

Unforgettable

Dark clouds drift low in the morning sky when we hike in drizzle on the Manoa ridge. Our shoes squelch through the red mud with a comical rhythm similar to croaking frogs, our steps leaving deep prints. As we reach the ridge top the sea wind blows our umbrellas inside out, and clouds split open a path for the warm sun. We rest a bit, looking at the harbor in the distance. Beside us is a rock chiseled with the word *Forget*. Janet asks, "What shall we forget?" No one seems to give a satisfactory answer.

on our way
back to the trailhead
a rainbow appears...
with repeated vows
a myna bird

Seeing in Tokyo

After visiting the Kanda Myojin Shrine, I stroll to Ochanomizu Station to meet Katsue who left Mississippi twenty years ago. At a street corner I find myself passing the Confucius Temple, so I walk in. The inscribed tablet of Taiseiden looks solemn; the hall is big and empty, echoing my footsteps. It rains suddenly with a beating rhythm in the courtyard to intensify the silent atmosphere of the temple. It's time to go. I open my umbrella and step out. The station isn't far away.

Yushima Seidō
a pause for the call
of a warbler

Homecoming

The man wanders in his hometown where he gets lost one way or the other because the roads are no longer the dirt ones that have remained like sepia pictures in his memory for one hundred and fifty years. The small river town of Canton is now a metropolitan city with lots of billboards presenting foreign models in fancy fashion. He wanders aimlessly. The trees on the roadsides stand like mourners. He feels like being carried back by an ox-cart hearse to his father's loud laughter over liquor and mother's broad smile at his big bite into the pancake she made, to his street fighting and tofu peddling, to his dating and wedding, to his days to son a father and father a son, to his young wife whom he never saw again after he sailed to America to build railroads, to the Pearl River where he once swam naked and caught shrimps with a small net and pieces of dried pigskin. He walks down the river shouting *I'm home*; he wants to hear an echo, but his shouting is like a stone thrown into water to produce only silent ripples. He looks hard at the river, his dream river: a horn blows, and then a barge looms in. It chugs along and looms out into the white sun rising over the river's bend, and its horn faints away like a dirge.

a rooster's crow
headstone
of a Chinese railroad builder

Home

The kindergarten looked like a ghost house after kids went home at 5 p.m. Friday. I was always the last one to be picked up. Sitting on a low stool I looked out desperately. There was no shadow of mom or dad except the bloody sunset on the window. My homeroom teacher became a bit impatient. "Why are your parents always late?" I puckered my lips. An hour later dad appeared at the door, apologizing to the teacher.

"You're always late," I poured out my cry in tears. Since I was two years old, my parents decided to send me to a boarding kindergarten so they could devote themselves wholeheartedly to their jobs. Each Monday I begged them to pick me up each afternoon because staying in the kindergarten the whole week made me feel like a homeless child, but they always wheedled me with the same words, "Baby, the kindergarten is good for you. You can learn many, many good things there."

Fifty years later I still wonder what good things they ever learned from my growing up or what good nights they ever enjoyed without me home.

kindergarten night
the girl holds a doll
in her arms

Departures

Home on leave to write a grant proposal, I slide windows open to invite birdsongs and sunshine in. Cool air flows through, confirming that summer has silently walked away.

mind wandering
the train chugs louder
and louder

Dream

When I walked into the ward, grandma held out her frail hands and murmured my name. Her eyes sparkled; her face wrinkled like a venation pattern of a brown sycamore leaf.

gust of wind
birds disperse
like leaves
across the sky
fleeting clouds

She asked me to tell about my life in the Deep South as I massaged her bony hands that raised four kids after my grandfather died of heart attack. While I recounted, my mind began to flow to my childhood years. Each night before bed grandma would tell me a story.

deep night
bamboos clank
rhythmically
out on the lawn
a yowling cat

Now the autumn sun through the window beamed on grandma's face. She closed her eyes, but I seemed to catch her blink, like in those nights after she finished a ghost story. I hummed the way she did to me in old days. Grandma smiled like a sleeping baby.

autumn equinox
moon behind the tree
as if in a cradle
wind a lullaby
rocking gently

Remembrance

We drove to the Japanese Garden in Memphis one misty morning to see the cherry blossoms, but what we saw most were cherry buds starting to peek out. Only a few of them that couldn't wait for the coming of spring had blossomed.

daylily festival
mom's smile
in every cultivar

The Pear Tree

for Mama Nell

The pear tree by the window is blooming in profusion. Mom, who has been suffering a stroke, asks her maid to lift her up from the bed to look at the blossoms shining in warm sunshine. She planted it sixty years ago when she and dad moved to Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Since then she became a master gardener, well-known for her colorful daylilies which will not bloom without her care, but the pear tree, like an old faithful, never disappoints her.

spring sunrise
pear blossoms take on
a shade of red

Mediation in Changsha, China

Assured by the vendor that the watermelons were ripe and sweet, a middle-aged man picked one from the wagon, rolled it around to check if it had a ripe yellow color and a dried brown stem. Hesitant for a while, he put it back and chose another one. He knocked at it and pressed his thumb at it for a soft fizz. Then he asked the vendor to cut out a small triangular wedge for him to taste.

sticky summer
cicadas buzz
here and there—
candidates on tv
market their dreams

It was not sweet; the man frowned. The vendor winced and piled up a smile: “You can’t judge the melon from a small wedge.” Refusing to buy, the man called the police for mediation. A cop showed up. After listening to both sides, he paid for the watermelon and brought it back to the police station. He sliced the melon to share it with his comrades. None of them wanted a second bite.

summer sunset
its red shine slants
through the window
melon juice
spilled on the table

Waiting for Spring

When life stops clicking, body—a mass of elements—can be turned to ashes, used as fertilizer for flowerbeds.

autumn dusk
a worn-out jacket
on the peg