In the Province of the Gods

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Published by University of Wisconsin Press

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In Lafcadio Hearn’s tale “The Mountain of Skulls,” a bodhisattva guides a pilgrim up a steep mountain where “neither token of water, nor trace of plant, nor shadow of flying bird” can be found. The two climbers climb higher; the pilgrim looks down: “For there was not any ground,—neither beneath him nor about him nor above him,—but a heaping only, monstrous and measureless, of skull and fragments of skulls and dust of bone.”

The pilgrim is horrified. “I fear!—unutterably I fear! . . . there is nothing but the skulls of men!”

“A mountain of skulls it is,” says the bodhisattva. “But know, my son, that all of them are your own! Each has at some time been the nest of your dreams and delusions and desires. Not even one of them is the skull of any other being. All,—all without exception,—have been yours, in the billions of your former lives.”
It probably takes ten minutes—but it is as if time has stopped—for me to realize there is a woman rising from the floor of the dark stage.

At first, the only sound I hear might be the hiss-static of speakers playing nothing with the volume turned too loud. Slowly, I discern the familiar strains of “Amazing Grace,” played by an unfamiliar wind instrument.

Even more slowly, I see the butoh dancer I have come to see: Mikami Kayo, her face and body painted _kabuki_-white, covered by tree branches—or is she wearing the branches? it is still too dark to tell—begins to move. At first a toe. Then a finger. Then a leg. A hand. Until it seems as if her back is arched fully backward. Each part of her body, including eyes and mouth, seems to move independently. I cannot tell what is hand, what is foot, what is face, or what is backside.

Finally, gravity is defeated: the woman is standing.

As the music plays, increasingly louder and louder, she begins to sway, moving sideways, forward, and backward, all seemingly at the same time. She has complete control of every digit of every limb. Watching what I think is a primordial ritual, I feel as if I, too, have slowly been brought to my feet. I check with my hands; I am still seated.

The music stops. A group of multisized women darts to the front of the stage and stares at the audience—like the Harajuku girls in their white face paint. I can clearly see the red on the insides of mouths, at the edges of eyes.

The music changes to something akin to French cabaret. Four tall men, their height emphasized by the large Victorian dresses they wear, overtake the stage. This group of tall men and this group of multisized women and Mikami Kayo cross paths during many scenes, each ending in a blackout and a change of music, until, once again, Mikami Kayo, the woman who started the performance, descends, slow movement by slow movement, back into the ground.

After the performance, I roam the theater lobby, where the performers are serving and drinking beer. I approach Mikami-san, who
seems so much smaller offstage than on, though her round face contains
the same intensity of her performance.

I hold both of Mikami-san’s hands in mine, give her my meishi, and
gesture to ask if I can take her picture. Mikami-san graciously puts her
arm around my shoulder. I hug her warmly and although I have no idea
if she knows what I am saying, I tell her I cannot wait to see her perform
again.

On the subway back to Meijirodai, I begin to think of butoh as
contemporary Japan’s expression of mono no aware, “the beauty of tem-
poral things.” It was like watching the entire life process, from birth to
death, but I couldn’t tell which was which. Was Mikami-san learning to
walk or learning to die?

Obon is the mid-August Japanese festival celebrating ancestors. During
Obon most Japanese return to their familial residence. Families decorate
their houses with lanterns to help guide the ancestral spirits home.

Not having a family in Japan, I don’t know what to do for Obon.
MM suggests I go to Kōyasan for the famous Obon Festival.

Kūkai, better known as Kōbō Daishi, introduced Shingon Bud-
dhism to Japan in 806 AD, after returning from a boat trip to China.
Kōbō Daishi is enshrined in eternal meditation at Okunoin cemetery
on Kōyasan. The night before Obon, thousands of worshippers light
a two-kilometer path through Okunoin leading to the Torodo, Kōbō
Daishi’s burial chamber guarded by a thousand lamps, two of which are
believed to have been continuously lit for nine hundred years.

I arrive on Kōyasan in the afternoon. I am relieved that among the
tall cedar trees on the top of the mountain, it is much cooler than the
brutal humid heat of the Japanese summer. There are no hotels on
Kōyasan. The only lodgings on the forested mountaintop are in shukubō,
simple temple lodgings in tatami-matted rooms. Guests are served
shojin ryori, vegetarian meals eaten by monks, and are welcome at the daily six o’clock morning prayers.

After leaving my things at the shukubō, I decide to see Okunoin while it is still daylight. This afternoon I am the only visitor on the paths along the Tamagawa. The leaves rustle in the breeze at the top of the trees; shadows fall on the over two hundred thousand tombs.

Before I came to Japan, I knew of the Buddhist belief in cremation. But I didn’t know that Buddhist temple grounds included cemeteries. After cremation, what is the use of a grave? I didn’t know that Buddhist graves inter the ashes of the dead.

Okunoin is the largest cemetery in Japan. It is also spooky. The old section contains large nishinoya, stone lanterns, most with a yin-yang symbol with an open crescent incised in the stone to emit light. These nishinoya line the paths leading through gravesites of former feudal lords.

The tombs are composed of weathered lichen-stained fallen stones and large wooden poles dampened by the forest humidity. Often, indecipherable kanji are incised in the stones and poles. I pass some tombs that look like small houses guarded by stone-slatted fences. Some have torii-gated entrances, showing how, over the years, Buddhism has absorbed Shinto beliefs.

Other tombs are stupa-shaped, angular stones on top of round stones on top of rectangular stones; others have representational statues of Kannon, pilgrims in pointed straw hats, and countless smaller statues of jizō, the deity who protects children and is often seen at a child’s grave.

In the cemetery’s newer section are company-owned tombs. Here, Japanese kitsch even reaches the dead: United Coffee Company’s tomb has a large marble coffee cup; another has a towering metal rocket. I search for the White Ant Monument, supposedly donated by a pesticide company to atone for the suffering caused to the insects its products killed, but I can’t find it.
The path gently rises as I get closer to the Torodo, the hall of lamps, which guards Kōbō Daishi’s grave. I pass huge stupa-shaped tombs that look like mini-pyramids. Getting closer to these mounds, I notice they are made up of countless niches, and in the niches are countless jizō, each eerily adorned with offerings of childlike garb—bibs, hats, scarves, even pajamas emblazoned with familiar anime characters, including Pikachu, my totem yellow Pokémon.

I decide to turn back before crossing the river, leaving the sacred visit to Kōbō Daishi’s grave for this evening’s Obon procession.

After dinner, I walk back to Okunoin. As I approach the cemetery, the streets become increasingly crowded. Looking back from where we came, I see orange-robed monks carrying a huge, flaming tree. When the monks reach the cemetery entrance, they stop so other monks can light candles from the tree’s flame.

The crowd follows the monks, so I follow, too. The orderly procession continues on the cemetery paths; small children run alongside us distributing candles. Since my afternoon visit, the paths have been lined with aluminum foil. Sticks protrude from the foil. A few lit candles are atop some sticks. People from the procession begin to stop. They light their candles from the already lit ones and leave them on the empty sticks. In this way, those in front light the path for those who follow.

Soon, as the path moves further into the forest, the evening darkens. The flickering flames from the candles are the only light on the path to Kōbō Daishi’s grave.

Every so often, I replenish my supply of candles at small tables set up on the side of the path. Stopping at a table, I look back down the sloping path now lit by thousands of candles.

I stop again before crossing over the river to Kōbō Daishi’s grave. In the middle of the river are large upright planks in remembrance of children who have drowned. At the river crossing are five large jizō statues of darkened stone. The custom is to douse the statues with water from
the purification fountains at the base of each statue before crossing the river.

I take the large bamboo ladle. I wash, in turn, each jizō. My dead—even those I have not remembered for many years—gather around me: my boyfriend Alex, my acupuncturist Paul, the poets Tede Matthews and Melvin Dixon, all dead of AIDS; the actress Kathy Leavelle, my former boss and San Francisco friend, dead from lung cancer; my parents’ friend Civia’s son, Larry, her daughter, Nancy, her infant granddaughter, Larry’s wife, Cindy, dead from a car accident when hit by a drunk driver outside Civia’s Florida home. With each ladle of water, each dousing of a jizō, more of my dead return to accompany me to Kōbō Daishi’s grave across the river.

A thousand eternally lit bronze lamps surround the Torodo. The long procession lines up to pass around the gates—always closed—guarding the cave in which Kōbō Daishi sits, where he is said to have rested in eternal meditation for over a thousand years.

It is believed that when Kōbō Daishi is ready for Buddhahood, he will take all those enshrined on Kōyasan with him. In the meantime, he awaits the arrival of Maitreya, the bodhisattva who will become the Future Buddha who will save all those unable to achieve enlightenment.

I wonder if anyone has ever entered the cave. If they did enter, what would they find?

I follow the path around the mausoleum and pass the building that holds additional lamps and scriptures before recrossing the river, leaving my dead behind to wait with Kōbō Daishi.

Back on the other side of the river, I don’t want to walk through the candlelit cemetery again. I remember Allan’s story of his first visit to a Japanese cemetery. Leaving the cemetery, Yoshihiro asked if he saw the bakemono on his shoulder.

Leaving the cemetery, I look back across the river to the Torodo.

I can no longer see my dead. But I feel as if I am somehow more complete, more integrated, as if my past finally has caught up with the present.
On my walk back to the *shukubō*, I don’t know how to explain what happened when I doused the jizu statues with water. Is this why I came to Japan? To ferry my dead across the Tamagawa? I think about what the bodhisattva in Hearn’s “A Mountain of Skulls” says about the skulls: *All,—all without exception—have been yours, in the billions of your former lives.*

And I realize that the dead I saw were dead too young, too early. If, according to Buddhism, they were taken from this life because of something their ancestors did, I don’t know what those actions might be. If I were to believe this, I would have to believe that there was a reason I was disabled, something I gave up thinking a very long time ago.

When I return to the *shukubō*, on the futon in my temple lodgings, I am kept awake by the candlelight still flickering before my eyes.

I remember what the priest tells Hōichi: *All that you have been imagining was illusion—except the calling of the dead.*

My last thought before sleep is of Ian, surely someone I do not count among my dead. But he is the only person I know who is familiar with all the dead who had returned to me earlier in the night. The only person who could understand what I experienced is halfway around the world, where his day has just begun.

The next morning I awake at 5:30 a.m. and make my way to the temple prayer hall. I sit silently listening to the rhythmic chanting of the monks, remembering how I fell asleep when Alex and I meditated together when we lived in our Victorian house on Carl Street in San Francisco.

This morning, on Kōyasan, though my eyes are closed, I do not fall asleep. I am startled by what comes into my mind: last night, did I think of Ian because, in a way, he was taken from me before I thought it was time?

At the end of the prayer session, I rise and walk to the altar, where I leave an offering of coins and a stick of burning incense.

Before descending Kōyasan, I buy a drawing of Kōbō Daishi, which I send to Ian when I return to Tokyo.