

The Voyage

by David P. Gontar (June 2015)

The three rows of tarnished gas lamps were already roaring at the dock when she arrived. Clouds of ephemeral insects twitched and chattered in the ochre conflagration, restless for extinction. Akira was nowhere in sight. Maybe they wouldn't rendezvous after all. By the water's edge a few dinghies sloshed about, each emblazoned with the grotesque face of a clown, green, red, and blue. What sort of child would laugh at these pathetic expressions? They were so sad and stupid with their lolling tongues, bulging eyeballs and swollen jowls. Sakura was surprised to discover that she was still carrying her purse – out of sheer animal habit. As she realized she wouldn't be needing it anymore, she almost smiled, dumping it discreetly in a trash bin beside the boardwalk. Why let him see it and mock her? Aimlessly she paced back and forth, trying to ignore the dank air. The revelers a few blocks away had quieted down, but would soon return to make an even bigger ruckus. She wanted to smoke, but of course she'd just tossed her cigarettes in the garbage.

A fierce arm thrust out of the shadows and seized her. So Akira was not going to desert her after all. She flung herself around him and feverishly kissed his neck. He was wearing only a thin tee shirt and tattered denims, his body lean and taut in her embrace, yet strangely impassive. His eyes were dim like the brackish water, yet glinted every so often with flashes of his former desire and idealism. She didn't want to see, and hid her face against his breast, waiting desperately for her frozen tears to melt.

"Are you ok?"

When she made no answer, he asked again.

"Yes," he heard her say softly, feeling her shiver.

"Come on."

It was the October festival. All afternoon the maze of streets had rocked with fireworks and inebriated young men rollicking beneath the divinities they bore on their strong backs. Now the stillness was eerie, like what you might experience in the eye of a typhoon.

Akira rowed them briskly towards the umbrageous heart of Tenbou Lake. His strokes were clean, pure and almost inaudible as she watched him pull them to love's terminus. In his canvas satchel she felt the heavy anchor, hempen rope and bottle of liquor. Searching in vain for a

spark of that seismic passion which had welded them together, she remained convinced it was still present, somewhere, churning inside him like an invisible dynamo. Akira shipped the oars, letting them drift through the dark. In the rippling glass over which they glided the moon splintered into millions of pieces.

The saki gave her courage. When her Harbor School skirt, blouse and gold-escutcheoned jacket finally lay in a puddle at the bottom of the boat, she felt safe in his last caresses. Let fate do its worst. Then it was his turn. As she stood to help him out of his trousers, a silver fish bolted from the depths, landing spluttering at her feet. Sakura gasped, losing her balance, and toppled clumsily into the chill blackness. Uncomprehending, he saw her waving at him, shrieking his name. There was no time to think. He dived in and took hold of her, hauling her back to the dinghy as she coughed and shuddered. Though her uniform was damp, she felt relieved as he draped the coat over her shoulders. Why was he so disconsolate? They had planned this excursion in joy. After a while she understood; it was Akira who was drowning – in failure. She tried to talk to him, to reassure him, to rekindle the impossible bond that appeared to have been extinguished by a gust of accident. But the magic had evaporated. In dead silence they reached the marina. By the time she climbed out of the dinghy he was gone without a word.

Hardly knowing what to do, Sakura wandered along the shore, dangling her sandals by the straps. The tears came freely now, though she didn't know why. After all, they had survived, hadn't they? Then, as she drew near the precinct center, she could hear the merrymakers taking up their great juggernauts. The gods were rousing. Her two older sisters ran up to greet her. For once she was glad to see them. "Come!" they shouted. "Come quickly. Can't you hear them singing? Father and his friends are waiting for us." Then they poured their rice wine down her throat. "Yes", she thought, "the will of heaven cannot be denied." And as she joined them in their rowdy chanting, the deeds of the *kami* were hot in her mouth.

David P. Gontar's latest book is [Hamlet Made Simple and Other Essays](#), New English Review Press, 2013.

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