

People's Voices, Mother's Song

SPECIAL ISSUE

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On Grieving, volume 1 of the Tsushima Yūko collection (Jinbun shoin, 2017), where this essay appeared in Japanese.

A while back, a coworker at the company where I was working won a new writer's prize for a novel. I say coworker, but she'd already left the company before I started there, so until she won the prize I never even knew she existed. The prize-winning piece had as its narrator a woman working in sales at a building products manufacturer, and the work was clearly based upon my company. She became the sole topic of conversation around the office. *Our company gave birth to a novelist*, the in-house newsletter proclaimed, and there were five men who said *you know, actually I was the model for that work*. Looking coolly at the situation, T— who worked in the office commented:

But all she did was write about the company exactly as it is.

This struck me as somehow funny. It seems that when a literary work is set in a place that the writer knows well personally, it robs people nearby of their perspective and they lose sight of the work's essence. I was like that once too.

When I was born into this world, my mother was already a novelist. In her writings, a character who it seemed could only be my mother lived with children who seemed like me and my younger brother, in the same town where we lived. Thanks to that, until I was almost fully grown I thought my mother's early works were all about our household exactly as it was. Even now, looking at the pieces written when I was little, if you were to ask me how much of it is true I couldn't possibly tell you. All of it comes across as real, and then again it doesn't. Even when scenes give me a sense of nostalgia, if you told me I was just remembering reading the novels, that would make sense to me, and as for things I have no direct recollection of I couldn't deny it if you

told me things really happened that way. That's particularly true of the pieces written after my brother left this world. I can't say for sure that everything in them is real, but I feel that I know them down to the scent and the touch—even the parts that are about dreams and fantasies. The vividness makes me tense and my heart tightens, and I can't hold the works at a distance for objective analysis.

When my brother died at the age of eight he was raising thirteen newts. He might also have been taking care of tree lizards and African clawed frogs and other things, but I was twelve at the time and those don't factor much in my memories. There should have been several aquariums lined up in a row next to the living room windows, but the only one that comes to mind is the tank with the blue plastic lid holding the thirteen newts. I doted on the newts too, and if I remember correctly, I said that the reptilian geckoes had scary eyes but the large black pupils of the amphibian newts were cute. But my mother says I only came to think that way after my brother died. I can't be sure. We fed sludge worms to my brother's newts, and they grew steadily, even laying eggs. I can still picture how my brother gazed earnestly into the aquarium when he was sketching the newt eggs. No, I still have his drawing from that time, so it might just be that in the process of imagining what my little brother looked like then, I've come to feel as if I saw him. Around that time there was an elementary school student slightly older than my brother whose research on the relationship between the weather and how far newts climb up the walls of their aquariums was made into a picture book, and my brother felt a great rivalry with him. But then the eggs all dried up when we were on a trip away from home.

Soon after my brother passed away, one of his friends came over to adopt the newts. The boy was a year older than my younger brother, and his parents ran a private tutoring school out of their apartment. The boy's mother wasn't fond

of things like frogs, so he had never been allowed to keep any, and whenever he came over he had gazed at my brother's newts and frogs and sighed enviously. After what happened with my brother he went about convincing his mother that the newts who'd lost their owner might be thrown away. *I finally got permission to raise them*, the little boy said, rushing into the apartment and standing in the entryway without so much as taking off his shoes. He was still panting.

Wait a second. I'll go get them right away.

I went to get the newts' aquarium. There was a large bookcase just in front of the sliding door leading from the kitchen to my brother's room, and the newts' aquarium had been set on the floor right in front of it. The deep brown of the flooring and the bookcase created a dark space around the aquarium. I could hear my mother's voice coming from the entryway.

After all, the best thing is for them to be given to someone who will really care about them.

Looking at the aquarium more closely, the glass was dirty with white residue. Come to think of it, it hadn't been cleaned in a long time. I took off the blue plastic lid. The smell of foul water.

What's wrong? Well?

When the boy who had come to see what was going on called out to me, I quickly closed the lid. The newts were all dead.

Unfortunately the newts've all died. We can't give them to you. Sorry.

I smiled awkwardly at the boy, who was at a loss for words. He suspected I might actually be lying because I didn't want to hand over the newts. When I prompted him to go home, he seemed to be searching for words and was reluctant to give up, but eventually he left quietly. Thinking back, after my brother died we had the funeral at my grandmother's house,

and it was almost two weeks later when we returned to the apartment. We couldn't have had much chance to worry about the newts after that either. Most likely the newts had been left without food for over a month. It seems like the boy should have called on the phone to see if it was all right to take them before he came over to pick them up, and like it or not we'd have been reminded of the existence of the newts if there'd been such a call, so we would have checked on their condition and turned him down then. At any rate I don't remember anything beyond that. I can't recall my mother's reaction either. I don't know whether it's horrible that I don't remember, or I don't remember because it was horrible, but I don't think my mother could have stomached having killed off the newts so casually when we were carefully trying to avoid erasing the traces of my brother. Maybe there was nothing dramatic about it at all, and we just calmly buried the dead newts in a grave in the white planter on the veranda, but I still feel terribly guilty about it. After that I never talked to my mother about letting the newts die. Since we never spoke about it, it's not clear what really happened. I sometimes think that, against all expectations, it might be that none of it happened at all.

You sometimes go and think things you saw in dreams are real.

My mother often said that to me. Still, I can't simply conclude that these things didn't happen, so I continue to be haunted by guilt.

Beginning around my second year of senior high I started to go to an art prep school to get ready for the entrance exam for a university for the arts. Perhaps because architecture programs didn't require a high level of practical skills, there weren't many people who went there from their second year. Most of the attendees were either in their last year of high school or graduates still trying to enter a university, so they were quite mature. Across

the street from the school building there was a small Chinese restaurant that served set meals. The shop was run by a married couple and it was closed on Sundays, but there was a rumor that they would stay open even on Sundays when their fights kept them from opening the restaurant on its regular days. The area was residential and far from any train station, and there weren't any other shops to speak of nearby, so I often ate a lunch set there or bought a boxed lunch to take home.

It was a chilly day in spring. I think it was the first time I ever went to that shop. I went to eat lunch along with several people from my class. I was still at the point where I couldn't match names to faces. I hated Chinese food. I don't remember the reason why. I think I always said it had to do with its appearance or its oiliness, but maybe I simply couldn't handle spicy food. Up to that point I'd had barely any chances to eat out with someone other than my mother, so I'd never had to put up with going somewhere I didn't want to go. But on that day I couldn't bring myself to suggest going someplace else. It was my first Chinese food in ages. The inside of the restaurant was dirty with oil and tobacco stains. The pictures of food taped on the walls were so discolored that you couldn't tell what they were pictures of. The windows facing the street were covered in an oily film as well, so light could barely make its way through them. We sat at a table next to the windows and went about ordering the stir-fried vegetable lunch and the liver-and-onion lunch and things like that. While we were waiting for the food to arrive, I kept on talking and talking by myself. I was intending to keep the conversation from dying, but I was also enjoying the attention I got for still being in my second year of high school, so maybe I was just feeling my oats. I was eagerly seeking affection like a child surrounded by adults. At some point the topic turned to our likes and dislikes when it came to food. I was really good at talking about food I didn't like. I exaggerated things and went out of my way to use harsh language. Even though

everyone was disgusted, they were all laughing. I was feeling great and went right on talking.

Cut it out. You'll make it taste bad.

It was like being doused in cold water.

It sounded off the cuff, but the voice that said it was firm. It came from a woman two years my senior sitting diagonally in front of me. She was already silently eating the food that had been carried out to her as though nothing had happened. The inside of the shop went silent and the only sounds were echoes from the kitchen. Everyone was supposed to have been paying attention to me, but now no one was. They didn't talk to me either. It served me right.

I don't think I went as far as to say anything bad about Chinese food in particular. Anyway, I want to think I didn't. But most likely whether or not Chinese food came in for criticism wasn't the real issue. When all was said and done, it was my whole stance toward food in general that was being called into question.

After that I started eating Chinese food again, and I came to understand the pleasures of eating.

My mother says that it was after my younger brother died that I started to dislike Chinese food. The day before my brother died, my mother and brother and I went out to eat Chinese food. Since my brother liked Chinese food, we picked out a Chinese restaurant. She says it's because of that memory that I stopped eating Chinese food and began claiming I'd always disliked it but had been holding back. If I were just to agree with her then I'd feel uncomfortable, like I was making excuses for past mistakes. After all, I have no memory of that. Still, I can't say for sure that my dislike of Chinese food and what happened with my brother are completely unrelated. Whether it was because the two things were connected for

my mother, or whether it was because she'd lost her spirit due to the death of my brother, she never got angry with me when I tossed around my likes and dislikes without any regard for time or place. As for me, I deliberately made blunt declarations like *I hate it, I won't eat it* because I felt I couldn't afford to use kinder words with my mother. I was afraid that she would start crying if I were to show any weakness.

Back then I simply found my mother incomprehensibly frightening, and since I couldn't tell what my mother was thinking at all, I went about studying the expressions on her face. Thinking about another person's feelings and studying her face might seem like similar undertakings, but they're completely different. You study someone's face because you don't understand her feelings.

On the morning of the funeral, when I returned to my grandmother's house from where I'd stayed with my cousins, the door to the room where my brother's body had been placed was ajar and my mother emerged from it. Her eyes were red and she was staring straight ahead.

I was too frightened to call out to her.

Some time later we went to a nearby supermarket together as though it was a form of therapy. Walking alongside my mother, I blurted out carelessly:

It's a good thing you had two of us.

I can't remember why I said such a thing.

I thought my mother was going to be angry with me, but she stopped still and, while maintaining a hardened expression, broke into silent tears. Unable to apologize, I turned away from her, saying *stop it, already*. It was too horrible to face her.

Even now, looking at the works of my mother from that time immediately brings back

feelings of nervous tension. I'm not capable of reflecting upon the essence of those works. I wonder what I find so frightening about them. It's probably that I was afraid my mother would give up on living and leave me all alone. And the thought that I was the one responsible for whether she'd live or die. Once during the summer of my first year of middle school, I fell asleep face down at my desk and was awakened by my mother frantically calling my name. My mother found in me a reason not to die. She wasn't foolish enough to say that out loud, but at the same time, since these fears were never expressed in words, they fed the growth of a vague sense of anxiety in me.

In the midst of this, my mother's anger was the only thing that saved me.

In those days my mother felt angry and wounded by every little thing. At the funeral, a woman who was the mother of a student in my brother's class and a member of the ward assembly sidled over to whisper that she wanted my mother to read her telegram of condolence aloud. My mother was so angry that she almost ripped up the telegram and threw it away. Needless to say, she didn't recite the telegram.

Not everyone was as flagrant as that woman, of course. Yet it's undeniable that there was a deep rift between my mother and the people around her. She derived consolation from them, but she scorned and loathed them whenever she sensed the slightest curiosity or fascination in any of their words or expressions. She found immaculate formal mourning attire and the sorrowful expressions in letters to be insensitive. She thought that everyone in town believed the groundless rumors that children from fatherless families were more likely to die young. She suspected that behind her back people might be saying that she was already laughing and wearing gaudy clothes despite having lost a child, so to free herself from that fear she went out of her way to put on bright

red lipstick. My mother desperately wanted to avoid being put in the “mother who’s lost a child” box. She injected her anger into her writings, but they couldn’t hold it all, so she continually complained to me at the dinner table, on the way home from shopping, at her desk late at night.

It wasn’t easy to handle all that anger. Still, because I could understand it, I found it reassuring. Maybe I too found the curiosity and fascination directed at my mother offensive. I also took pride in being the only one who could understand. But in the end, that anger existed precisely because of her will to live, so my mother’s tearless anger was the thing that saved me.

A long time later I quit the construction company and started writing scripts for the theater.

After the 3.11 disaster in eastern Japan, while living in Osaka I got into the habit of going home to my mother’s place in Tokyo once a month. One night we were sitting across from each other at the dining room table, drinking tea after dinner. The table was covered in a blue cloth. Since I’d left Tokyo, we’d developed a tendency to get absorbed in discussion and lose track of time when we did have a chance to meet. One reason for it was the unbelievable chain of events happening in society. It wasn’t rare for us to suddenly notice that it was already past one in the morning. I don’t remember how the subject came up, but I mentioned to my mother that anger motivated me to write. I think I’d been saying something trivial about not liking sadness because it was too gloomy. My mother, who’d been peeling an apple, laughed mischievously.

What is it?, I asked.

I was thinking I’ve said something similar, my mother said. I laughed too.

That’s not to say we were always laughing with

each other. For a long time I claimed to understand my mother’s anger, but I was unable to admit that I had any anger of my own. I tried to remain a neutral third party, one who simply sympathized with my angry mother. Perhaps I knew instinctively that were I to become angry myself I’d be cut off from society. I didn’t have the courage to stand alone. As a matter of course, my desire not to deviate from normal standards intensified as my experience in personal relationships expanded through junior high, senior high, and university. I even went against my mother’s word, and we fought constantly. Maybe it was when I started to write that this began to change. There was a conflict between the part of me that understood my mother and the part of me that didn’t want to become isolated from society, and as the contradiction between the two intensified, I couldn’t ignore it anymore. I quit my company, entered the world of the theater, and several years later experienced the nuclear accident in that disaster. Since I wanted to know what had happened, I collected materials on my own initiative and read voraciously. It might have been the first time I ever did something like that. I started to see the true nature of this country as though a fog was being lifted from my eyes. I got angry. One day I met a woman who had evacuated from Fukushima. At the same time that she was trying to adapt to life in a new place with her husband and daughter, she was also calling for a criminal investigation into those responsible for the nuclear disaster, and she was being attacked for it on the internet. This is what she said:

No one likes an angry victim.

I remembered when my mother put on her red lipstick. From that time on I finally started to express my own anger in words. And then, just as I became able to laugh together with her, my mother left this world.

The death of my mother that I’d feared ever

since my brother passed away.

As I sank into the loneliness of having been left behind, I began to reread my mother's writings.

At first it was in order to plan for having a reading of my mother's work at the funeral. Next came the arrangements to have two posthumous works published in addition to what was already scheduled to come out at the time of her death, and I read through the galley proofs one after another. I also organized readings of my mother's writings.. Over the course of reading my mother's works one by one, her words took on a fresh tone that was different from anything I'd sensed before.

Little by little, I began to realize what my mother had wanted to say. The meaning of her anger.

My mother had written it all down. That it nevertheless utterly escaped me until now just goes to show that people who are too close lose sight of the essence of a work.

After losing my younger brother, my mother wasn't angry only out of resentment.

Death was beyond comprehension to my mother. Since she lost her father when she was one and her older brother when she was twelve she must always have been thinking about it, but all understanding of the meaning of death escaped her after she lost her son. That's why she wanted to think about it, the meaning of the loss that is death. In order to do so she had to break free of her limits. If she stayed within the "mother who's lost a child" box, immersing herself in words of sympathy, she would end up acceding to the ready-made answers of society about the nature of death and the meaning of loss. That wouldn't lead her to their true meanings. My mother knew that. So she resisted and sought out the voices of people who'd gone beyond tears or accepting consolation. She started with Miyazawa Kenji, then moved on to read works about Auschwitz

and those related to war or to the atomic bombs in Japan, then memoirs and posthumous collections of other people who'd lost their children, one after another without regard for whether they were fiction or nonfiction. The voices she encountered there naturally came to include voices from minority groups. When she first heard the songs of the Ainu, she was surprised to find that the songs were written from the perspective of gods looking detachedly at humans, and she wondered how they could attain such a point of view. Through contact with the world of the epic poem of Manas in Kyrgyzstan, she came to sense that songs act as a foundation for people to rebuild their worlds even when they've lost their homelands. My mother's world was woven from and broadened by song.

My mother's voice echoes in the soft light.

This world is overflowing with words. People try to escape from the fear of loss by immersing themselves in words, but there are voices they can never hear as long as they are immersed that way.

A blue tablecloth. White dishes. An apple peel.

My mother's voice quickens and continues unbroken, rising into song.

When you first entered junior high, there was a time you came home from school with other girls from your class. The girls were waiting for you in the living room while you changed out of your uniform. I was working in the study next door. There was only one sliding door between us so I could hear their voices clearly. While they were drinking the tea you'd poured for them, those girls were bantering about how the

cups had tea stains, how the rims were chipped, things like that. At some point I heard a loud burst of laughter. You had changed and come out from your room. The girls were laughing at you, saying you looked strange and tacky. Then they ordered you to go change again. You went ahead and changed several times just as they asked. The fourth time you were heading back to your room to change yet again, I couldn't take it anymore and came out. When I asked what all of you were doing, the girls made faces like they knew they were in trouble and said "oh, nothing." You had a faint smile on your face.

You were afraid of being left alone then.

You were desperately trying to escape your fear of loss.

But as long as you live in fear of isolation, you'll continue to be at the mercy of all the words overflowing this world. So stop it already, please.

It's difficult not to fear isolation. You said that things got a bit better when you started in the theater, but even if you planned to free yourself from the conventions of society by leaving your company, you've always been one who cares what other people think, so I'm sure there are times you try your hardest to write a certain way because you feel constrained by what people say a drama should be. Particularly since your approach isn't oriented toward producing hits, I imagine there might be times when you're swayed by the judgment of others because you think you've got to win a prize. But in that case you're no different from how you were back then. If you fixate on the words of people who want only to laugh at you, you'll have to wear that faint smile and keep changing clothes for your whole life. In this world there are words that can only be heard in the depths of silence. Don't be afraid of isolation and loss. You might reply that there's no avoiding fear no matter what I say, but when you feel fear, instead of trying to find a way not

to be afraid, think about your writing. Look closely at the society you're trying to depict. When 3.11 took place, you realized that this society's systems can't function without the presence of people who are oppressed. The dairy farmer from Fukushima who wrote "if not for the nuclear plant" in the note he left when he committed suicide, or the laborers sent out from Kamagasaki to be exposed to radiation for little pay. And you saw that they make your life possible. You were hurt by the line that was being drawn when they said only women planning to have children should evacuate. And you came to understand how difficult it is to demand your rights when it's not for the sake of someone else, but for yourself. Given all that, you have to keep on thinking so, so much more about why this society is how it is, what we've lost and when we've lost it. Listen to the voices that can't be put into words, and pass them on. If you think you understand them, you're still far, far from their essence. The closer you get to something, the less of the whole you can see, until you can no longer recognize it. Once you can't recognize it anymore, you'll finally start to hear the voices that can't be put into words.

People who lost their homes or families in the earthquake and tsunami say "don't forget," don't they? They mean they shouldn't forget the pain and fear of loss they've experienced. But actually all people know the fear of loss. When I lost my child, I read books one after the next in order to find the meaning of that loss. I was amazed at how many words stemming from death have been left to us, and I was thankful for them. You should lend an ear to them too. The songs of indigenous peoples, passed down from ancient times when death was more familiar than it is now. The perspectives of people who really know how transient life is. If you do that, you'll surely come to see loss in a new light. You're sure to realize that it's precisely because of loss that this world is so vibrant. This world is made from repeated cycles of loss and rebirth. That's where its vibrancy comes from.

The tragedy of life in our time is that we've forgotten the meaning of loss, don't you think?

The poison with a half life that might as well be eternity taught me a new fear, of the impossibility of loss. That fear seemed to surpass anything the people in tune with the repeated cycles of loss and rebirth could have imagined. Why has humanity come to this point? I started to retrace history to find the reason. I reviewed everything piece by piece to see if there was something I'd missed. What an undertaking! I think it took years off my life. But I had a great time. Writing is really the most fun of all. The small bits and pieces you discover while you're at it, those are what's called "hope." Novels don't have the power to change the world. They can't stop war or do away with poverty. Yet there are words that are necessary precisely because the world won't be perfect no matter how much we struggle.

Several years ago I saw a musical with my daughter based on the theme that "music can't save the world." Since my daughter sensed the

deceit of the idea that any old song could save the world, she seemed to find the plot, in which every song made things worse, to be new and original. But I want you to understand. You, who are sitting in front of me right now. If the thought that "music can't save the world" doesn't question what songs are, or what it means to save the world, it's no different from blind faith in the ability of music to save the world. There's nothing new about it. It just renounces thought in favor of defiance. You do understand, don't you? You don't need to force yourself to find words. Society is already overflowing with the kind of words that would come to you. Instead hearken to them. First listen, then pass along the voices that can't be put into words. The questions that they raise. I know you understand. Don't worry, you can do it. You know you aren't saying anything significant now. That's your strong point. Without a doubt, as long as long as you try not to miss hearing the marginalized voices, you'll receive the message. I'm sure of it.

Make them hear it. The chorus of voices, languishing and neglected, that can't be put into words. My song.

Ishihara Nen is a playwright and the daughter of Tsushima Yūko. She has won several prizes including the Osaka Theatre Fortieth Anniversary Drama Prize and an Honorable Mention for the 24th Teatro Newcomer Drama Prize. Her many works include "Hiding a White Flower" and the short piece "Seeing Dreams," produced in 2011 by regional theaters across the US as part of the program Shinsai: Theaters for Japan Benefit for the Japan Playwrights' Association.

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