

Hokusai's Daughter

From my hotel window on Tokyo Bay I watch a lighted Ferris wheel spin slowly in the dark. I wish its little buckets could raise the dead souls of Edo buried under the rubble of World War II, the ash of earthquakes, fires, the garbage of eras. But they can't.

Strange mission, looking for a woman painter whose name meant "Hey, you!", who almost never signed her work, was briefly famous, and then disappeared—one hundred and fifty years ago. Another country, another language, another century. Am I mad?

Do I think I will see her, walking on the street? In her indigo striped cotton kimono with the red trim wearing her wooden clogs, her head cocked at that extreme angle that said, "You may think I'm nobody, but don't be so sure"?

Who was she? Flourishing woman, she wrote. Or drunken woman; the characters could mean either. It depends how you read them.

But how funny. On my JR Pass, embossed and in foil, is the Great Wave. Her father's image: straight out of old Japan. And she was there, under the snarling lip of it.

At Asakusa, I walk the long pink aisle under plastic cherry blossoms, passing hawkers of chestnuts and straw sandals. I pass through the Kaminari-mon Gate, five times my height. Between its persimmon pillars a giant lantern is squeezed, red

with huge black characters. I love the gaudiness. Inside the temple grounds, incense burns in a large round drum. People scoop the dark smoke over their faces.

And it begins. I can sense it. Maybe it's because there are still trees here, protected by their proximity to the sacred. Or because in their shade I hear the Holy Crows, conducive of long life. There is the drone of the monks, chanting. The clunk of the padded mallets marking time. The old well, with stone bucket; she would have drunk from there.

I leave by the covered market, now clogged with people. They come at me, face after face, an army of the present day. I shift to the right, to the left, cannot walk in a straight line, can't get past, can only shuffle along with everyone else. I try not to lose her.

6.30 train: Ueno Station to Nagano. 8.30: change for Obuse, on a slow commuter. Kids on and off in school uniforms. 9.15: I'm there. Kubota-san is waiting for me under the station roof. We've never met. He looks nervous: I don't blame him, facing the odd arrival of the lady writer, searching for someone long dead. But he told me she was here. "According to collective memory", he wrote. The Japanese call it *kolekutibu memori*.

He shows me the letter from Oei. It is in her hand, and probably written in 1843. He reads it to the translator, who repeats it in English. And then her voice comes out of the silence, over that long, long distance: "We have never met," she says, "but I trust that you are well..."