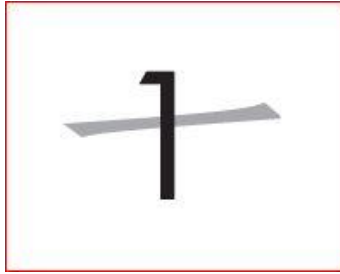


*Empty-handed I entered the world  
Barefoot I leave it.  
My coming, my going –  
Two simple happenings  
that got entangled.*  
—Kozan Ichikyo



## Obon The Days of the Dead 1990

.....In life, and even in death, I did not at first comprehend the delicate balance the living and the dead share, the two worlds connected like wings to a butterfly, pulsing open and closed, brushing against each other in flight, cleaving together at rest.

But it is not desire alone that brings us back; our family's remembrance also pulls us home. It is their need that attracts us, like a related group of errant fireflies in the night, conjured up out of the mist for ten days in late summer. I understood this on the first day of Obon, when I saw the grief my absence caused. A hole existed where I had been; it made my wife and daughter stumble when they passed over it, to forget their words in mid-sentence.

Now their anguish, fresh and sharp as vinegar, has become my compass.

At night, while the young boys of the neighborhood beat the drums at the temple for the Obon festival, I wait by my wife's bedside for her eyes to flicker, for her to see me and give up her slight hold on the living world. There can be no proceeding, no continuation of our story, without Satsuki. I wonder if I will have the courage to do what I must to make certain that we meet in the afterlife. I worry that I will

fail her again.

*Saaaaaaa*. As twilight begins to fall, I exhale along with the wind. Nearly time to go inside the house and take up my station next to Satsuki's bedside. The leaves of the cherry blossom tree, petals long since faded and fallen to the ground, expose their silvery underbellies to the breeze. When I was alive, and our daughter was still a young girl, she fell asleep each night lulled by the sound of the wind and my wife's animated voice explaining the workings of this world and the next. "Satsuki, why do you fill our daughter's head with such tales?" I would scold. "Spirits are no more real than *kappa* or *Oni*."

"Ah, and how do you know that the *kappa* doesn't wait at the bottom of murky ponds to pull children down by their feet with his frog hands, or that the giant demon *Oni* never existed?" Satsuki would answer. "Professor Tsuruda, you are a clever man, but how are you certain that spirits aren't around us, always?" In her pocket, she grasped the small statue of Inari the fox goddess, which she reached for whenever I expressed doubt.

Now I am thankful that Satsuki was not swayed by my scientist's logic or my belief that spirits, demons, and gods were created by men to soothe their fearful dreams. In life, I was blind to the ease with which spirits move back and forth, like the patrons of a neighborhood ramen restaurant ducking under a short blue curtain, shifting from dark to light. My foolish arrogance about the world in which I once lived, and the one I now inhabit.

And so it is that I find my garden crowded with spirits during the Obon holiday, just as Satsuki always said it was.