



The Immigrant's Song

A Selection of Student Monologues

City Arts and Tech High School, San Francisco, CA

The Thirty-Eighth Dong

by Yvette Li



Setting: Kitchen/over the stove

Props: Large pot(s), fresh produce mentioned in story, apron, spoon(s)

Mrs. Nguyen comes in every day at 10. Right before the hottest part of the day, the time she balances her two baskets over her shoulder and sells her sweet durians and fragrant lychees to thirsty passer-bys roaming the streets of Vietnam. “Boss, one bowl of *dry-tossed seafood noodle*” she says while carefully pouring herself a cup of tea. Mr. Tran and his son come eight minutes later for bowls of hot *beef brisket noodle soup* right before opening their herb shop. They are our first customers on sunny days, rainy days, windy days and foggy days, if fog ever reached Vietnam. When you’ve been in the noodle business as long as I have, you’d know your most loyal customers’ schedules too. For my family and me, our day started six hours ago. My husband gets all the money-related business out of the way while I heat the soups and stews we started cooking the night before. Flour and spread the thirty-eight pounds of noodles. Chop the cilantro and scallions. Start plating bean sprouts, basil, five types of mint, and lemon wedges for every order of hot noodle soup. Always something to do. My four sons help me before, after and sometimes during school. *Ga Ging*, my third son, delivers orders on his bicycle. *Minh*, my oldest son, helps me in the kitchen.

All very bright and all very obedient. And then there’s *Ah Ha* and *Ah Gouw*, my little brothers, both appropriately named. *Ah Ha* [giggle] was the smallest like a shrimp, so we named him after one. *Ah Gouw* was born in the year of the dog so we named after it for his loyalty, stubbornness and honesty. Mother takes care of the children most of the time to relieve me of the stress from the restaurant.

It was not always like this. My passion only recently became my job, a very tedious one too. After Ho Chi Minh and the Communists took over a few years back, our restaurant stopped prospering the way we had hoped. All of North Vietnam was under Communist rule, our communal rations kept us from ever having enough. It was difficult to repay favors with complimentary noodles. I couldn’t provide extra mint for customers like Mr. Tran, who preferred them to basil. I guess these are only my selfish requests but I need my customers as much as, if not more than, they need my food. Even with the help of my mother with the children, the Communist rule affected life at home. Minh, a natural born rebel, won’t stop protesting about the new lesson that was forced upon them. “I go to school to know stuff; learn about mummies, planets and cowboys, not recite stupid songs!” I didn’t know what to do. Go against the government, lose my life. Keep living the life we have now... well...we’d never be free.

The sun painted the sky pink; I could feel the humid Vietnamese air. We had dinner. *Low Dow* went outside to join all the other men who lived in our alley to smoke his pipe. The children ran off. You know, all the usuals. I poured the bucket of dirty soap water into the kitchen drain when *Ah Gouw* walked into the kitchen while rubbing his belly. “*Ah Jeh*, did you make any dessert soups tonight?” “The *sweet corn dessert* is in the pot over there. The coconut milk is in that bowl.” He walks towards the pot and lifts the lid taking in the sweet aroma. “What has gotten into you tonight? You hate my desserts.” “I don’t know” he said, “I felt like I

wanted something sweet. Actually, I have something to ask you.” “What? You lost your job. I knew it. That boss of yours has never liked you.” “It’s not that” he interrupted, “Well, I was talking to *Thanh* from work and he told me about a trip. It would cost thirty-eight dong.” I stop pouring. His red and tired eyes face me. “*Thanh’s* brother has already done it. The boat ride is only a few days and it is perfectly safe because we’ll be in the bottom of a fisherman’s boat.” “What are you talking about?” “Escaping to America. *Ah Jeh*, we can’t live like this any longer. We need freedom. Mother and *Sung Goh* want me to go. I’ve already talked to them. I’ll go to America, become a citizen and come back to get you guys. Meanwhile, you can sell the restaurant, collect our belongings and wait for my return. I’ll come back.”

“I’ll come back...I’ll come back” the voice whispered. I can still hear the sound of his voice in my head. I listen back to that very voice that brought me here today and wonder what convinced me to let my little brother go. I remember the months we imagined his safe landing or some assurance of his safety, a letter, a call, anything. I learned the art of being numb. I remember finally gathering that last thirty-eighth dong and feeling a hesitant joy while giving him my blessing that night at the dock. I stared at the boat until my eyes could no longer find them, praying he would land in America.

My Canción

by Alma Herrera-Pazmino



A.B.C.D.E.F. I can’t believe I have to do this. Practice my freaking alphabet? But I have to if I want to if I want to be “normal”. This is for my papa. I’m just sitting here in a desk that has probably used by 10 generation of kids while I’m looking at an old dusty chalkboard with unknown words on it. It’s like I’m a kid again, pretty soon my mom’s going to have to start changing my pampers. If I was back in Guatemala I know that I’d be out playing soccer with my friends practicing our scoring dance after we made a goal. I can hear everyone yelling and laughing. “Pasa me la pelota!!!” Now I’m sitting here in this room with 7 other kids that don’t know English either.

“What is your name?”

“Que?”

This is the first conversation I ‘member having with a teacher at me middle school. There standing in front of me was an old, wrinkly, tall prune. He wore some long black slacks that made it seem like he was a scarecrow with a live dinosaur head that talked. He would lean over my desk and breathe heavily like there was some kind of truck stepping on the brakes in front of my face, letting the smog take over my air. His heavy hot coffee breath made me put my face down to my desk and just shake my head so he would go away. Everyday I traced the words F-U-C-K T-H-I-S S-C-H-O-O-L! on my desk. Good thing I started practicing my alphabet. It was bad enough that we had to smell the teacher’s hot breath, but it was a whole bunch of kids that didn’t know what deodorant was, in one classroom. It smelled like someone just finished playing a game and hung up their soccer shoes right next to the fan after a cat had pissed on it.

I remember the first day of school. It was just un big blur, tu sabes... Everything was huge, era enorme. The school was so big, I was so small, even though I'm tall for 12. It was like 20 of my houses in Guatemala could fit in there. Yo me sentia bien chiquito like a how do you say it... aunty, no ANT!

“DO U KNOW WHERE U R GOINGGGG?” Secretary yelled in my ear. I am Guatemalan not Stupid! I don't know why people think that loud plus slow equals Spanish. I have to go to school for my education. Sometimes it feels like I'm repeating history because in Guatemala they would teach us these things twice as fast I think you call it Deyavu? Algo asi... Like Christopher Columbus, I already knew he didn't discover America. Well at lest it gives me more time to focus on my mama.

Focusing on my mama just always reminds me why I'm in this class. It reminds me of my papa too. I need to learn English to take care of my mom because I'm the man until my papa comes to take care of us. It's not safe here and people don't care about other people. They smoke in your face, even in baby's faces and when they talk to you their breath stinks really bad. But they don't care. I wish I was back home in Esquincla. The community would always making sure you have food and have your back if you need to go into the city, they can give you a ride. One time I lost my soccer ball in the trees and my neighbor Santiago climbed up there to get it since I was so small.

I still remember leaving Guatemala. That day went by as quick as flipping a tortilla. I remember. I felt my stomach turning like it was a continuous carousal inside of a Ferris wheel, hay que nauscia. My father just wants it to be better for us because he can't provide if there aren't any more jobs there. Even though I had no problem with my life there. There I was a Jaguar, and *Esquincla* was my jungle, my playing field, my comfort. In America I feared I might just be a leg on a centipede and fall in the shadows of the nobodies.

Every night I look at the moon and I know my dad is looking at the same moon. It lets me know my dad is still coming. He's on his way traveling by land everyday and every night until he sees our faces again.

[Flash back to the day I left Guatemala and my father.]

“ Quiero que quides y protejes a tu madre. Ella es bien fuerte pero quien sabe como son las personas aya y lo que pasara cada dia. Los estudios son muy importantes porque no quiero que gente piense que no somos inteligentes solo porque no hablamos el lenguaje. Por eso también es importante que aprendes el ingles, haci puedes ayudar a tu mama con las compras y contestar el teléfono. Así pueden comprar comida y habla r contestar cuando les llamo de aquí. Luego tú le puedes enseñar el ingles. Ponte sabio porque la vida esta llena de sorpresas. Nos vamos a ver muy pronto protegese y no se preocupe nos vamos a ver pronto te lo prometo.” Dice papa.

“Pero a mi me gusta nuestra vida aquí muy bien. No hay problemas y aquí tengo a mis amigos y mi escuela. No quiero ir me.” Le digo con tristeza.

“Ya se pero no podemos vivir aquí, ya no hay mas trabajos. Tengo que agarrar otro trabajo para soportar a ti y tu mama. Que no quieries ir en el avión? Me dijisteis que eso era tu ilusión. Mira, Cuando llego vamos a comprar una casa y no vamos estar pobres. Vamos a poder vivir nuestra vida tranquila. Te voy a poder comprar todo de lo que quieries y vamos a seguir nuestra vida como familia sin problemas. Ya vas a ver, recuérdate que una sonría cura el Corazón. Nunca seas negativo porque siempre hay algo mejor que te espera en el camino. Te veo en un ratito. No te olvides que te amo.”

I haven't seen my papa for 3 months. The last words he speaks, replay in my head every night antes de dormir, and I pray to God he's safe and always keep faith in my heart. That's why I smile.

Not knowing English is a struggle. School is there to help me out in learning the language, but I can't just go to the store yet because I don't know what to ask for or what it's even called. It's hard. And it gets me frustrado! Como si me quiero jalar los pelos de la caveza when I can't say what I want in English. Soon enough I will be able to go the store and ask for a "coka" with out getting cheated for my money. Soon I will accomplish my goal and help my mama out with groceries and answering the phone. This is what I will do to make my father proud. Little by little I'll learn. Baby steps, u know?

Home Sweet Home

by Jazmine Kamariotis

SETTING: ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE CLASS

Free, such a strange word. Free, freedom, strange. English has always seemed strange to me.

What's a synonym of sorry? (raises hand) Regret? (sits back in chair and leans head in hands)

(pause) It seems like all my memories of Germany are fading like the morning San Francisco fog in the afternoon sun. (pause and give a huge smile) But I can remember those times when we would bake bread together. I can just picture it right now: My family would wake up early just as the sun was coming up. My brother and I would always be the first ones up. We would run to the kitchen and pull out all the ingredients and supplies we would need. Then our parents would walk in, dragging their feet, and rubbing the sleep out of their eyes. (laughs). My favorite part was making the dough. As a child I loved getting my hands dirty. Then we would bake the dough. My brother and I used to sit in front of the oven as if it was a TV set and watch the bread rise, then after my father took us to the farmer just down the road from us, to get fresh milk. I remember one morning my brother and I would dressed up like hippies, sat on top of the sacks of corn we had in our kitchen, play the guitar and sing for our parents. And then after we would ask for money. (pause and sigh)

Once again I have that sense that I belong and I have a home. I could never move back to Germany. I have found true love. I have found America.

America is my home. I can remember thinking when I first came here (pause) jeeze what was it? Like 4 years ago (pause) I remember feeling like I was home even though I had never been here before. (sigh heavily)

My first week here, (laugh) I remember going to my usual grocery store before it was my usual grocery store. I felt as if I was in a haunted house. The labels and the produce look so strange to me. I never thought I would have been so happy at the familiar sight of carrots and celery. I must have walked up and down each aisle hundreds of times with only a bag of apples, a stock of celery, some sourdough bread, and packaged carrots. After being in the store for



almost two hours I was able to round up enough courage to pay. I walked to the front of the store and looked down all the cashier stands looking for someone who seemed friendly and patient. I finally stopped and got into a line. The man who was behind the counter was short and chubby with black hair that was standing on end as if he had just been electrocuted. He had small beady eyes that turned into the same shape as his mouth when he smiled.

I stared at him as I placed my basket of food on the counter. I felt sick. I did not know how to use American money. He must have sensed my feelings because he gave me this smile that I knew was genuine. The kind that a mother or father gives their child to let them know that they are going to be right beside you and that nothing can harm you. I looked up at him and forced myself to give him the slightest smile. He rang up my food and it came out to be \$5.30. My hand shook as I took out my wallet from my purse. I took out a dollar and handed it to the man. He looked at me and gave me that same smile. I pulled out another dollar and handed it to him. He understood my dilemma. He was very patient and helped me understand the money. We were there for half an hour, and I could hear the people behind me grunting with anger. But the man stood there until I was able to count out the money myself. I remember the overwhelming sense of belonging.

Ich fühle in Amerika frei. No, (pause and has puzzled look on face) I feel free in America. Being free is the world to me. I was born into a family where our whole philosophy is to be free and be yourself. Being free is all that matters to me. Everyone in America is of different ethnicities and all have different opinions and different experiences but one thing that never changes is the idea of freedom. There is that word again. English is so strange.

(snaps out of daydream and looks around room. Noticing that class has been out for some time I grab my notebook and run off stage)

Life Is Like a Box of Chocolates

In the POV of Desiree Cecilia Chang, my Mom

by Morgan Ashley Chang

Two years can mark the extraordinary milestone in the life of a child born premature at 3 pounds. Two years can mark the unbelievable length of a Hollywood marriage. Two years is also 715 days, or 1,051,200 minutes. But at the age of eight, two years marked the longest period in my life. Two years was how long it took for my family to be reunited after my mom and I first left the Philippines.

Where did I grow up? After living in San Francisco for over 30 years, I would say right here in the city. But I was born in the Philippines, in Manila. There was a quiet bustle about the city, still untouched by the growing hunger of commerce and capitalism. The sun's rays always beat down, leaving everyone to run around in their shorts, tank tops, and *chinellas*, or slippers.

I was the first of my siblings to leave Manila. It was exciting, but still I was scared. I didn't wanna leave my dad; I was a Daddy's girl. He'd always cook me delicious foods like *Guinataang* and *Kure Kure*. Leaving the Philippines meant leaving behind certainty and a familiar lifestyle I was accustomed to.



It was the summer of 1969, right after my youngest sister May was born, when my mom came to me. I was playing outside with Ben, my older brother. We just finished racing and were about to go again. I always loved running as a kid, it was a way to release all my emotions, and drop all my cares.

My face was dripping beads of sweat, but the breezy Pacific Ocean winds came by like a cloak of cool air sent to refresh me. She motioned for me to come over, but I didn't want to. "Just one more race, Mommy!" *Psst*. My attitude changed completely, knowing now whatever she wanted was important. I walked over slowly, trying to delay whatever it was that I was about to get in trouble for.

"What is it, Mom?" I asked, looking down at my feet, in fear of the lecture I was expecting. I tried as hard as I could to act like the laces on my shoes were so entrancing.

"Pupunta ako sa America."

We are going to America. I finally looked up at her, and saw the worry lines forming across her forehead. She never gave me an exact reason, but I never asked. I figured her reasoning was the same as every other immigrant's; she wanted our family to seek out the American Dream. Everyone always spoke of the opportunities we would have when we got here. Better jobs, money, and lifestyles. All I really cared about was getting chocolates.

My aunts and uncles that were already in San Francisco would send over chocolates for special occasions. At least twice a year, that brown cardboard box would come to our doorstep, with a myriad of stamps decorated across the top. Ben and I would always fight to open the box, being the two oldest kids. But every year my mom would come over, yell at us and take the box away. Within two days, she would take the box back out of its hiding place and let us open it. There in front would be eight bars of Hershey's chocolates, one for each of us. I remember trying to take small bites, hoping to savor the taste. In the end, the bar wouldn't last me more than an hour. We had candy in the Philippines, but nothing compared to chocolates.

Once we arrived at SFO Airport, I could see it. My treasure was only 100 feet away. A simple sprint could get me those chocolates in 5 seconds. But my mom had a firm grip on my hand; careful not to lose me in this new place we would be calling home. "Desiree! Desiree! Over here!" I looked over and saw my Tito Al. We would be staying at his house until our whole family arrived from Manila.

"Hi, Desiree. I have something for you!" At the sound of this, my eyes lit up and my heart began beating faster. Was it a chocolate bar just like I wished for? He reached into his jacket pocket slowly and pulled out my gift. It was a chocolate bar for sure; I felt it in my gut. But I looked and saw a tacky, red, San Francisco souvenir pen. Inside was a mini Golden Gate Bridge and glitter. "Oh, *Salamat*, Tito." I thanked him.

We approached the automatic doors, ready to leave the airport. I couldn't leave without a chocolate bar. I knew my mom would most likely yell at me for asking to buy one; she was always the one who disciplined us. This time I didn't care. I tugged on her dress and pointed to the gift shop. She must've been in a good mood, or maybe she felt like spoiling me since I was the only child with her at the time, but she brought me over to the store. There, I had what seemed like an endless amount of choices. I closed my eyes and reached out, picking up a bar with a brown, red, white and blue wrapper. "Snickers..." Satisfied with my choice, I smiled at the teller shyly and placed the Snickers on the counter.

Immigrant's Song

by Leah Trevor

It was the morning I had dreamed about night after night but now that it was here I wanted it to stay only in imagination. Everything I touched that morning had an effect on me. Clothes I wore when I was a child still raggy and torn with age and tatter, jewelry that never lost it's sparkle, the pictures and furniture that I grew up jumping on when my father wasn't home all of these things made me depressed. Just things I didn't even know I had made me depressed. It was the last time I would be with all of those things. I pocketed a pair of old chopsticks that suddenly contained all importance to me. I had all my things packed for days, so I had nothing to do that morning but wait for James to come and pick me up and take me to the ship that would bring me to America. I stayed in my room crying, waiting for someone to come in and say goodbye to me, I wanted but no one came in. My last time ever able to talk with them, and they say nothing to me. My Uncle and Aunt stopped speaking with me the first word they caught of my relationship with James The American. It was hard enough to not get a goodbye from them that I needed one from my parents. I didn't need them to approve of the choice that I was making. I needed them to tell me that they would miss me. I left my room and I faced my father as I was to leave. He and I both knew this would be the last time we would ever be in the same room as each other, the same country. The last time I would smell the smell of my home, sweet and fresh and warm. The last time I could look him square in the eye, stand with him face to face. The word last was tattooed on everything and everyone that morning. I looked at my father and he looked at me. We stood there like two deer caught in the headlights. Blank stares but behind them was a world of emotions that we concealed in our eyes. I was leaving with an American I knew that was the only thing playing in his head. He hated the whole idea. I couldn't help it, I gave in and started crying right there in front of him. I had never cried in front of him, I couldn't ever bring myself that kind of shame and embarrassment. He hugged me and I became angry with myself. Angry with myself for not hugging him more over the years because then maybe this last hug wouldn't be so hard to walk away from. But, he didn't tell me once that he would miss me or that he loved me. My anger wasn't at myself after I thought of that. My anger was spewing out all over him and I couldn't help it.



“Why won't you just be happy for me?” I screamed and my face was burning red, my cool tears steamed off of my hot face. I was going to the Land of Dreams. “I'm going to the land of the free Father! Don't you want me to be happy?” I was screaming at him. I had never screamed like that at him like this before. Not even in my dreams would I ever speak to him like this. He was my father and I had always been too proud of him, that's what he would tell me. He had told me so many times, “Once you leave, be gone!” but this is when it hurt the most. I was going and it was real. This was my reality and I thought that when the time came for me to leave he wouldn't say that. I thought it would be different when it actually came. My father was never different, he was always strong willed and never backed down. For some reason, I thought this would be different. On the 11 day ship ride to the country and settled my brain by the idea that I was leaving with a man that loved me, but in doing so I was loosing another. James made me see that.

I would never want to relive that day. Walking away from my home, I would never want to do that again. Walking away and leaving it all behind me was the hardest thing I have ever done. Everything I considered hard before then was petty and I felt so foolish for thinking that it was anything. My father always told to keep my head held high. Because way up there nothing can bring you down. I was told to be strong and be brave. Then, nothing can cause you any harm. The morning I walked out of that house my head was down. I had always been at the top in school. I got good grades and all the teachers loved me. After living in this country for many years I have come to realize that nothing here is of any priority. People here take what they are able for granted. Some don't even see what is right in front of their faces. They won't ever know what they could become and they don't even dip their feet into the possibilities. This is what I hate about here. Nothing is anything to people born here. If this is not enough reason for me to be here and take advantage of this place, I don't know what would be. This is my home as much as it is theirs as much as we chose to make it our own world. I would dream of it when I was a little girl and in dreams this country was my home. I looked just like the pinup girls in the magazines. I dreamed of going on the movies and becoming something. In my dreams I always became something of priority. In Japan there is a hierarchy among everyone, everywhere you look. Social standards and presentation is all that matters, even the food has to be perfect. Pinup girls, Betty Grable, being on movies that was so over the top to me when I was young. All Japanese girls wanted to be just like Betty. It is what I have left of Japan. Still, ask me if I'm American. Yes, I am truly American.

Even though the way my father and I left each other was the way that it was, we wrote letters. We never called, we just wrote. We would write on holidays and I would never speak of anything about here. It was an unwritten law between us. It was always considering him and home and mother and things in Japan. They stopped after my fifth child Robert was born. I got a call from my younger brother. The same brother that many years before my family had thought was one of the many Japanese people who were murdered in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He was gone for over a month after the bombing. We had started to give up hope. Then, in the middle of the day he showed up at our doorstep. I remember how overjoyed I was to see his face. I was so happy that day. I got a call from this brother. He spoke to me in Japanese. I hadn't forgotten the language over these past 20 years but I also haven't spoken a word of it in 19. He told in that our father had died. He told me we were orphans now, no father and no mother. I didn't even know my mother had died. He explained it has been years. He told me "Come home Toshi, you need to be here." I agreed. I remember falling into my chair and crying for days and days. In one moment, I had no mother and no father. That is how fast it happens I hated that my own mother had been dead years and I had no idea. It was because I left them. I felt so guilty. I feared that when I went to back to Japan the people would look at me and call me a traitor. I had left with the enemy. That is what they would say when they say me.

The plane ride, I was silent. A 12-hour trip and I said not one word. The plane landed and I was spoken to only in Japanese and I spoke only Japanese to the people. I got the feeling of Christmas and hot coco and the smell of a burning campfire as soon as that plane landed. I felt as though I stepped off that platform and onto a huge warm baby blanket that would only keep me safe and never harm me. Speaking Japanese was the icing on the cake. I felt this joy but I

looked around and Japan was different. Everyone was so fancy and in suits and busy. It was almost like America. I remembered when I saw all of the people; I remembered what it was like to be one of them. I remembered all of my old friends that I had long since forgotten. All of my childhood flew back into my mind. But, it saddened me. I was sad looking around at the people in their black suits because they didn't look happy. They looked unimpressed and undistinguished. They were just there, doing their business and daily routines like any other day. That was not how I remembered Japan. Everyone walking around with his or her head down, that was not my Japan. I couldn't figure out what had caused this change. I got into a taxi and told the driver to take me where I needed to go. On the long drive to visit my father, on the long drive to the cemetery I realized what had changed; this place wasn't my home anymore. And I had never thought about what I had left behind once I did leave because I was so overwhelmed with the U.S. and that overwhelmed feeling never went away or even faded. It was so strong that I had no time for thoughts. I had children and a husband and a family that I thought about and that was all. I was getting old and my memory was not so good like it used to be. I thought about aging and my children's lives and helping them. If I ever thought about what I had left behind, I would not be a mother or a wife. I would not be a whole person if I thought only in the past. But, what snapped me back to reality was knowing that after all this is where I met the love of my life. This is the small town where we fell in love such a long time ago. Thinking of him and holding his hand brought me back to my reality. Back to my father and mother just 5 minutes away from me. This is when I noticed the cottage cheese smell of the back of this taxi. I rolled down the window, smelled the air of my home. I look back on doing this and I think that this was one of the best moments of my life. I had never been so content with everything that lay ahead of me, and what lay ahead of me then was my whole life. If I was content at the moment, I was content with life. One of my most loved memories.

I stood before my parent's grave and studied every detail of their tombstones. They were buried right next to each other just like they always wanted. They loved each other so much. Then, I did the one thing I knew would make my father proud. I held my head high. I looked up at the gray sky and back down at the even greyer stone's with their names so elegantly engraved. It was real and I didn't let my head fall down. I studied each crack and each line of their graves. I couldn't bring my chest to look away because this really was the last time. When I left I was wrong. That hug we shared the morning I left wasn't the last, this was the ending forever. It was getting dark and I knew I had to leave. This was the last time now, and I knew I had to say something. Say one final word to my father, for the last time, "I took you with me and you kept me here. You are all the home I need."

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I would never want to relive that day. Walking away from my home, I would never want to do that again. Walking away and leaving it all behind me was the hardest thing I have ever done. Everything I considered hard before then was petty and I felt so foolish for thinking that it was anything. My father always told to keep my head held high. Because way up there nothing can bring you down. I was told to be strong and be brave. Then, nothing can cause you any harm. The morning I walked out of that house my head was down.

After living in this country for many years I have come to realize that nothing here is of any priority. People here take what they are able for granted. Some don't even see what is right in front of their faces. They won't ever know what they could become and they don't even care to dip their feet into the possibilities. This is like a slap in the face for me. Nothing is anything to people born here. If this is not enough reason for me to have a right to be here and actually live up to this country's possibilities, I don't know what would be. This is my home as much as it is theirs. We choose to make it our own world. I would dream of it when I was a little girl and in dreams this country was my home. I looked just like the pinup girls in the magazines. I dreamed of going on the movies and becoming something. In my dreams I always became something of priority. In Japan there is a hierarchy among everyone, everywhere you look. Social standards and presentation is all that matters to parents, teachers, husbands and wives and children. If you present yourself well then you are well. Even the food has to be perfect. Pinup girls like Betty Grable and every celebrity presented themselves well. They were just as perfect as sushi and the geisha's. All Japanese girls wanted to be just like Betty. It is what I have left of Japan and I carry my priorities with me where ever I may go. Still, ask me if I'm American. Yes, I am truly American.

Even though the way my father and I left each other was the way that it was, we wrote letters. We never called, we just wrote. We would write on holidays and I would never speak of anything about here. It was an unwritten law between us. It was always considering him and home and mother and things in Japan. They stopped just around when my fifth child Robert was born. I got a call from my younger brother. The same brother that many years before my family had thought was one of the many Japanese people who were murdered in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He was gone for over a month after the bombing. We had started to give up hope. Then, in the middle of the day he showed up at our doorstep. I remember how overjoyed I was to see his face. I was so happy that day. I got a call from this brother. He spoke to me in Japanese. I hadn't forgotten the language over these past 20 years but I also haven't spoken a word of it in 19. He told in that our father had passed away. He told me we were orphans now, no father and no mother. I didn't even know my mother had died. He explained it had been years since her death. He told me "Come home Toshi, you need to be here." I agreed. I remember collapsing as soon as the hung up, crying for days. My eyes were swollen and I didn't want to cry anymore. I felt all dried up. I had no more tears left to shed. I was dried up in just one moment. And in that moment I was left with no mother and no father. That is how fast it happens. I hated that my own mother had been dead years and I had no idea. It was because I left them. I was so guilty. I feared that when I went back to Japan the people would look at me and call me a traitor. I left with the enemy. That is what they would say when they say me.

The plane ride I was silent. The plane landed and I was spoken to only in Japanese and I spoke only Japanese to the people. I got this overwhelming feeling of fresh air and relief. I got a feeling of protection, being warm inside on a cold rainy day. I felt as though I stepped off that platform and onto a huge warm baby blanket that would keep me safe, something that would never let me fall. Speaking and having everyone understand you, not question what you're trying to say, questioning your intelligence was something I hadn't experienced since I had left Japan. Everyone knew what I was saying and I knew what everyone was saying too. But, I looked around and Japan was different. Everyone was so fancy and in suits and so busy. Still when I saw their eyes and their hands and the people's faces, I remembered what it was like to be one of them. I remembered all of my old friends that I had long since forgotten. All of my childhood flew back into my mind. But, it saddened me. I was sad looking around at the people in their black suits because they didn't look happy. They looked unimpressed and undistinguished. They were just there, doing their business and daily routines like any other day. That was not how I remembered Japan. Everyone walking around with his or her head down, that was not my Japan. I couldn't figure out what had caused this change. I got into a taxi and told the driver to take me where I needed to go. On the long drive to visit my father, on the long drive to the cemetery I realized what had changed. This place wasn't my home anymore. And I had never thought about what I had left behind after the morning I left it because if I did I would not be a whole person, I would be broken. I wouldn't be a mother or any kind of wife. And that was my life, my family. I would think about my children's future and I would cook and clean and wash things. I had no time for anything else. What snapped me back to reality was that after all Japan is where I met the love of my life. This is where I started and was where my life began. I am not ashamed nor do I try to hide that. This is the small town where we fell in love such a long time ago. Thinking of him and holding his hands, this is what brought me back to reality. Back to my father and mother just 5 minutes away from me now. This is when I noticed the sour rotten milk smell in the back of this taxi. I rolled down the window, smelled the air of my home. I look back on doing this and I think that this was one of the best moments of my life.

They were buried right next to each other just like they always wanted. They loved each other so much. I looked up at the gray sky and back down at the even greyer tombstones with their names so elegantly engraved. It was real and I didn't let my head fall down this time. I studied each crack and each line of their gravesite. I wanted to be able to come back to it in my dreams. I wanted to know where they were in my head when I left them. I couldn't bring my eyes to look away because I knew this would be the last time I would ever be this close to both of them. When I left them all those many years ago I thought it would be my last time with them. That hug we shared that morning wasn't the last. This is where it ends and I knew I had to say something.

“You are all the home I have ever needed. We have never separated you see, because I took you with me and you kept me here.”