

[Essay]

Homecoming *for Sugio Yamashiro (1950–2020)*

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In 2016, as a fourth-generation child of the diaspora, I returned to Okinawa a century after my great-grandfather, Taro Yamashiro, and great-grandmother, Uto Yamashiro, left their small village in the Yanbaru rainforest. While it is easy to romanticize the homecoming process, the act of returning has been fraught with loss. This short poem and the following essay provide some intimate meditations as I reflect on what it means to witness ancestors and relations who have been long ignored and cast aside.

he rubs katsuo-bushi
flakes between his legs
handfuls of rancid paper
tuna fins slicing the skin
a rotten carcass dangling
high and dry he is sprawled
and spread open until high tide
ocean rushes in to him
salt sending agony into his creation
as every one of his descendants awakens

My ancestral village sits on a small protected inlet somewhere on the northern shores of the main island of Okinawa—far enough away that the bustle of Naha and the formalities of Shuri feel like another world. The village is a scattering of no more than 40 houses and a small kouminkan—in summer, the buzz of cicadas is overpowering. Men stand by, idly casting rods into the gentle blue water. To the unburdened visitor, the scene is idyllic, perfect even, seemingly untarnished by the weight of the military and tourism that rests heavy on so much of the island. But past its beautiful façade, this piece of earth weighs difficult on my heart. When I am connected to a place, even through rupture, it is no longer possible to view it with the reckless abandon of a visitor or a tourist. It is steeped in a world of intensity, carrying the memories and layers of those who, over the generations, I came to know and leave behind. There is a pervasive sense that I have deserted the ethos of the village and any accompanying protocol or ceremony that might have maintained my connection to these waters and rolling hills. A century away, my

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body holds the summation of ancestors from the diaspora and all that we have forgotten.

I think back to the years before I returned to the village; I was almost 30 years old, and somehow, I had lived my whole life never having consciously met another Okinawan person. Surely this is some sort of cultural sin, a strange poverty to not know how to meet the gaze of your own kind. And this was not by coincidence, was rather some calculated type of avoidance, some sinister algorithm the government bred into my DNA. I yearned to rectify this problem. I told my uncle, with whom I was staying in Los Angeles, that I was going to visit the Okinawa Association of America; he told me no such place exists. I assured him I had spoken to a real person there, flesh and bone. He asked me if this search for my people was a targeted interest—as if our ancestors were simply some random strangers. I held his confusion; it weighed down on us as our family’s collective sadness. I carried it with me wrapped in a parcel with offerings of fish and tofu all the way down the Expo Line. *Why doesn’t my uncle believe our people exist?* I transferred the sadness, with care, to the Crenshaw bus as I shot down the spine of Los Angeles through South Central. The smog that covered the city spread into every crevice. So too did the amnesia. Months later, I brought my auntie to a traditional dance concert in Redondo Beach. We entered a lobby of excited aunties and families. I felt a sense of familiarity; I told my auntie, “Look, Okinawans”! (What a ridiculous phrase, but it needed to be said.) She didn’t believe me—said there was no way that so many of our people could gather in one space, could dance in flesh and bones, could come together and form a collective. I insisted it was true; she insisted I was wrong. *Why didn’t she believe our people existed?* Still, months later, I asked another uncle to meet me at the Okinawan Association. He told me it had been closed for years. I told him the center has never closed, but once again he insisted I was mistaken. My elders shared a strange kind of forgotten intimacy—somehow, we have condemned our own people to death, over and over again.

Nevertheless, in spite of my ancestral tradition of forgetting, I was drawn back to my roots. Amidst a climate of cultural emptiness, I stumbled across a village name in old family files, and soon enough, it felt like I was catapulted across the ocean to be reacquainted with my great-grandmother’s long-lost relations. Someone wanted me to know this place once more. It would be an understatement to call the force at play here magnetic—it felt cosmic and monumental. But at the same time, the return felt like revisiting a lover whom I was unsure whether I had the consent to see one more time.

I borrowed my friend’s car so I could make the hour-and-a-half drive from Yomitan, where I was staying, in the central portion of the island. As I traveled north into the Yanbaru rainforest, I found myself nestled amidst the snaking trees as the buildings began to fade away. As I approached the village, my blood began to flow heavy. This was the first time anyone in my lineage had returned in almost sixty years. When my great-grandfather left, he departed. There was something final in his departure: he didn’t appoint guardian spirits to keep the doors open; he didn’t light incense. Sometimes, the pain of our inheritance is too great; there is no use in trying to revive ourselves; there is nothing to gain from looking back into the rolling deep dark vortexes of history.

At first, unable to make it all the way back, I parked my car next to a picnic table across the bay and stared across the water at my ancestral village. To get closer felt wrong, but I craved proximity. So much of my life lived in a deficit of feelings, but here I was in all ways overwhelmed. I didn't know that you could cut sadness like this with a knife, partition it and shape it like clay, send it off into the water only for it to rain down on you once again.

And eventually, I succumbed to temptation—there were familiar spirits calling and teasing me to the village, offering tea and sweets and teachings lost—an uncanny familiarity that remains unmatched by anywhere else I've been in my life. But there were spirits, too, who raged fire and fury, imploring that I stay far away. Weary of the abandonment of the diaspora—they offered no easy salve for the wounds of separation—they didn't wish to placate my fantasy of reconnection and nostalgia. I wanted to engulf this world, my village, but like a burning sun, it remained too great to hold with my simple bare hands.

It was in this context that I celebrated my first Obon. And amidst the celebration, the ignorant, unhinged American that I had become came raging out of me. Ancestors were supposed to be greeted? And groomed? And fed? I had not uttered a word; I had not said a prayer. And neither had those who came before me. So after the initial celebration, the joy transformed into betrayal. *Where have you been? Where have you been? Why have you returned? What do you want from us?* In my hundred years away, I had gained access to wealth and movement, but my spirit had become depleted. As Okinawans in the diaspora, more often than not we adopt the settler colonial ways of the countries in which we make our lives—segregating us from the Indigenous knowledges that run deep in the places we migrate to. I came back to the village to recharge, but what right had I to this land? To this knowledge? After reconnecting with my great-grandmother's relatives, I was always struck by how much they had to offer me and how empty my hands felt. They loaded me down with gifts and customs, prayers and provocations. And I could barely wrap my tongue around a thank you. I was stunned—a stranger in a land I had forgotten I had known.