

Gomi Night · *Kim Edwards*

EVERY EVENING I WALK HOME through these narrow village streets. They twist and turn, curve around houses, duck under train tracks, meander between low walls that are sometimes overhung with flowers. This is Odawara, an industrious port town an hour south of Tokyo, and lately the nights have been filled with light rain, precipitation so delicate that it is almost mist, floating up beneath my umbrella. People here have told me that these are the plum rains, though no one can tell me exactly what that means. The plum blossoms have already come and gone, a week of floating petals and a clean fragrance that broke through the city smells at unexpected moments. This rain is connected with those blossoms, but whether it is rain that carries away the last remnants of the flowers, or rain that will bring the fruit to ripeness, I'm not sure. I do know that it's a rain of transition, a steady, misty weather that carries us from one season to another.

Because it is late evening, the streets of my neighborhood are nearly silent. People here rise early, up with the sun at 5:00 A.M., when it is fully daylight. Many of them are farmers. The rustle of their morning rituals filters through my half-sleep. I hear them opening shutters, beating *futons*, talking softly with each other, window to window. Later I hear them going off, the rattle and hum of motorbikes carrying them up into the hills that rise above our houses. These hills are full of orchards, kiwi fruits and mandarin oranges, full of men and women working steadily amid their crops. In this neighborhood, several generations may live in one house, but it's only the older people who work the land. Younger Japanese are drawn steadily to the cities, and there's a sense of impending change about these small, efficient farms. My own apartment stands on land that was recently an orchard. Still, the older people work as they always have. They come down from the hills once for lunch, wicker baskets full of fruit strapped to their backs, and then again for dinner. Now, though, the houses are quiet. Through windows I catch glimpses of golden *tatami* mats, white walls, polished wooden stairs that ascend beyond my line of vision. It is an old neighborhood; the houses are traditional, elegant and simple. I glimpse paper screens, a polished doorway, *tatami* rooms completely empty of furniture or things.

It makes me wonder where all the evidence of daily life gets hidden. I know it exists because tonight is *gomi* night, garbage night, and mountains of non-burnable trash have grown up on every other corner. Regular garbage gets collected three times a week by a compact turquoise truck that plays a tinny version of *Comin' Through the Rye* as it travels along the narrow lanes. But non-burnable garbage, which includes anything from beer bottles to refrigerators, only goes out once a month. In this neighborhood, it collects behind a specialty fish shop. Most of the time the *gomi* area is just a skeletal framework erected over a canal. As *gomi* day approaches, however, slats are fitted into the framework, and plywood is placed over the canal to make a platform. After that the accumulation is constant and amazing. In our neighborhood, the early evenings are filled with a steady clinking as people lug their sacks of empty beer and sake bottles to the corner. These bottles are joined by washing machines, fans, rice cookers, stereos, VCRs, televisions, radios, motorbikes, desks, frying pans, shelving units, and a multitude of other goods. At least half of these things are still in working order. Another third could be cleaned up or repaired with minimal expense or effort. But labor is expensive in Japan, and space is scarce. When a family wants to buy a new TV, there's just no place to store the old one. Unlike America, where auctions and garage sales draw big crowds, used goods have a stigma here. And so the bounty piles up, appearing mysteriously from the compact, tidy houses. You could furnish a house with these discarded things, several houses, but in the two years that I have lived here I've never once seen a Japanese person take something from the garbage.

In fact, the only people interested in these piles of garbage seem to be the Westerners, at least the Western English teachers, who are here temporarily—for two or three years—and who balk at the cost of fitting out a house. Things are generally well-made in Japan, but nothing is a bargain, and even cheap plastic gadgets for the house are expensive. There's no equivalent of K-mart here. Or rather, you can find the K-mart ambiance, but not the prices. And so *gomi* night—the last night before collection day, when the garbage is most abundant—becomes a much anticipated event at the school where I teach. People mark it off on their calendars, they compare the quality of garbage in different neighborhoods and exchange *gomi* dates, which vary from place to place. There's a floating knowledge of who needs what, and often one teacher will find a lamp, or a guitar, or a refrig-

erator, and rescue it for someone else. Like the plum rains, the *gomi* nights are times of transition, hours when the boundaries fall and objects move from one life to another.

My own *gomi* finds have been limited. My husband and I shipped the things we needed when we moved to Japan from Malaysia, and though I like to poke around the piles of garbage, I'm more interested in the socio-economics of this trash than in the things themselves. Malaysia is a developing country, a place where surplus things are so rare that leaving your shoes on the front steps means they could disappear within the hour. My sense of waste changed while living there, and now, walking the night streets amid this bounty of garbage, I'm shocked all over again by the way the first world wastes and discards. For my friends in rural Malaysia, finding these piles of garbage would be like entering a department store where everything was free. There, when someone dies or moves, the extra household goods are quickly absorbed by someone else. Things are used until they wear out, and are repaired again and again. When we left, our friends came over to our house to claim even the final odds and ends: a garbage can, a piece of orange hose, some rope. In the end, the house was completely empty. Poverty can't tolerate waste. I'm told that Japan was like that thirty years ago, as was America during the Depression. My parents, children in the 1930s, have good reasons to live by the proverbs that I still teach to English classes. *Waste not, want not. A penny saved is a penny earned.* In my parents' house we did save—old wrapping paper, brown grocery bags, water from vegetables to make soup stock. The sub-floor of their house was salvaged from a torn-down church. I am their daughter, and I save too, more and more as I grow older—childhood habits that shape my adult life. Perhaps that's why, standing at the edge of all these banished things, I feel uneasy, almost angry. We ought to need less, that's clear, and we ought to take better care of what we have. As the developing world reminds us, before we were rich, we were frugal.

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Sometime during the early morning, before I'm awake to witness it, the piles of *gomi* will disappear, leaving the streets clear for the rituals of a Japanese day. These include numerous peddlers, driving slowly through the narrow streets with megaphones, hawking fish or vegetables, laundry

poles, or rice. When I was a child in upstate New York, my life was shaped by similar rituals that have long since been discarded. Milk was delivered daily to an insulated metal box outside the back door. The fruit and vegetable man came three times a week in the summer, pulling his open truck into our driveway, bartering his fresh produce, newly picked, with the local housewives. For a while there was the egg man too, who came less often. I remember his car, gray with rusty patches, which seemed older than even he was. He was so nearly blind that when I tried to show him my new pet turtle, he mistook it for a chocolate—a food that, fortunately, he was under medical advice not to eat. I remember that my mother stood at the edge of the road, watching him drive off, waving, worrying, wondering if he could manage to keep his car on the road until he reached his farm.

I don't remember these things ending, though they must have, one by one, until the last ritual that remained was the weekly trip to the dump. In those days every town had a dump, and ours was located on several acres of swampy land at the very edge of the village. It was visible first through the plumes and haze of smoke that hung over it, rising from fires in various corners of the refuse. The next signal of approach was the smell, the air ripe with rotting things, dark with smoky decay. The trees along the dump road were stunted, black, and twisted, probably due to the marshy land rather than anything to do with the dump. At the time, though, they seemed to embody the general sense of rot that surrounded the area. When my mother backed the station wagon into the lot, we children worked quickly, covering our noses with one hand and tossing bags across the muddy ground as fast as we could. Sometimes, if we had heavy things or if there were cars waiting in line behind us, the dump man would come to help. That's the only name I knew him by—the dump man—and all I can remember about him are the coveralls he wore, so mired with grease and dirt that their color was unidentifiable. We used to wonder how he stood it, spending one day after another at the dump. The earth beneath our feet was lumpy with refuse, the smell caught in our throats and made us gag.

My mother hated the dump as much as we did, and tried to make fast work of it on a Saturday morning. That's why we were surprised sometimes to find my aunt there, not standing fastidiously on the edge of the smoking garbage, but wandering calmly through it, poking at the tables and chairs, lamps and rugs, dressers and beds, that stood randomly amid the garbage like some wild parody of domestic order. She lived in a cold

farmhouse with high-ceilinged, elegant rooms. When we visited, she'd take us around to admire her latest finds: a table with delicate curved legs, six Shaker chairs, a box of campaign buttons from the 1920s and '30s. This was in an era before antiques became fashionable, before the treasures my aunt dug out of the dump were considered valuable, or even aesthetic. My mother, who had exchanged the bulky, coal-heated house of her childhood for a sleek ranch house, was polite but mystified by my aunt's attraction to other people's garbage.

They're worth a fortune now, of course, all the things from the dump that my aunt collected thirty years ago. They line her shelves and walls and closets; they fill her renovated rooms. When I got married she gave me a lumpy blue and white vase. I like to imagine that she pulled it from one of her shelves, turned and considered it gravely before deciding to pass it into another person's life. It's an ugly thing, lopsided and clearly mass-produced. My husband considers it a dubious gift. Still, my aunt wore a certain look as I opened it, a kind of gleaming, prideful triumph that meant this vase was a *find*. I've felt that look on my own face before, most notably when I discovered a review copy of T. S. Eliot's "Dry Salvages" hidden in a London bookstore, priced at just two pounds. I recognize that look, and so I'll keep the ugly vase, tucked away in some corner of the house until its value is revealed to me.

For nostalgia's sake, I wish this vase had come from the dump, but the fact is that my aunt found it at an estate sale. These days she has to take her pleasure there, as well as in antique stores and jumble sales, because the dump is closed. These days my parents deliver the garbage, neatly sorted, wrapped in clear plastic bags, to a sanitary disposal station at the edge of the county. The dump has been covered over, and a housing development is going up; there are plans for a mall. In the interests of marketing, they've even changed the name. The place I still call the Old Dump Road is known these days as Gully Lane.

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What we take with us from childhood is a mystery. I grew up in a house where almost nothing was older than my parents, yet I've come to share my aunt's fascination for the old and the discarded, though perhaps for different reasons. It's not the monetary value or even the charm that entices

me, but the fact that discarded things have had previous lives, which remain unknown. A set of sturdy ceramic bowls, a velvet covered couch, a manual toaster which requires you to flip the bread yourself—these things are catalysts for the imagination. I like them because they have firm connections with pasts that will never be my own.

We don't have many auctions in upstate New York, and it wasn't until I moved to Iowa that I discovered the pleasures of bidding. I used to set off nearly every weekend once the weather got nice, following newspaper directions to farms and houses deep in the countryside. The thing was to get there early, before the bidding started. That way you got a chance to buy coffee in a paper cup and maybe a doughnut, and to wander through the things, spread out across the yard, for sale. Once the auction began the excitement grew, the auctioneer's voice thrumming across the lawn. People hovered around the center of the bidding, flashing their numbered cards. Friends and family shook their heads when treasured items brought less than they expected. Like going-out-of-business sales, all auctions have an inherent sadness to them. It's the end of something, for someone. Often it means the death of an elderly person, the closing of a farm, a moving away, a methodical dismantling of what was held together by a life.

I remember once walking through the rooms of an old house, looking at the carpets and rugs, touching the heavy brocade of the furniture. The wallpaper was old-fashioned, a floral print, scattered with bright, unfaded squares where pictures had hung for fifty years. The woman who had hung those pictures, polished the furniture, knitted the afghans, had recently been moved to a nursing home. Now her yard was full of milling people, locals and antique dealers, people from several counties off. They measured furniture, hefted tools, dug through boxes of linens, and eyed the sideboard made from oak. Dry sinks were all the rage that year, and several women huddled possessively around the lone example. At that auction, I bought a standing lamp with a red satin shade for \$12, a velvet sofa for \$5, and a treadle sewing machine in an oak cabinet for \$35. I still have them. They, along with found treasure from half a dozen other auctions, lie in storage, waiting for me to move back to America and incorporate them into my life. I sometimes think of the houses they came from, of all their sister things scattered across the country, as if they'd been picked up and hurled away in the random chaos of a tornado.

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In Japan, when someone dies, everyone knows about it. Walking to work, I often come upon memorials to the recently deceased. These memorials line the streets, each one standing as high as two people, their long legs bearing a circular banner, like a shield, decorated with bunches of paper in a pattern of black and various colors. They look festive, celebratory, arrayed one after another along each side of a narrow lane. The first time I saw them, I thought they were for a wedding. Workers were busy erecting a tent in the courtyard. It was only when the people came that I realized my mistake. The visitors were all in deep mourning, wearing suits and dresses as dark as pieces of unlit night, as opaque as the air of a closet. Some shades of black are vibrant, gleaming, but there was a density to these clothes, a sense of light not reflected, but swallowed.

Once, at an auction in Iowa, I bid against some Amish women for a box of black lawn undergarments. They were the same dull color as the clothes of Japanese mourning, and I don't know why I wanted them so badly. Once I had them home, I discovered they were too thin and stiff for the sundresses I had imagined, and I regretted the adrenaline rush of bidding that had deprived the Amish women of garments they could have used.

The black underwear was a mistake, but old clothes were one of the things I always looked for at auctions. My roommate had once run a vintage clothing store, and she had boxes of bustled dresses, kid gloves, real satin, handmade lace. We'd pull them out now and then, running our fingers over the rich, fragile fabrics of other ages, other decades. There was a black velvet dress from the 1920s, elegant and trimmed with creamy lace, a '30s dress studded with rhinestones, and green satin flowing out in a skirt from the '40s. The women who wore these clothes were tiny, and the fabric has grown fragile over the years, apt to split or tear with even the gentlest wearing. We took lacy undergarments, the cotton worn thin and delicate, and remade them. Legs became arms; the inseam, split carefully and trimmed with lace, became the neckline. Blouses-from-bloomers, we called them, and wore them out in public, feeling slightly daring. Sometimes, standing at a party with a glass of wine in my hand, I'd catch a glimpse of myself in a mirror and wonder what the original owner would think if she, transported suddenly in time, could see what had become of her discarded underwear.

In Japan, used clothing gets thrown out, or sometimes shipped to developing countries to clothe the poor. As with bulky garbage, there's no

market here for used things, no place in the house to store them. Most Japanese I know are impeccably dressed and at the very height of fashion. I don't know how they manage this—clothes here are so expensive that I no longer even bother to browse. Yet new clothes are the norm, and the old things must be thrown away. Kimonos are the only exception. Made from heavy silk, often thick with embroidery, hand-sewn by someone trained in the cut and drape of traditional clothes, these garments are so expensive that most women can afford very few of them over a lifetime. Upon a death, the kimonos are sometimes passed along. A teacher at my school recently received such a kimono as a gift from a student whose mother had passed away. She was flattered and a bit unnerved; though the student was her friend, they weren't extremely close. She couldn't understand why he would choose to give her such a personal gift. I watched her open it and unfold the dull silk. She held the kimono up against her body and the fabric expanded, rustled, moved as it might have stirred around a different woman not so long ago. I understood, then, quite suddenly, why the clothes of the dead are often packed into attic boxes or discarded, why I could find such lovely things tossed in with all the garbage at Goodwill. I understood the urge to pass clothes on to distant acquaintances, or strangers. It isn't so much that the fit or the fashion or the drape is out of date. Instead, it's that the clothes remain inhabited, alive with the shape and scent and character of those who once wore them.

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My mother still has clothes she wore in 1950, stored away in the cedar chest beside her bed. They've been there for as long as I can remember, more than thirty years now, which is also the length of time my parents have inhabited their house. It's a house they built themselves, moving in when it was literally half-finished, and so the past it contains belongs entirely to my family. When I go home I face this past in the pattern of the linoleum, the stone fireplace corner where my brother cut his head, the addition whose foundation was dug the day after Halloween when I was in third grade. I look into mirrors and remember the reflection of myself there years and years ago. Aside from the subtle differences reflected in mirrors, toasters, and the bread box, not much changes in my parents' house, year to year. I know I can expect the comfort of the familiar, which both eases

and accents my sense of passing time.

I, on the other hand, have pursued a nomadic sort of life. In the last ten years I have moved thirteen times between five countries, a fact that surprised me when I sat down to figure it out. Lately I've become aware of how this life in transit contributes to a sense of standing outside of time. Living in another culture, it's easy to feel less a participant in your own life than a spectator, a voyeur. Perhaps it's this sense of unmeasured time that is the central lure of travel. My house in Japan is just beginning to be a home, its rooms and features grown familiar enough that I can begin to take them for granted. Still, the fact remains that I am not of this place, but only in it. Soon enough I'll leave again, exhilarated by the sense of freedom I gain from choosing what to keep and what to discard, carrying only the essential things from place to place to place. The piles of *gomi* in the street make this clear to me. I think of the things I have already left behind. I wonder which of my possessions will be garbage in a year, which will take on new lives in the homes of friends and strangers.

That's months in the future, though. Tonight this place is still my home. I hear the ocean, heavy with the surf of the receding storm. My footsteps echo in the empty streets as I walk home through the light rain, past the piles of garbage, between the compact, silent houses. I leave it all behind me, as I left the plum blossoms, one night months ago. And with each step I leave something else as well, a moment of my life that's completely finished, that no one else can pick up later and re-use. It's simply gone, transformed into only what I save of this night in memory: its misty rain, the faint scent of garbage, a glimpse of pure simplicity beyond a pane of glass.