Oguri Hangan was the son of a fifteenth-century provincial lord who lost his estate to a rival clan. He was known for his horsemanship. His legend, told in bunraku, kabuki, and sekkyō-bushi (narrative singing), stemmed from his adventures to find his father’s stolen heirlooms.

In the legend, Oguri Hangan wanders throughout Japan. In one of the eastern provinces, he reaches the estate of Daizen. Terute, Daizen’s daughter, falls in love with him. Daizen tries to kill him first with a wild horse and then by poison. His face scarred, his legs weak (symptoms usually associated with leprosy), Oguri Hangan roams around Japan on a cart, depending on others who faithfully believe that pulling his cart will bring them great merit.

Finally, reaching a waterfall in the sacred land of Kurano, Oguri Hangan is healed by a local hermit and the Yunomine spring’s healing waters.
There is still one remaining thing I need to research for the Fulbright Commission presentation. Tōno, home to the folktales known as the *Tōno monogatari*, is remote, far from Tokyo. I wish Mike could accompany me as we originally planned. To make the trip easier, I will make some stops on my way to and from Tōno.

After taking enough pills plus a week’s supply in case I’m delayed, I go north, like the poet Bashō did in 1689.

Ever since first arriving in Japan, I’ve wanted to see the places Bashō saw and wrote about in *Narrow Road to the Interior*.

Now, I stand on the same shore where Bashō once stood. He also looked at the hundreds of small islands and their sharp-angled twisted pines. Using only the name of the place—*Matsu* = pine, *shima* = island—and *ya*, a syllable of both subject and exclamation, Bashō wrote one of his most famous *haiku*:

*Matsushima ya*

*ah Matsushima ya*

*Matsushima ya*

I take a boat to get closer to the small pine islands. I remember my Sensō-ji fortune of almost eight months ago and think of Mike: *Polling a boat across the stream is a simile of your getting along well with others in this world.*

Hiraizumi was once the resplendent capital of the Fujiwara clan, who chose it to be their paradise on earth. Now, Hiraizumi is a sleepy town
on the banks of the Kitakami-gawa. I’ve come here to see the garden at Mōtsū-ji, the ancient site of waka parties, an inspiration for my first poems about Japan.

I arrive in the early evening and check in at the Mōtsū-ji shukubo. Tonight I’m the only guest at the temple hostel.

Despite the early morning side effects of the drugs, I’m up at dawn so I can join the monks in the main hall for prayers. The young monk who checked me into my room is the only monk present. I sit across from him. I am still a bit dizzy. As he chants this morning’s sutra, I close my eyes. Once again, I remember my Sensō-ji fortune—your wish will come true, so you should be modest for everything. I ask my body to get me safely where I want to go.

Mōtsū-ji feels like a ghost temple. After the prayers I walk around the garden lake. The garden is mostly ruins. I find the remnants of the stream. Centuries ago this was the focus of the garden’s festivities, during which waka parties were held. Here, on the banks of garden’s stream, contestants sat writing short poems before a cup of saké floated by.

I am the only one who gets off the train at Tōno.

In 1909 folklorist Yanagita Kunio visited Tōno. He found a world populated by demons and spirits that the farmers tried to placate through ancient rituals. Here, goblins, ghosts, and gods were a part of everyday life, like Hanada-sensei explained at our meeting three months ago in Tokyo. It is said that people in Tōno still talk of Zashiki Warashi, a child spirit who can be heard running at night.

The most popular character of the Tōno legends is the mischievous kappa.

Walking from the station, I don’t notice any goblins or ghosts. But I do notice the irascible kappa all over the town: on postboxes, in souvenir shops, and even at the koban, the police box.
According to legend, the *kappa* lives in the river. Usually, the *kappa* is green, but sometimes he has a red face. He is somewhat frog-like and has long skinny limbs, webbed hands and feet, a sharp beak, and a hollow on the top of his head. This hollow must be kept filled with water. If you meet a *kappa*, it is recommended that you bow. When the *kappa* returns your bow, the water will pour out from the hollow on his head and he will have to hurry off to replenish it.

At the Tōno City Museum, I learn about the belief that women who become pregnant with a *kappa*’s child give birth to deformed babies. When they are born, these babies are hacked to pieces, put into small wine casks, and buried in the ground. I remember the true story of the Yokohama woman who killed her disabled daughter. In Tōno, my research has come full circle.

The next day I take the train and a bus to the middle of nowhere. Here, I am supposed to wait for my next mode of transportation. Mika has made and confirmed my reservation at the 350-year-old Tsurunoyu Onsen, one of the most unspoiled hot springs in all of Japan.

I check my watch: ten minutes to the time when someone from the *onsen* is supposed to pick me up to take me the rest of the way. In no other place but Japan would I be confident that this will happen. Even so, I check my watch a few more times before ten minutes have passed until, as if on cue, a van appears on the otherwise empty road. The van stops. The driver asks, “*Kenny-sama desu ka?*”

“*Hai. Kenny desu.*”

When we turn on to a dirt road and head farther into the mountains, I notice my cell phone has no service. This will be the first night since we met that I will not be able to talk with Mike.

As soon as I’m out of the van, I know I’ve come to the right place. Beyond a wooden waterwheel and a small rickety *torii*-like gateway is a
wide dirt path. On both sides of the path are two-storied wooden buildings. All the wood is rustically painted black. The only sound is of rushing water, which gets louder as I make my way through what seems a cross between a Wild West ghost town and the main street of an Edo-period village. The path ends at the river.

The van driver has followed me. He points across a small bridge that crosses the rushing water. I nod. I know he’s pointing to the rotemburo, the outdoor hot spring bath, beyond the tall winter-parched reeds that line the other side of the river.

I drop my bags in my small tatami-matted room. I change into a yukata and return to the rushing water.

I cross the bridge.

I don’t understand the signs. If I understood them, I know they would tell me which changing room and which of the baths is for men. I peer into one of the huts and see a man. I guess this is the one for men. I take off my yukata and leave it in a wicker basket.

Outside, I peek around the reed fence and see a man in the pool.

I submerge myself into the close-to-scalding water. I lean back and look up at the surrounding mountains and then the clear sky.

I don’t know what is finger or what is toe, what is head or what is sole, what is front or what is behind. Every part of my body individualized but coalescing. Skin no barrier. Difference no matter.

I could be a butoh dancer emerging, rising, emerging, ever so slowly; I see life’s process not as change but as changing—

No east. No west. No direction. No plan.
Time dissolves. Thought evaporates.
Conscious, unconscious. Seen, unseen. Everything inside and outside my body merges—

Changing, the virus not me but a part of me.
No words. No feeling. No future.
I disappear.