

“obasan”

He did not want to leave you
but it was 1943 and
he was the second son of a nobleman,
forbidden to you in marriage,
just another pretty peasant girl.
So you watched him leave
and clutched the red scroll
next to your young skin,
felt the words on the hand-pressed
rice paper
where his love
rose in bold, flat strokes
like an army of protecting samurai.

The Emperor didn't come that morning,
red and white banners waved instead.
His plane cut the bruised horizon
with its silver smoke
while unsmiling faces and
the silent grief of mothers
turned their backs on you.
You did not intrude
on the young brides as they dropped
fresh tears, they did not know
one thousand years of duty to the Emperor,
only the comfort of new love
found between scented sheets
as thin as paper lanterns.

You went to the landing strip
every morning, hands wrapped around
your thickening belly
(such a surprise)
and burned sacrifices
for his return. But you knew
what Kamikaze meant,
so you watched the new grass
as it covered the healing runway.

After the war,
you broke his red, waxy seal
under your thumb
and wept anew
as his plane went down

under a swarm of American bullets.
You opened the ivory box
he left you in secret
found his precious inks, paper,
and ten thousand yen bank notes
in clean piles wrapped in silk.
You threw them into the red sun,
watched them float to earth
like confetti
and wished they could buy
a small bowl of rice for your child
instead
they fell like cherry blossoms
their tight furls flowered
on your shoulders
wrists
and breasts
before fluttering
away.

“1926”

In 1926
you squeezed through a hole
as wide as your head
and jumped into the closest river
trying to drown yourself
and your swollen belly
before the family chased you out
from the shame of an unmarried daughter
giving birth inside their home.
But your belly had gotten so big
you couldn't drown it
or yourself,
the both of you kept floating to the surface.
Eventually
you drifted into rice paddies
and gave birth,
swollen ankles submerged in green shoots.

I think you
must have loved him very much
since you never revealed his name,
kept his characters locked firmly
inside your heart
for no one to see
or reproduce with
pen and ink.

You named your child
Brightest Sorrow
and years later,
she married an American
after the war.
You would not forgive her,
your oldest, your best-loved.

She writes you long letters from America
written in careful, perfect strokes
learned in school
that you paid for.
You do not read them,
lock them in a box
and say you have no eldest daughter,
will not even see her

when she comes to visit
with American dollars
and a big house
in New York.
You have shut her name
inside your heart
and will not repeat it,
even forbid others
from saying her name aloud.

On your 90th birthday
I, (your great-granddaughter
whom you have never seen)
wonder
how many names
you have written
and locked there
inside your heart?
is your list as long
as the Great Wall of China?
as numerous
as the stars in the Eastern Sky?
I think
it is as well-loved and cared for as
your Japanese garden
that gives you comfort
in the lonely winter hours.
I stand outside your gate,
hand raised,
and gather the courage
to see for myself.

“for A”

Last night I had a dream and you were in it,
we were walking along the beach in Hawaii.
When we saw each other, we ran straight for one other
and hugged a long time without saying a word.
Our eyes were shut,
our faces smiling.
Sometimes it's like that in dreams.
No explanations, no angry words
just the meaning coming through.

We began walking along the shore,
our conversation as gentle as the waves.
You said, why did you leave me that time so long ago?
The question came as a shock
since it was the one I always meant to ask *you*.
Why did you leave me? You knew how they were,
the rage that lived inside our house.
I always remembered
you were the one who left me,
not the other way around.
It made me consider you in a different way,
a boy left alone the world
drifting from one Eastern port to another,
instead of a girl wandering through Europe
shell shocked by the past,
both of us unhappy in our own way.

There were so few things we did for each other as children,
if I could rewind the silver thread of time back to childhood
I would reenter the lair and be kinder to you, more patient.
I would forgive you your bouts of fury, violence, and argument
and tell you it wasn't your fault, because it wasn't.
I would tiptoe around the monster at the heart of the labyrinth
and whisper in your ear, let us leave here together, quickly.

Even now, awake, six thousand miles away
with all those years between us
I wonder
who left whom
why it still hurts
when I think of that half man, half-horned beast
eating his own children inside the darkness.
What kind of person did you grow up to be,

are you kind, are you gentle?
or do you eat your children too?
I remained childless,
afraid the minotaur would rise up
like a drop of hidden ink written in indelible blood
to reappear later in life.

Come find me.
Unwind the silver and follow it over oceans,
over continents, over to me,
tell me it wasn't my fault.
While there's still time,
let us stop eating each other.