

Ashiato (Footsteps)

The woodland walk is as muddy and wet as I remember.

From when I was six, Papa would take me
As a Saturday treat to Koajiro Woods
Where we would leap over logs and duck under branches,
Gripping our wellies, slippery in the mire
And head to the lake
To peek at cygnets timidly taking to water, or
Wonder at tadpoles sprouting their tiny limbs
Before heading home to scoff *oyakodon* for tea.

I would always walk behind Papa.

His broad frame towered closely ahead,
Shielding me from *kami-san* whips of wind
And rain that lashed at my face.
Fawn-like, I would plant my knock-kneed pins in his giant tracks,
Great pools that reflected a stormy sky,
As we navigated streams and stiles. Together.
When my little legs tired,
I climbed aboard his back and pointed the path with
Sticks we had found.

In nineteen years, the woodland path has little changed her course.
Yet ahead of me, Papa's back travels slower now –
Curving forwards, shoulders stooped
And a *tsueh* keeps him steady.
I hover closely behind,
Still marking his footprints with mine,
With steps both wider and longer -
Marking, now, to catch any slip back or fall
As we slowly make our way home.

While measured of speed, he still leads the way:
So the shepherd, though weary, still tends to his lamb.

hitsujikai, tsukareni kakawarazu, kohitsuji no sewa o suru

--

Unsung Heroes – Tamiko Dooley

Kayobi (Tuesday)

The bedtime story isn't told
Perching on the edge of his wipe-clean mattress
Or from the dinosaur beanbag
In the corner of his room.
She doesn't need to avoid the
creaky floorboard on the way out.

Instead, as his eyelids flutter
And he steals away to today and yesterday,
To what will and could be,
She peers into the screen
And watches his grip on *kuma-chan* loosen
As one by one his fingers drop.

Once his shallow breathing beats a regular rhythm,
He's *yume no naka* – in his dreams.
She stays awhile, drinking him in
From the other side of the town,
Singing *Komori-uta*, a lullaby, and brushing her
Fingers across the stuffed Totoro
He left at hers a year ago -
Only intended for a short stay, to be washed properly.
He hasn't been picked up yet.

She tries to recall the feather of his cheek,
The tickle of his overgrown mop,
His heaviness on her lap,
the scent of the soap he uses for eczema.

When the screen flickers
And she's staring into darkness,
She thinks of *Kayobi*, *hachi-ji*, next Tuesday, 8 o'clock,
and it wraps futon-like around her
And keeps her warm.

--

Unsung Heroes – Tamiko Dooley

Shogi no shiai (Chess match)

If I tell you of the *ohmisoka*, the New Year's Eve
Where you gave me the hardwood *shogi* set
Would you remember that year?

Each piece was hand-carved with delicate *kanji*
The underside of the grid board
Green velvet: no slips.

If I gave you the bishop to hold in your hand
Could you tell me which way he moves?

It was a stormy night at our house in Higashi Nakano
My parents and I were up late listening to the radio
Slurping our *soba* noodles as old *enka* songs played quietly

The doorbell rang unexpectedly
Clashing shrilly with the minor key
You burst into our hallway, throwing off your shoes

You ran to me and swept me up in your arms
I inhaled the smoky undertones of your aftershave
And your shampoo – a heady mixture.

When I opened the *shogi* set that year
You taught me about life:
Rules and routes and hierarchy
Black and white, winning and losing.

When you came round to visit
We would play it together
And you'd lose every time.

I never knew you chose to let me win.

You might not remember my name today
But I tell you of that evening
And the way you always made me feel

I place a pawn in your fist
And I clutch your hands tightly
To hold on to you and to show you I'm here

That it isn't checkmate
Not even check –

We will learn the laws of this new game, this new world you inhabit
We will not give up on each other

And this time we will both win.

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