LOOKING INTO THE SUN

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WHEN I WOKE up that morning, my throat was already sore from the dry heat of the night. The hair on the back of my neck was sticky with sweat, and the futon cover felt damp and heavy. At breakfast, while I ate a dish of rice and sipped noisily at a bowl of salty miso soup, I told Mother that I had had nightmares again, so she let me wear my favorite blue and white kimono. It was made of very thin, fragile cotton embroidered with expensive silk, and I was supposed to wear it only for special occasions. It had a pattern of butterflies and lilies intertwined on it, which Mother said brought good luck to girls who behaved themselves, and I felt especially safe when I wore it. She had assured me long ago that it would keep away any evil spirits that might try to distract me as I walked to school or that might try to make me disobedient and willful.

Nevertheless, I felt anxious as I walked the short distance to First Elementary, carefully trying to keep my kimono and white tabi socks unsoiled to avoid a scolding in front of the class. I dreaded getting to school in the morning, when Teacher carefully looked over each student, making sure our clothes were clean and our notebooks neat and orderly. Even worse than Teacher's daily scrutiny was the question and answer session before classes began. Every day, Teacher would ask a different student to stand up and tell the class what he or she would do in the service of the Emperor. I knew that any day it would be my turn. The other students all knew what they would do for the Emperor. Standing up and bowing to Teacher, they answered his question in high, unfaltering voices. "I would cut out my tongue rather than tell our secrets to the enemy, teacher." "I would kill my parents and then myself rather than be taken alive." "I would devote my life to fighting in the Emperor's service."

I was sitting quietly at my desk arranging my lesson books and making sure my writing brush was supple enough to make strong, clean brush strokes. Suddenly, I heard my name and realized that Teacher was ordering me to stand up and tell the class what I would

do for the Emperor. My hands began to sweat and my voice shook. "I would die, Teacher," I said. "I would slit open my belly and die."

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That afternoon, I got home from school late—Teacher had not been pleased with my flower arranging, and I had not been able to leave at three o'clock with the other girls, but had had to stay after and practice. I had felt nervous with Teacher hovering over me and was sure that he resented my hesitant, deceitful voice when I answered his question that morning. In my haste and worry, I kept breaking the stems off my flowers, and finally, with his brows knotted into a scowl and his lips pressed tightly together, Teacher hit me over the knuckles with his stick and sent me home with the admonition not to be such a stupid, clumsy girl.

When I got home, my hand still stinging from the hard blow and my shoes and tabi brown from the dusty road, Mother and Father were in the kitchen listening to the radio. The radio was on constantly then, to keep us informed of the progress of the war and to broadcast safety bulletins. I went into my small room at the back of the house. The sun shone directly onto the roof of the room, and it grew almost unbearably hot during the day. I lay down on the floor, pressing my cheek to the cool tatami, and licked my sore knuckles, trying to get the redness to go away so Mother and Father wouldn't notice I had been hit.

Just then, I heard a muffled cry from Mother and I got up and hurried back into the kitchen. Mother and Father were staring at the radio. Mother had turned the volume up, and the static was loud and crackled, periodically drowning out the voice. "The enemy has created a new and most cruel bomb, . . ." The next sentence was lost in a flurry of static. Mother grabbed my upper arm so hard that it hurt. "That's Him! That's Him!" she cried. Her voice was high and harsh, and I had never heard her use the shortest, crudely masculine speech form. Too surprised to concentrate on the pain, I pulled my arm away. When the Emperor's words became distinguishable once more, I did not understand them. They were long and unfamiliar sounding, and I did not even know where one word ended and the next began.

As the Emperor's voice filled the room, I remembered the day last June when Mother and Father had brought me to see the Emperor. It was one of his rare public appearances at the Meijii Palace, and it seemed everyone in Tokyo had come to the Palace that day; the sound of wooden geta shoes clicking and clattering was like geese calling to each other as they flew overhead. Mother and Father reminded me numerous times before we got there that I absolutely mustn't look at the Emperor, for He was a direct descendant of the sun. Mother took

her hand and placed it over my face, showing me how to arrange my fingers correctly so my eyes wouldn't be burned out by the sight of Him.

When the gong sounded, signalling that He was about to appear, Father put me up on his shoulders so I wouldn't be jostled by the crowd. In a ripple of movement, everyone raised their hands to their faces and bent their heads. I held my hands over my eyes like everyone else, but spread my fingers a little. From underneath, I could still see out. Not daring to gaze at the Emperor, I looked around at the crowd. Tens of thousands of sweating people stood staring at the ground, hands raised to shield their eyes. The sound of the gong hung in the quiet air. From up on Father's shoulders all I could see before me were bowed heads, the hair on top shining as it caught the afternoon light.

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For the few minutes that Emperor's voice filled our kitchen the neighborhood was silent. No doors slid in their tracks. No thwack of a dusty futon being beaten with a stick sounded in the air. Then, after three or four seconds, screams came from houses up and down the street, doors slammed and people ran outside, their hands pressed over their ears. Father, who was too old to fight in the war and had been turned down for service, didn't move from his tatami. He just let the tears fall down his cheeks. It was the first time I had ever seen him cry.

I began to sob, and the sight of Father and the noises all around me gave rise to a panic that choked off my breath. I went over to where Mother stood, a pot of unhusked rice in front of her, her hands hanging motionless over it. But she pushed me away, something she had never done before. I tried to put my arms around her waist, but she disentangled herself without even looking at me, and let her hands drop to her sides. She walked slowly out of the kitchen into the small dressing room which adjoined her bedroom. Frightened, I did not want to follow her; it did not occur to me to go to Father. Afraid to dirty my kimono by wiping my eyes and nose on the sleeve, I used my hand, sticky with tears and rice starch.

I made my way to the door of Mother's dressing room. She had not slid the shoji all the way shut, and peering timidly through a crack, I saw her kneeling on the silk brocade cushion in front of her mirror. She seemed to search through her little sewing basket, the one she let me play with at night while she braided my hair into a tight coil, pulling so hard on the roots that tears would well up in my eyes.

After a few minutes she pulled out her long embroidering needle. Without any hesitation she pushed it firmly into first one ear, then the

other. When she put down the needle, her face was white as cotton and her hand was shaking uncontrollably. She inserted into each ear a small strip of gauze wadded into a ball. When she pulled it out, it was soaked with blood. I slipped through the crack of the open door and stepped inside the room, still crying, and called out "Mama, Mama." But she didn't turn around or say anything to acknowledge my presence.

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That summer and the following fall, I lived in a constant state of fear—fear that I would be found out and exposed to everyone. Often, when I remembered my behavior in school that morning, I wept with guilt at my own treachery and deceit.

It seemed to me that only I had escaped unscathed. Not only Mother and Father, but our friends, neighbors, my school teachers—all bore visible scars and wounds from that day. Many, like Mother, had fulfilled their vows never to hear another voice after listening to the Emperor's. Many others took their lives in the days that followed. Not able to face the unbearable humiliation of losing the war, and sure that an honorable death was still possible, they would not taint themselves by behaving as if nothing had happened.

Father seemed to walk more slowly than before. Instead of his formerly purposeful stride, which even in my bedroom I had been able to hear rattling the dishes in the tall cupboard, I now heard the scrape of his slippers dragging across the mats. At meals his chopsticks dropped from his fingers, and a few long seconds would elapse before he picked them up and began eating again. Most of the time the house was quiet. When Mother spoke, it was usually in a whisper, for now that she could not hear her own voice, she lived in constant fear of speaking too loudly. And I had curbed my former chatter, knowing that what I said went for the most part unheard, since Mother of course could not understand unless she looked at my face and watched my lips. Father spent more and more time at the post office, often not arriving home until after nine o'clock. He ate his dinner alone, long after I had finished mine and was soaking in the tub or hunched over my writing table, trying to imitate Mother's graceful, flowing calligraphy. During those hot, sleepless nights, I lay in bed and contemplated the enormity of the lie I had told. In my room on the other side of the screen from my parents, I waited eagerly for nightfall to cloak my shame in darkness. I knew only that in my black heart, I had betrayed the Emperor and deserved to die the death of beggars and outcasts, those whose bodies lay unnoticed in the street until August heat began to work on them and they started to rot,

filling the air with their stench.

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September came. At night the cicadas chirped more loudly than ever. In school we read poems about them, about how their chirps grow louder as they get closer to death. In the mornings, the thinnest layer of ice covered the water in my basin, so thin I could break it with the slightest pressure of my fingers.

At school each morning, a different student came to the front of the class and explained how to cook or eat one of the foods the occupation army had distributed that week. When it was my turn, I brought in one of the fifty packs of gum Mother had received as that week's rations. When we had examined the package at home, Mother had refused to try any of the gum. I loved the sweet tasting saliva it made in my mouth and put in three pieces at once, almost gagging as I tried to swallow the strange, slippery wad. In class I explained that the wrappers weren't edible, and showed them how to slide the stick out without tearing the paper, a trick I had discovered while seeing how high I could stack the pieces of gum. Then I carefully folded one stick into a small square, chewed it and swallowed it. Glancing proudly at Teacher's face, I was surprised and confused to see his amused expression. Back at my desk, as he explained to the class that you were supposed to spit out the gum after chewing it, I blushed angrily. Later, at home, I chewed one stick after another, not waiting for the first to lose its flavor before taking it out of my mouth and unwrapping a new piece. Though Mother still would not try any of the gum, she fastened the colored wrappers next to the plain white papers that were tied to the branches of the little wishing tree in the tea room.

One morning after all the leaves had fallen from the trees, I woke up and realized that the night before I had fallen asleep almost right away. Lying in bed, I had not heard the sound of my voice shaking as I answered Teacher; I had not pictured myself standing before the class, the eyes of the students watching me scornfully, as I had imagined and dreamed of them doing night after night. I had forgotten to be afraid. That day as I walked to school, hearing the crunch of my shoes on the frosty ground, it occurred to me that the others too would not really have made the sacrifices they had boasted of. Perhaps they had never intended to do all those things they had claimed they would.

In the spring, the Emperor once again appeared at the Palace. Mother and Father and I stood in the crowd, holding hands, the cool breeze drying the sweat on our foreheads even as it formed. Standing at the gateway to the Palace, the Emperor gave a blessing for the new

year, then read a poem and said a prayer for the dead as he looked out over the crowd. We looked back at him.