

SNOWFALL

inspired by the films of Takeshi Kitano

one : “Cucumber Horse”

I don't remember when I met Sunglasses Man, only that it must have been the summer, because the mosquito nets were up. I remember sweat and rain. Zaru-soba and the smell of wet bamboo. He stood on the doorstep, every bit soaked but glasses unfogged. I did not think much of it. I did not invite him inside.

She went first. I remember setting up white paper lanterns outside and buying fat cucumbers at the market. She always carved the ugliest little spirit horses. I never really understood why that was a part of the ritual, but I carved one anyway. For her. Placed it on the porch when it was done and ate the shavings. I kneeled and lit incense for her. Clapped twice, held my hands in prayer. There wasn't much to wash off her fresh grave.

In retrospect, there must have been something a little sinister about how much she loved the Bon Odori dances. It's like death was made for her. The spirit world was hers before she entered it. I can still picture her standing in the doorway, with her brand new yukata – midnight blue patterned with white flowers. A resolute smile on her face. Her forehead glimmering in the early evening heat.

Her name I'll keep to myself like a secret talisman, unspoken. A compass for beyond, a cucumber horse to lead her home.

two : "The Festival"

"Come on, Shinji, we're going to be late!" she cried, adjusting her yukata.

"I'm coming, I'm coming!" I shouted back from the kitchen, making my way to the door.

"You don't have to wear that, you know." I never really understood her commitment to the holiday. She was always so meticulous in her preparations.

"Just— hurry up." She replied, ignoring my comment.

I tied my shoes and followed her out the door. She had already placed yellow lanterns on the porch for the ancestors. Picture it : warm light, windchimes, distant sounds of music and chatter. Her face, strands of black hair.

(I'll make a confession to you : it's easier to love her now that she's gone. She went first, but she stayed mine.)

We made our way to the bay, where we had been attending the Bon Odori festival since we had moved to the countryside – two years prior. The smell of incense and street food filling the heavy summer air, I watched her face light up as we approached the festival. Folk music, chanting, drumming and *shamisen* were all mixed up in a cheerful hubbub. Dances to honor the dead. The sun falling down on Sagami Bay. Young children playing in the sand.

Once the night fell, the festival goers prepared for *hana-bi*, the fireworks show. Hana-bi. Flower-fire. It's just like her to have gone out with a bang. I lost her in the crowd around midnight. As the festival began to dissolve, I assumed she had gone home. It's only once I found our bed still made that I went looking for her. I think I still am looking for her, the truth of her. Not the shell that once kept her spirit.

They found her just off the riverbed, her yukata drenched in blood from where the bullet had hit her. My eastern Ophelia, my warning sign. I knew we couldn't hide in the hills of Kamakura for long. It was my mistake for pretending we could.

three : “Exodus”

I am not an honest man. She knew that when she married me, but she did it anyway. It would have been useless to try and fight her, my stubborn girl. Maybe if she hadn't followed me, she would still be alive.

I got into this *yakuza* business when I was young and wanted to fight. School was of no use to me. They took me in like family. I should've known blood bonds can't be severed. I should've known there was no way out. I thought because I was merely a *kobun*, a foster child, that my exile would not be noticed. It was when Masaru, my best and only friend, was killed in a shootout with a rival family that I officially decided to leave Tokyo. With him gone, I had nothing left to keep me there. I was just married. I did not want to die a dishonorable man.

We decided to move to Kamakura because it was hilly and near the ocean. I thought, if it was good enough for the Shogun to have made it their military base, it would be good enough for me. We bought an old house on the outskirts of town, surrounded by trees. For two years, we lived a simple life. For two years, I thought we were safe. But I could feel her getting restless. She had found a sort of glamor in being the gangster's wife. And so she died a gangster's wife : bloodied by the side of the river, sending a message. *We know where you are.*

four : “The Beach”

I packed a bag and took the night train to Aomori. Someone on the train was selling hot yams from a cart. The sweet smell conjured up a trove of memories like a strong wind blowing through a drafty house. I changed cars and tried to ignore the unshakable feeling of having left something behind. She was gone now. Dwelling on it was of no use.

After staying at a local inn for a week, I bought a house near the beach, with bamboo screens and tatami floors. I never was one for traditional things, but it was the best I could find. All that was left of its previous owners was a small stone buddha in the courtyard. Moss had begun to cover it. I'm not a superstitious man, but still thought it best to leave it where it was. I would take whatever small protection I could get.

But I knew it would only be a matter of time until they found me.

Six months passed, and the excitement of the summer soon faded to brown hues, then barren trees and snowfall. I began keeping small trays of oranges for the buddha. I busied myself with repairing the house.

It was night when they came for me. I remember the clatter of shingles, and the windows sweating icicles in the humid winter air. The family sent two young men, just like Masaru and I once were. I did not blame them. I remembered being in their place.

I stepped out into the snow still in my dressing gown. I watched as they drew their guns. As the ground pulled at me, I thought of fireworks. Her face, my fire-flower.

There are worse ways to go.

That was the winter of Sunglasses Man's return.

The snowfall was late that season, after New Year's. I can still feel that faint taste of tangerine and sticky rice from the kagami-mochi I made with the neighbors when they invited me over. *You shouldn't be spending the New Year alone*, they said.

Sunglasses Man wanted to go to the beach. He didn't speak and I didn't ask, but we both knew, and this time I came with him. It was the first heavy snow of the season. I had never been somewhere so quiet. We stood and stared at the unreadable horizon for what seemed like hours.

Crimson is stark against white ground. The snow called out to me. In the vast and hollow corridors of memory, all I could remember was that muted fall. The taste of blood. The *pop!* like fireworks in the night.

I knew his second apparition would be the last. I knew he had taken me where I was meant to go.