

Also by HC Hsu

Fiction

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Translation

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Middle of the Night

HC Hsu

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For my mother

He who does not dream cannot sleep.
– Unknown

Suppose if, like Tom Cruise in Mission: Impossible, you were to lower yourself slowly into his mind, you would see something like a cylindrical structure around you (you are suspended on a tight black steel cable barely a hair's breadth away from the ground because the alarm would trigger if any part of you brushed up against any one of the glowing red laser beams), lined with glass panels or screens, and you could see on them, each playing something different simultaneously, images like: figures leaping off a skyscraper, falling (the most natural motion of bodies), slowly, in an almost choreography, even occasionally lifted up by the wind (tight black steel cables again) like leaves; a kimono being ripped apart down the middle of a woman; the moon like a Cheshire grin; a group of men (like in Claire Denis' Beau Travail) sunbathing in the nude on a white sand beach – the men, with glistening bronze bodies, are not doing anything except lying on the sand, basking under the noon sun separately and individually, being surrounded by carcasses, skeletal fragments, of fish, shellfish, seagulls and other birds, bleached, empty spiral conchs, and rocks eroded to the point of becoming like porous sponges, with thousands of little holes, through some of which you could see to the other side, the entire scene being silent, except for sounds of waves and wind...et cetera, remnants of dreams like that...

all you have to do is hide from the sun

Sunset

18:03

日本の記 - Nihon no ki (1)

The Italian author Cesare Pavese said, 'The richness of life lies in memories we have forgotten.' Perhaps. Often we don't choose, or don't feel like we're choosing, what we remember, and what we forget. Things, events and people that we once thought were important fade away like ice melted in water, then evaporated in routine life; others are carved into the deepest, darkest recesses of our mind, like scars, that sometimes live on even after the bodies on which they're etched have broken down, eroded and scattered to the winds. A pure scar, like an idea, or a virus, passing from person to person, generation to generation. Sometimes we are glad that we remember, or forget, intentionally or not. But that, often, isn't up to us either. A painful memory turns into a happy one, and vice versa. It seems it's our past that keeps shifting, changing and moving from place to place, from time to time, while our future remains a constant unknown. Neither is something we choose. The only thing we choose in life, is the present.

I want to write down some things from my Japan trip a few years ago. They are not necessarily things that are, or should be, spectacular, jolting, or even particularly meaningful or 'memorable,' at least, I think, to most people. But somehow, for one reason or another, or maybe for no reason at all, they took hold of me, grabbed me, as if by sheer will, chose me, and articulated fully their presence to me, and I couldn't shut them out. They might even seem arbitrary and random. It is my choice now, however, to write them down.

18:17

日本の記 - Nihon no ki (2)
The sushi chef's right hand

The sushi chef reached his right hand into the half-covered light cedar pail directly in front of me. From the crescent-shaped opening I could see into the top half of the inside of the pail, which, beneath a further layer of thin gray muslin that had been pulled back against the edge of the circular opening, held an irregularly shaped white dome of rice, short and round, one grain pushed and pressed tightly against another, intimately, happily, as if each clump of grains were a family, and the pail were their big, extended reunion.

The chef tore and lifted a clump of the whiteness out of this great mass, his fingers curled like a rake, and, still hovering in the bucket, began a rhythmic motion of contraction and expansion against the little torn-off piece of cloud in the palm of his hand. The cloud disappeared, reappeared and disappeared again behind the rapid opening and closing of the precipitous ridge-like fingers, and each time it appeared its shape was completely different from before; the hand, at one moment, seemed like a beating heart, the next, a cage, and still, at times, it was a mouth, a mouth that was simultaneously consuming and articulating, with each appearance of the white shape being a punctuation sign.

Until, finally, it became a ball. Period.

18:46

日本の記 - Nihon no ki (3)
A blind girl

She got on the subway train, sweeping the ground in front of her with a thin white plastic stick, not like the long ones that people usually see and think of when they picture a blind person, but short, almost half the length of a typical cane, like that of a child's.

Maybe she was born blind, or had been blind since she was a child.

She waved the cane in a circular motion around her feet, tracing arcs over and over again, like a fragment of a pencil sketch on air, which, if it were visible, would probably look like nothing but a tangled mess of errant lines, nothing more. The ends of each arc

she created bounced off the floor of the train, or clinked against the metal railings by the automatic doors, as she made her way into the compartment.

Then, she sat down in the seat behind the metal railing, next to the door.

Her skin was very pale, but it didn't give off a feeling of cleanness, but one of being sickly and, strangely, sullied. She was neither thin nor fat, and her face was round, like a cherry with its skin peeled off, then blanched and poached. Her matte, ink-black hair wound into piecey, uneven wisps just below her shoulders, and the bangs were cut in a straight line right across the middle of her forehead, almost taped flat against it. There was a light splotch of pink on the tip of her small, flat nose; above it, her eyes stared at the empty space between the seat across and the floor. Her left eye was slightly larger than her right, which took on the appearance of being somewhat swollen under the weight of a fuller and thicker eyelid, and they were brimming with tears. She didn't look sad, though; other than her teary eyes, her face was expressionless. Her cheeks were loose and relaxed, and her long, thin pale pink lips remained slightly open. She couldn't have been more than twenty years old.

She was dressed head-to-toe in white, but different feelings, thicknesses and natures of white: a short-sleeve synthetic and slightly reflective white round-neck blouse, an ivory cotton knee-length skirt, and a pair of white fake patent leather Mary Janes with kitten heels, smudged with gray and black spots, and scuffed on the front tips. No jewelry of any kind. Part of her right forearm and palm was in a paunchy white plaster cast, which she rested on her lap, and she clutched her cane and a small worn, cracked soft off-white leather purse in the fingers of her left hand, with the purse hanging down by its strings between her pale legs, dangling and swaying to the rhythm of the train. Her bare, waxen legs were flecked with a motley of purple and black bruised patches and spots.

Without moving the position of her head, she leaned forward and set her purse down on the floor, then reached her left hand into it, and took out a piece of square-folded white linen handkerchief with stains of yellow, which blossomed into large, overlapping flowers that were brown at the edges on the fabric. Without unfolding it, she raised the handkerchief to her face, and dabbed it in her eyes.

A blind girl. On a train.

18:55

日本の記 - Nihon no ki (4)

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Mausoleum kaidan

This past weekend I watched a series on DVD called *Tales of Terror from Tokyo and All Over Japan* (Kaidan shin mimibukuro). It's a series of horror shorts, each around five minutes long, that began airing regularly on Japanese television in 2003, and ended in summer 2006. The series was adapted from a book of short horror tales, called *Shin mimibukuro*, by Hirokatsu Kihara and Ichiro Nakayama, originally published in 1990. According to them, these stories were based on live accounts they had heard or collected from real people throughout Japan. Seeing how these mimibukuro's have also been recently adapted into comic books, three films, and are even available now as UMDs for PlayStation, their popularity (at least in Japan and certain other parts of Asia) seems for one reason or another indubitable.

All of the shin kaidan's ('new strange tales') are set in contemporary Japan, and many take place in Tokyo. They are all shot on 16-mm film, each by a different director, with mostly just two or three amateur actors, and a few settings and props. In other words, no budget. And no special effects. Any scary effect and atmosphere is done through lighting, editing, framing, makeup, or simply, the narrative. It definitely sounds boring. Yet since everything is shot on 16-mm on location, in places today many people are familiar with, many on a day-to-day basis — school, the office, apartments, suburban houses, ordinary city streets and alleys, department stores, taxi stands, the subway — all the shorts end up having an extremely realistic feel, like you are watching a documentary, a home video, a slice of your own life. Even when 'strange' things happen in these 'tales,' all the noise of real life still pervades the background. No explosions, car chases, seas of blood, or 40-story-high alien monsters from outer space.

I like these stories a lot. But maybe I shouldn't even call them, or at least most of them, 'stories,' because the 'strange' incidents that occur in them are rarely explained, and the 'endings' often just drop off suddenly, without any resolution at all. What's, then, left in your mind, is often just a cut-off image, a frame, a gesture, a concept, an impression. Or simply a feeling. Like a lingering shadow, in the corner of your mind. You forget about it, but then you're at some place and something triggers something in your brain, then all of a sudden it comes up front and center again,

overshadowing everything else, without you knowing why or being able to do anything about it. Then it would recede again, as quietly and unnoticeably as it came. As I said before, we can't choose our memories. In life, few of us even ever look for explanations. Maybe rather than stories, they should just be called 'events,' or 'happenings.'

Like something that happened to me in Japan.

E and I were spending a night on Mount Koya in a Buddhist temple. Mount Koya is known for the Okunoin (奥之院) mausoleum that sprawls over its west-central area, with over 200,000 graves beside a long cobblestone path, sheltered under giant cedar trees over hundreds (and some even thousands) of years old, on each side.

We were tight on schedule, so we decided that after dinner we were going to tour the mausoleum at night.

It was dusk, and a few temples, small restaurants, and distantly intervalled streetlights were beginning to light up the main street in the small town. We walked briskly down the slim sidewalk, which, except for an occasional car or motorcycle that would pass us by every 15 to 20 minutes, was dim and quiet. Probably because of the curfews that many temples kept, we were the only people out walking still at that time. It was about 6:30 in the evening.

By the time we reached the landmark wooden bridge before the entrance of the mausoleum, a little past seven, it was completely dark out. You could look up and see streaks and sprinkles of star clusters twinkling in the sky, and ribbon after ribbon of cool breeze brushed past our skin, as the last cicadas succumbed to the rising clamor of crickets and grasshoppers. Before us, a gray boulder, engraved '奥之院' stood at about one-and-a-half times our height, lit in bright white fluorescence from beneath.

Once we passed the sign, it got almost immediately pitch-black, except for the residual rings of light from the glare in my eyes. As I walked more down the trail, I still couldn't make out distinct gravestones, which seemed to recede simply into the surrounding blackness, into a whole shapeless, depthless, immaterial, yet impenetrable black fog.

I walked faster, with the wind whooshing louder and louder past my ears. Then, I saw a spot of yellow light, partially obscured by the black trunk of a tall cedar tree, softly illuminating a corner in the road where the path quickly bent right, about twenty feet from me. I

slowed down, and followed the wind of the path, as the spot of light grew bigger, and brighter, until I saw that it was coming from a tall lamppost, hidden behind the tree. From farther away, it looked like the tree itself was glowing softly.

Then I saw the people. A group of people, about 30 to 40 of them, men, women, young, old, tall, short, varying in dress, huddling under the spot of light, twisting and writhing their bodies and limbs, seemingly, toward something that remained high above them. There was a dramatic and strenuous deliberateness to their movements. Reaching upward to the black sky, pulling back down, then looking up, extending their arms above their heads again, then outward, squatting down and lowering their bodies, one knee in front of the other. Just like that. Over and over again. In complete silence.

They didn't move all together, but there was a certain unity to their movements, as if they were part of a swarm, or one, single organism, their rising and falling arms like the billowing tentacles of a giant, flesh-colored sea anemone. As if in an eerie dance, or praying to, or worshiping, something, some invisible thing, in the air above them, something, at least, that I couldn't see. They didn't seem to see me.

Just them, and us.

I quickly grabbed E's arm, and both of us stood in place, E a few steps behind me, for a few seconds.

*

And then? You ask.

And then, *we scrambled the hell out of there.* Of course.

Looking back, there was probably a very reasonable, perfectly logical explanation of what we had encountered. We just didn't stick around to find out what that was.

But sometimes you don't really need one, anyway. And sometimes, you may like holding on to a mystery just the way it is.

A mystery.

18:56

日本の記 - Nihon no ki (5)
Chanting

19

I like the sound of the Buddhist monks chanting. One starts, and then another joins, and then another – the voices are like threads, weaving together, more and more, bigger and bigger, an invisible net; when a thread is cut off by a breath, another immediately picks it up and extends it, never losing the single rhythm of the progression of syllables, extending, growing, enlarging, flatly and evenly, in all directions. Every once in a while a single syllable would be held for one-and-a-half beats, as if suddenly the forming fabric would twist and be pulled in another direction, but then would quickly resume its steady progression. Growing by the edges, bit by bit, thread by thread, until the whole prayer hall is enveloped by a clear, transparent netting – now and again twisting, sliding, like a piece of wash cloth, wiping the air clean.

18:57

日本の記 - Nihon no ki (6)
Two geishas

Late sunset. As we were walking down the concrete-paved slopes from Kiyomizu Temple in Gion, amidst crowds of tourists, past the ranks of shops lining both sides of the steep street hill, we saw two geishas walking up the path, together in full dress.

It's difficult to describe the impression they had on me. It's almost as if each of the two of them stood in the center of a small spotlight, which followed along and moved with them, wherever they were. You can't help noticing, gazing at them, the spotlights composing a magnetic field, pulling in all lines of vision.

Both of the geishas' faces, and necks down to the nape, were powdered white. The one walking in front had a rounder face, her black hair pulled back into a large, smooth knot in the shape of a crescent that ended at the temples, framing the face. Against her black drawn-in eyebrows and edges of the eyes, and the silken white layer of skin, a thin peach-red cloud, still soft at the edges, seeped like vapors through the eyelids, spreading to the outer contour of her cheeks, the color identical to that of the center of her lips, which were

the only part that was painted, saturated, burnished, and titillating.

A row of large white and red flowers bloomed directly out of her black hair, extended at the end by a cascade of white glass beads that hung down the left side of her face, like drops of milky nectar trickling down from the petals; at the right end of the row a spoon-shaped silver pin was placed at a right angle to the flowers.

The girl in the back had a longer, more rectangular face, and smaller lips. The collar of her silk kimono, which was cut into a wide V halfway between the neck and the shoulders, was white, against the black base of the rest of the dress, which was embroidered with white flowers and slender tan bamboo branches, tied behind a sheened, half-red, half-tan wide sash. Underneath, a white and tan skirt ending just below the knees covered another, longer layer of red skirt painted with clusters of white blossoms coming in around the ankles; a further piece of thin red cotton cloth, showered by a constellation of white polka dots, fell between the two layers and to the side. Small white socked feet peeked through from behind the red skirt, clenching the thin red straps attached to blocks of tall wooden boat-shaped soles, clicking against the stone ground like a procession of slit drums, as both of them walked in small, but sure, steps.

The girl in front was similarly dressed, but in a peach-red kimono, tied in a gold sash with black ribbons, and with moss-green leaves in addition to a large pale pink chrysanthemum embroidered on her skirt, while, in her right hand, holding a gray floral satchel and two long black nylon umbrellas.

They walked amidst everyone else, but seemed to be enclosed within a capsule, which held in it a different time, perhaps a different kind of time, which flowed with more viscosity as well as perpetuity. Drowning out everything else surrounding it.

A young girl, in shorts and sandals, giggling, and bantering with a boy, who was half-pushing, half-leaning against her, came up behind the second geisha, lifting her feet up almost exaggeratedly as if she were sneaking up on someone, and then, once close enough to the woman, pressed the tips of her fingers gently on the back of the geisha's dress. The geisha turned around, saw the girl, and smiled. The young girl mouthed and gestured something to her, nodded, then, all of a sudden, pressed the palms of her hands together, as if in an ecstatic prayer. Then, turning around, she patted the boy, behind her, on the arm, and made a small repeating arc motion in the air with her hands, as if to hurry him. The geisha simply stood in place,

watching the young couple. The geisha in front didn't notice, and, with her back turned to it all, simply kept walking.

I don't know what it was about this particular image that stayed with me. I can only hope that, perhaps, like the geisha who revealed her smile to the young couple, it will one day tell its secret to me.

And that I won't have already moved on.

18:59

日本の記 - Nihon no ki (7)
Fairy kids

On the train to Gokurakubashi, in Hashimoto, a young boy and a young girl boarded our car. They looked both about seven or eight years old, and though they stepped onto the train at the same time, they didn't seem together, or to know each other; without acknowledging, or even looking at each other, they simply went in opposite directions, and sat down by themselves in the seats right next to the doors, flanking either side.

They were probably elementary school students. The doors closed, and the train was nearly empty, except for a man sleeping in the far corner of the car, us, and the boy and girl. The boy was thin and small-framed, with tan skin, wearing a white button-down short sleeve shirt, tucked into dark navy Bermuda shorts with a narrow patent black belt, knee-high ribbed white socks, and dirty, beat-up off-white tennis shoes. He sported short, cropped hair, which made his forehead look especially tall against the hairline, as well as extra wide, and he had big almond eyes, which, by contrast, ended up making his nose and mouth look particularly small, while simultaneously giving the illusion of a disproportionately large head in general relative to the rest of his body. Strapped to both his arms behind him was a big, squarish faded army-green canvas backpack, which appeared to be filled and stretched to the brim. A very cute boy, his thin, baton-like legs dangling out from under him in front of the seat, never quite reaching the floor, back and forth, his big eyes blinking, every few seconds, sharply and quickly, staring out the windows directly across from him.

The girl sat on the opposite side of the doors, to the right, and had on a white buttoned short shirt, untucked, over a light pink knee-length circle skirt. Her head was lowered since she sat down, swaying