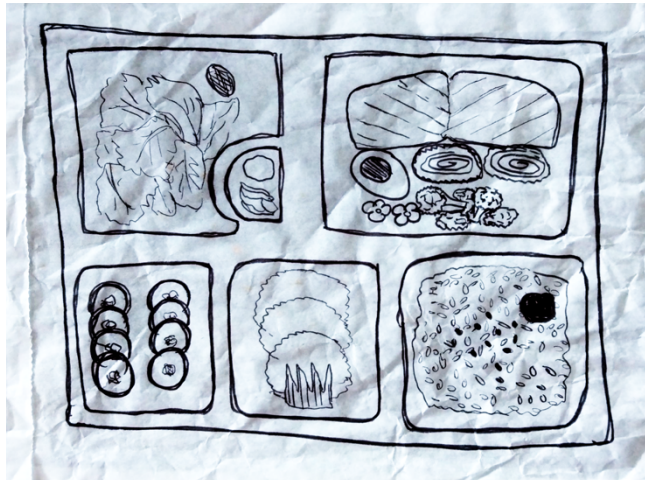
All of this makes me feel vulnerable and that's scary. If just the right flaw is exposed at just the right moment and I come crashing down, my art goes down with me. Is this the way it should be? Is there something in between allowing one the mistakes that come with humanity and mindlessly celebrating the work of a serial rapist? Does accountability always have to mean annihilation?

I don't know, man, I just want to write some creepy stories. I want to do it responsibly, without causing harm, but I also want to do it without paranoia and paralyzing fear. I want to do it with joy. Do you feel the joy in my writing? That's another sign my writing is tethered to me. It's bubbling, frothing with giddy, deep delight.

Bento Box Poetics

I think my bento box is full. Let's see what we have:

- The protein of my anthology is Hapa Japanese American storytelling. It can be fried, braised, grilled, or baked, just like the Hapa Japanese American story can be prepared and served in a variety of ways.



- Filling, and comprised of thousands of individual objects, the rice is the material stuff of my family legacy and writing. There's no meal without the rice. There's no Amy Hirayama without the stuff gene.
- The deep-fried potato croquettes are the female arts. They're complex in their layers of potato, seasoning and crispy coating. They require knowledge and skill to deep fry them to perfection.
- The body is the vegetables in all their versatility. They can be raw, steamed, battered and fried, roasted and blanched. Sometimes they're transformed into flowers or stars with some artful manipulation. Sometimes they look like they were just plucked from the earth. Sometimes they are unrecognizable.
- The writer and her connection to her art are the dressed salad. Maybe the dressing tastes nice on its own and maybe the lettuce is sweet and crisp, but tossing them together brings out the best of them both. And once they're all slathered together, it's all but impossible to separate them.

- The variety of maki rolls are the author biographies. Sure, they have similarities, but they're cut from different rolls made from different ingredients. And yet here they all are, enjoying each other's company in one, shared compartment.
- Finally, we can't forget the Gothic pickles. The umami funk of pickled plums, eggplant, ginger and cucumber brings a sharp edge to the meal. The Gothic pickles help us explore the darkness of fermenting emotion and the bright acid of vengeance.

The further I get into this project the more the lines blur between fact and fiction. When I talk to friends about my authors, they stop and ask, wait, is this person real? Sometimes when I'm writing in the voice of one of the authors I lose track of where I end and she begins. Or maybe we co-exist on the page. My poetics are not just a framework for my writing, but for my identity. For some, this murkiness might suggest a lack of vision or a clear direction. For my Hapa Japanese American self, it's a place of possibility and pleasure. When this bento box is full, I can grab another sectioned platter and build a new meal. It will always have rice, it will always have protein, it will always be me.

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