

Nori NAKAGAMI

Reunion

Once again a dense, still fog held the island in its tight embrace.

Kotoko stood in front of the temple, just as when she first began the study of dance. When she had come to practice then, the music of the *gamelan* could be heard here all day and night. How many times had she been made to listen to that worn-out practice tape? But today only silence resounded throughout the temple. “Kotoko, come on, let’s go.” Wayan’s voice interrupted the remembered chimes of the *gamelan*.

She was no longer the girl who had once stood -- suitcase in hand and caught up in the fresh fever of dance -- before the temple gates. She was now the proprietor of a successful dance school in Tokyo. The young man hailing her came from an established family of dancers, and was now striking out on his own in the tourist business. When Kotoko arrived, she had not gone directly to the town where Lubak’s family lived. Instead, she went straight to the hotel in Ubud where his son, Wayan, worked. Perhaps she had done so because she knew how Lubak would feel about her turning dance into a business venture.

With Wayan in tow as an ally, Kotoko hoped to convince the aging Lubak to agree to her plans. There were rumors that his daughter Manuh was possessed by evil spirits. Turning custody of her over to someone else shouldn’t be an entirely distasteful prospect to Lubak. If Manuh were to disappear for a while, the villagers’ attentions would naturally wane. Once the heat of gossip and suspicion faded, it might even be possible for Manuh to return. The adoption would also allow Manuh to work legally so that she could send money home. And if Manuh were to become a bridge between the island and Japan, the entire dance troupe could benefit as well.

Wayan was in complete agreement. For him, this was a most favorable arrangement. It had been three years since Kotoko had last been in the village. Decorations left over from *penjor*, the greeting of ancestral spirits, hung from bamboo poles and greeted Kotoko in the form of an arch. It was only three days away from the New Year’s celebration of *nyepi*, and the village was charged with a certain restlessness, as though the air was about to suddenly flow in a different direction.

All the thresholds to the houses and all the gates to the roads were streaming with colorfully dyed rice and flowers tucked inside woven banana leaves. The *canang* were placed there as offerings to the gods. The shadow, cast by the trees covering the road, contrasted sharply with the bright light of the rest of the town and cooled Kotoko’s skin, which had become flushed walking under the hot sun, Everything in the town was exactly as it had been when she left. Except that there was now a man standing in front of the earthen wall. “Master...” As Kotoko whispered a greeting, tears gathered in her eyes.

He was wearing the *udeng* and *sarong* just like he always had. His dark brown skin shone against a white shirt. Seeing Kotoko and Wayan before him, Lubak was startled only for the briefest of moments. The wrinkles around his eyes, the cool outline of his face, the perfect musculature of his body were exactly as Kotoko remembered.

Kotoko sat herself down on the tiled veranda where she had so often seen Lubak sit and read the paper. Finding no one else about, Wayan headed into the kitchen to boil water for coffee.

While Wayan was preparing the coffee, Kotoko lost no time in explaining to Lubak the benefits of her plan to adopt Manuh. As she had already clarified in the letter, her plan would benefit all involved.

Lubak said nothing.

Even after Wayan had returned with the steaming drinks, Lubak remained lost in thought; his only immediate response pacing slowly back and forth.

“For taking care of my daughter, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. But adoption is something else altogether.” Lubak clenched his mouth shut as soon as he finished speaking.

Kotoko sensed that there was something different about Lubak, a subtle shift, or awkwardness, in his bearing. No, it wasn't any sort of unease. His shape, his voice were the same as before. But something had changed.

What was it?

Before Kotoko could begin to understand the difference in Lubak's demeanor, Wayan suggested that they return to Ubud and leave Lubak on his own for a while. “It's because *nyepi* is coming up, he can't think of anything but the festival.” This was how Wayan explained his father's aloof manner.

Nonetheless, Kotoko couldn't stop thinking about Lubak. She couldn't get his expression out of her mind.

And then it struck her what the matter was:

It was the absence of divinity. It was that empty feeling that wafts through even the wealthiest temples on Bali when they are not in use. That sad, hollow air was palpable. Lubak had been more than mortal to her; almost a demigod. But that sense of divinity was gone, and its departure left Kotoko disconcerted and lost.

The next morning Kotoko dressed formally for the ceremony and visited Lubak's town. It was two days before *nyepi* and the sounds of the *gamelan* could be heard everywhere. The lace coat she had made when she lived on the island still fitted her perfectly. The sash she wore was yellow -- the color of the gods. When she wrapped it around herself she felt as nervous as she did the first time she stepped onstage to dance. The girl that once had such faith in the island, that self, was for the moment restored.

Amidst the crowd that had gathered in the road she could see Lubak, Wayan, Made, and the youngest, Sana. All of them wore spotless white coats and sashes speckled with gold. The new year must be greeted with absolute purity, and the entire village had gathered to wash themselves in the ocean. Following the procession of villagers heading to the sea, Kotoko thought of how she used to hold Manuh's little hand as they walked together to the water.

On any given day, there will always be a festival or ceremony taking place in a temple somewhere on Bali. But this purification rite was unique. It was being enacted all over the island, on the same grand scale, on this day; just as *ogob-ogob* would be tomorrow. At the front of the procession of men were Lubak and his two eldest sons. The fine figures they cut

as they headed towards the ocean together gave no hint of the troubles that had divided their family since the rumors of evil spirits began.

“Everyone goes with the *barong* to the ocean and cleanses themselves of the past year’s impurities.” This was the explanation that Lubak’s wife, Anom, had given as she helped Kotoko put on her coat and sash, when Kotoko had first come to the island. How many years had passed since then?

And how long had it been now since Anom and Kadek had shut themselves up in their house? They knew of Kotoko’s visit and yet neither of them had so much as shown their faces.

The road was crowded with groups of villagers from all over the island. People were bumping into each other in the intersection, or stopping in the road to talk. It was hard to tell who was doing the jostling and who was being jostled. The lines themselves, however, were hardly making any progress. Everyone was chatting, or calling out to people they recognized in the distance, raise their voices to be heard over the *gamelan* and the sound of so much laughter.

The road swelled with thousands of people as the crowd neared the ocean. Cars and bikes carrying elaborately dressed men and women got caught in traffic jams, making movement even harder. There was construction at the final intersection before the water and the police were not letting vehicles go any further. The rich folk in cars, the young couples on motorbikes, and the groups of families: all had to leave their vehicles behind and continue on foot.

The group from Lubak’s village headed down the sea slope bearing incense and offerings. As they squeezed past the people already making their return trip from the beach, the ringing of competing *gamelans* made a strange sound against the ocean wind.

Gentle waves lapped up on shore and the smell of fish wafted through the air. Despite the vendors busily selling boiled peanuts and cold drinks from their stalls, the beach had a desolate, savage quality. Hardly anyone ever came to this beach. But today the silver sand was covered with villagers from all over the island. Those who had finished the ceremony sat down in the sand and lit incense or offered gifts, remnants of which lay strewn amongst the seaweed and driftwood at the water’s edge. Kotoko remembered how Manuh would sit here with her hands cupped together trying to catch the purified water which spilled from the priest’s silver bowl.

Already lined up in a neat row, the villagers began to move. The majestic, lion-like figure of the *barong* led the procession. The men carrying the shrine were followed by the *gamelan* players and behind them, the rest of the villagers. One body at a time, they entered the ocean, swaying between the waves as the salt water tossed them about. The *barong*, the villagers, the good and the bad: the ocean drank them all. And then they were cleansed. The ceremony was over. As soon as one village had finished, another village group moved in and began their ceremony.

Soon everyone from Lubak’s village was back in line and heading home. Kotoko was about to join the procession when her eyes fell on Lubak. He was off to the side, immersed in prayer. Slowly, he stood up and walked straight into the ocean. When the water reached his knees it seemed as though he was going to stop. But then, playfully, Lubak threw his body against the waves.

The chiming of the *gamelan* rang clearly through the air. Someone called out to Kotoko. It might have been Lubak. Or it might have been the voice of the ocean. She was

overcome by a sudden desire to be free. She felt as though her feet were no longer touching the ground. All sense of time dissolved.

Kotoko walked into the shallow water. With the water up to her waist, she began to pray. She prayed to the ocean that held everything in its embrace. She prayed to the universe. Memories that had been carved into her body began to fall away from her. They washed up on shore with the waves and soaked into the sand, becoming one with the earth.

The Ocean was the *gamelan*. The air was music. The rivers and padi fields were the people. And when the gods streamed down from the mountains, the dancers soared. The *sarong* and *kebaya* clinging to Kotoko's wet body became her dancing clothes. She became a butterfly: a butterfly drawn to the petals of a blood-red hibiscus.

The butterfly danced around the flower that had sprung suddenly from the sand. The flower was Lubak. Opening and closing itself invitingly, the flower offered its honey to the butterfly. The sweet-tasting honey changed the butterfly, too, into a flower.

And the two flowers slid into one another.

*translated by Robin Tierney
edited by Alvin Pang*

Nyepi

Firecrackers had been echoing in the village streets since early morning. The memory of night stayed hidden -- in tree roots, at the corners of houses. During festivals and rituals the young people of the village would devote themselves to the playing of *gamelan*, dedicating its music to God. They would stop work for days or weeks before the event to rehearse their dances. The villagers here were known to be a happy-go-lucky lot; more so than anywhere else on the island. Although the island was well-known throughout the world for its tourist attractions, this village, situated outside the main tourist routes, had remained as poor as always.

Tomorrow was to be the island's major holy day, *nyepi*, an annual event when numerous evil spirits would visit the land. The necessary rituals had been taking place in grand style for several days now; it would all lead to tomorrow's rites, when everyone would pray indoors in private serenity. But during the festival so far, the village had been brimming with excitement and revelry. Everything in sight shone with a fierce light, as in a fever. Firecrackers rang out again and again.

Sleeping on a simple bamboo bed, Kotoko, still half-asleep, listened.
"Oha yo. Ko nichiva," called a girl in choppy Japanese. It was ten-year-old Manuh.
Kotoko giggled.

Inhaling deeply and quietly, she took in the morning breeze which penetrated this room without walls, the scent of incense lit by someone in the family, and the infrequent sounds of firecrackers set off by young people in the distance.

Yesterday's had been an important ritual. The white, cloud-covered sky had filled the village with a sacred morning fragrance. The men, having bathed and dressed in full regalia, filled the streets in front of the houses. Each of the men wore brightly colored sarongs wrapped at their waists and clean white undergarments. The figures of old and young alike merged on the horizon as in a picture drawn against the sky. Everyone looked elegant, heroic.

At the front of the line, the sacred beast *barong* made his somber way forward, accompanied by the band of *gamelan* players. Behind him several villagers carried a sacred relic from the temple on their shoulders. Women with offerings on their heads followed the men gaily. Behind them came more women, empty-handed, and the children.

Kotoko, wearing a *sarong*, a tight-fitting laced *kebaya*, and a sash for the first time, trailed the villagers as they headed towards the sea. By the hand, she led Manuh, also in full dress. She had encountered festivals and rituals at small temples on previous sightseeing visits to the island, but had never witnessed anything on this scale. All the people of the island, village by village, were marching to the sea.

Anom, Manuh's mother, told Kotoko, "Everyone will go to the sea and be purified with Barong. We'll meet the new year with fresh spirits." She had Kotoko put on a splendid costume for the festival -- despite Kotoko's hesitation, having just come to the island. But Anom herself, who was pregnant, stayed home with her first daughter, Kadek. Her husband, Lubak, and two sons were among those at the head of the line, marching with pride.

As Kadek was sickly, she rarely left the house but kept indoors, drawing pictures. She was subdued and languid compared to the exuberant Manuh. Kadek had not tried to talk with Kotoko, not even briefly. Still, she did not seem to dislike her, and when Kotoko and Manuh were joking and laughing together, she sometimes smiled.

Manuh urged her on, anxious to get there as soon as possible; Kotoko, mumbling the words of parting she had just learned, left the house. The sight of Kadek seeing them off with her hand half raised, lingered in Kotoko's mind.

The sea was a dull gray. On her previous visit, driven around by a guide, the color of the sea and the atmosphere of the place had struck her as quietly different from that of the beach resort.

Villagers were sitting on the beach in proper lines. The priests, or *pudandas*, raised their hands above their heads and sprinkled sacred water over the praying worshippers. The *pudanda* from Manuh's village was an old man with a gentle face, and completely desiccated white skin. Seated beside Kotoko, Manuh received the sacred water solemnly, her small hands pressed together, as the *pudanda* sprinkled water from a silver bowl. The sacred beast *barong* proceeded gradually toward the waves. When *barong* had been purified in the sea water, the ritual came to an end, and the villagers stood and made their way home.

Kotoko had followed them, with Manuh tugging her on by the hand. As she left the seashore, turning her back to return to the village, Kotoko seemed to feel the gaze of something watching her. Perhaps it was the gaze of the eternal Ocean, connected to all; the Ocean God, who watched over the beaches of the resort where naked men and women lay, and also over the seashore where the brightly dressed villagers had conducted their rituals. Kotoko felt she belonged to both of these places and at the same time to neither. That mysterious feeling of being watched held an eerie comfort for her.

“Get up soon or I won’t show you something interesting,” Manuh cried again as Kotoko tried to recall the previous day’s events. Manuh chattered rapidly in her native tongue this time, as she if she were embarrassed or afraid of being laughed at because of her beginner’s Japanese.

Reluctantly, Kotoko got up and shifted her feet from the bed onto the tiled floor. Its sudden chill woke her completely. She studied Manuh who was standing by the bed. She appeared mature for her age, though this was to be expected as she’d risen early for the festival, done up her hair, and put on new clothes.

“What’s the interesting thing you want to show me?”

“You shall see when you come,” she says, her speech unusually affected.

At once, Kotoko changed into her clothes, slipped on sandals, and went outside with Manuh. The morning mist hovered over the gravel streets like a curtain of vapor and incense, softening the onset of brighter sunlight.

Leading her by the hand the entire way, Manuh took Kotoko to a meeting house with a raised floor. A large open space with a roof covering, it was a convenient gathering spot for children and young people, as well as a place to hold the meetings of the self-governing community to which Manuh’s family belonged. There were several such meeting houses in the village, placed under each of the autonomous communities into which the area was divided. The islanders referred to the communities and the meeting houses by the same word: *banjar*.

Kotoko stared in astonishment. A gigantic red devil with shining eyes and a gaping mouth stood on the space facing the street, just in front of the meeting house. The devil glared, and appeared as if at any moment, it would swoop and seize someone with its sharp teeth and long nails.

“It’s *ogho-ogho*. Frightening, isn’t it?”

“It is...”

As Kotoko stammered, a proud expression appears on Manuh’s face. “The cloth around *ogho-ogho*’s waist is the same as what the men wear at festivals,” she said.

Ogho-ogho wore a sarong with a checkered pattern in monotone, and layers of prayer beads around its neck. It looked as if it were about to move at any moment because of its bulging eyes and disheveled black hair. According to Manuh, it was made of sponge-like

materials over a bamboo frame, which was then skillfully spray painted in red and black. It was like a giant papier-mâché.

Although the lives of the islanders depended totally on revenue from tourism, the *nyepi* festivities had the power to close the airport for an entire day. Kotoko knew that the ceremony of the day, when *ogbo-ogbo* the devil would be carried around, would be livelier than any other. She had read about it in books and heard it described by a student from Jakarta, who had tutored her in the Indonesian language back in Japan.

Kotoko remembered passing by this place the day before, when she and Manuh had joined in the ritual parade to the sea, but the red devil had not been there then. “Where did they carry this devil from? A wondrous island, it is,” she mused.

Manuh laughed proudly at Kotoko’s bewilderment and began prattling like an overexcited child. “Everything becomes a competition among the *banjars* in this village. They make their *ogbo-ogbo* in secret and hide it so that the others won’t copy it. Those who come up with the best-looking *ogbo-ogbo* will be admired until next year’s festival, so we won’t lose face before the other *panjars*.”

Manuh said that as *nyepi* grew nearer, the islanders made offerings to the evil spirits and cleansed their houses and temples. The festival, in which *ogbo-ogbo* was carried around, was meant to purify the whole island on the eve of *nyepi*. It was believed that the more vigorous the male carriers’ movements were, the more effective *ogbo-ogbo*’s purifying power would be in preventing the coming of evil spirits.

In this village the *ogbo-ogbo* was made with great attention to detail, as there were particularly devout people living here, pious even from the viewpoint of the islanders in general, who regarded festivals and rituals with utmost importance. They devoted a tremendous amount of time, handiwork, and expense into the construction, in order to make it the biggest, most elaborate and fearsome devil possible. As the village consisted of five *panjars*, there were five sets of *ogbo-ogbo* and an equal number of musical bands.

Manuh mumbled, “I wish I could carry *ogbo-ogbo*. If I’d been born as a man... I’ve always wished it.”

She was her parents’ youngest child. They adored her but worried about the future of their tomboyish daughter. This was why her father wanted Kotoko to become her tutor in Japanese — Manuh would have better opportunities in future with the skills of another language. Lubak hoped his children would be able to choose what they wanted to do in life, but seemed especially concerned about the fate of Manuh, who demonstrated little feminine virtue.

Kotoko wondered what the other villagers thought of someone like her who had come from Japan and begun living in Manuh’s home all of a sudden. Neither Manuh nor even Lubak knew the details of Kotoko’s past, nothing more than that she came to this village because she admired Lubak’s dancing.

The family resided in a farming village, an hour's walk from the tourist town of Ubud. When Kotoko came to this village on a previous trip, she was shocked to come upon a man dancing alone in one of the village temples. As she herself had been a student of dance, she understood immediately that something extraordinary lay at the core of his movements. This was how she had met Lubak.

Lubak's group danced mostly for temple rituals and festivals. Their dance was for prayer. Its purpose was significantly different from the dances put on to entertain tourists. The dancer and the villager became one, the atmosphere transformed to that of a different world. The dance itself was the ritual, and the ritual was the dance. But Lubak's dance was at a higher level than any other Kotoko had witnessed on the island, and his skill seemed to shine with inexplicable light.

"I've been to Japan," Manuh said abruptly.

"To Japan? When?"

"Yesterday. In my mind," Manuh giggled. "You were there, dancing. A strange dance. Your costumes and everything else was different, but the dance was a little bit like ours."

"How do you know? Where did you see it?"

"It's easy," said Manuh, laughing. "When I close my eyes and calm my mind, I can fly to Japan in an instant and see whatever I want."

"That sure sounds easy. I'm envious." Kotoko thought Manuh must have been referring to her imagination.

"Every day I wish to go to Japan. Because it'll come true if I wish it hard enough."

Only a child could have such unwavering faith, Kotoko sighed. No dream would ever come true by merely wishing it, she knew. Unless you made your way with single-hearted devotion towards your goal, the dream would never arrive.

Lubak's dancing, which Kotoko had seen only once, had ignited her desire to learn the traditional movements of this island. She had left everything in Japan and returned here. There were problems. She knew there were those who considered her decision foolish. But in order to reach her dream, she had no other choice but to make the attempt. She envied Manuh's naive conviction that a wish could come true just by wishing it.

She looked up. The red devil, with its dreadful face, was glaring fiercely at the sky.

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