

Flightless Bird

By David Copson

Mrs Okada has no teeth and refuses to use plastic ones, though somehow you never look away from her smile. She is so old now that the bones of her hands seem to be outside the skin, but if she offered you her hand you would take it and give it warmth.

Mrs Okada came from the edge of Nagasaki that wasn't melted, though she says she was blind for ten days - but saw the sun at night! She says all her prayers were answered when she had children that were not deformed, and that she had no right to pray after this: even though her friends told her she could.

Mrs Okada has had no husband for 47 years but rarely mentions this. She feels, I believe, that she should be there for her daughters and her grandchildren, though none of them truly know what it was like for her to leave her homeland. And it has to be said that her undeformed daughters sometimes scold her and take her for granted.

Mrs Okada decided to give her savings to her daughters when they came to England so they could buy houses, and they were kind enough to let her live in one of them when she came over. They never ask about the lonely years she remained in Japan tending her garden, or speak to her while she does the washing up.

Mrs Okada was a volunteer up until she was 85, but she had worked before that, so she could pay for her own funeral and leave something for her daughters. She never told them of the many times she sat alone in their north-facing backroom, dreaming that she was a bird soaring over the mountains of Japan, and how she absolutely knew they had never appreciated her - even once.