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Japonisme

Lesley Carhart

It all started and ended in a cup of tea.

The first cup of tea is orange pekoe, served in a ceramic cup, a source of comparative bliss until rudely interrupted by a potato. This potato is about seventeen years old, with hair the color of straw, and wants to know if that was really my vintage Kawasaki that I left outside or if it is one I liberated from a boyfriend or lover. I awaken from my reverie, and with my most girlish and vapid smile, inform the potato that it really is my motorcycle and no, I have no potato-sized helmets to take him along for a ride. I feel a slightly sadistic pleasure watching the apathetic interest turn to guarded humiliation.

After several rather irritating strings of more and more overtly personal questions from the potato, and his friend, a gawking, bushy-eyebrowed radish, I abandon all hope of enjoying my rapidly cooling tea. I excuse myself. I feel helplessly offended that these irreverent garden-variety vegetables intruded on my private sanctuary, a corner of a bustling Japanese mall in the heart of the Little Japan. I escape and wander aimlessly between shops. I mutter an apology of "sumimasen" as I slip past a middle-aged woman shopping for special treats for Children's Day. Her severe glance at me is a grim reminder that I too am a garden-variety vegetable. Perhaps I am an onion, something useful but just offensive enough - that I fit in but am never invited closer.

I am certainly not Japanese. I can study the language and the history and culture for the rest of my days, but I will never be Japanese. I am too tall, too Caucasian, and too fair haired to ever resemble the racial genotype. I have no Japanese heritage, nor do any people in my family find anything but passing curiosity in the culture. I, however, for some reason I cannot name, feel more at home in the midst of Japonisme than I do immersed in any other foreign culture. It has become an obsession.

And what of my own culture? I was born and raised here: a good life, with brilliant parents and decent means. The American Dream (or at least what it is this decade.)

But what is American culture? What distinctive thing makes me uniquely American? Perhaps my bland Mid-Western accent? (So grating to me when I study other languages I adopt British pronunciations) The fact that I know what number Chalupas are on the Taco Bell drive-thru menu? (six, but they aren't low-carb or low-fat, so I mustn't eat any more.) Is it my denim clothes? My military service? The fact that I watch fireworks on the 4th of July and incinerate a turkey on Thanksgiving?

All together, it seems rather artificial. When I go home, I get lost in my beautiful Japanese art, the brilliant depth and simplicity of Yasunari Kawabata and Kobo Abe's writing, the discipline, insight, and wit of Akira Kurosawa and Mamoru Oshii. I immerse myself in Japanese video game fantasy worlds. I practice yoga and fencing in the evening, then drift off into dreams of other times and places. Yet I still incinerate a turkey every Thanksgiving.

A few days later, I'm repairing a broken radio at work when some hapless carrot asks me if I want to go to a football game. I politely decline, and then, in a flash of resentment, not-so-politely tell him what I think of football. The carrot chalks it up to me being a she-vegetable. I chalk it up to the fact that watching the football game anywhere but in the safety of my own home will involve crowding in amongst several hundred SUVs, stomaching warm beer, suspect hotdogs, and tired jokes about daytime TV and the mayor; everything I hate about American culture. I end up having to start over on the radio.

I don't hate being American. I love freedom, democracy, unity- love them so much I would and have risked my life to protect them. But somewhere in the joining of a thousand cultures and a billion ideas, we as a people may have lost something which I so desperately seek. I hate the bland same-ness of American culture. How the remnants of unique history and culture are tucked away in small, ever dwindling neighborhoods in the big cities. It is, of course, necessary. I am rational enough to understand this. But some part of me longs for tradition, cultural identity, and beauty. Even a child knows that when the most striking colors of paint are mixed, they become a dull grey-brown.

I rush along the grey highway, winged Alecto on a vintage Kawasaki, flying past the perversely, stubbornly happy occupants of Land Cruisers and Explorers. I want to laugh at them, but they are much too busy wrangling miniature vegetables and talking about business-love-want-desperation-hate-humor-duty-apathy on their cellular phones. I laugh anyway. To hell with them.

I suppose I could have made it easier on myself and picked a culture to adore better suited to my genetics. I would make a terrific Swede. Unfortunately, I was as coldly stubborn in falling in love with a culture as I am in falling in love with a human being. My interest in Japan comes from many sources.

I name them to myself as I select udon noodles from a hundred plastic imitations in a display case.

Perhaps it is the ability that the Japanese have to absorb other cultures and technology without losing their own identity. Becoming a work of art instead of a grey palette. Perhaps it is the centuries of isolationism that kept them unique. Perhaps it is the contrast of severe discipline and intense sense of beauty. Perhaps it is the sound of flutes or of drums or of bells. The determination and calm in pouring a cup of tea or fighting a war. Or the willingness to abandon war forever. Perhaps it is the Shinto shrine that is still respected by passing atheists. I am an atheist. I pay respect to no one except Einstein, Hawking, and Asimov.

My number is called (in English, of course, as I am an onion). I retrieve my noodles and timidly thank the merchant. She thinks I am a much nicer and saner onion than I really am.

Some people call themselves Chinese-American, African-American, Polish-American, Indian-American... the list continues as long as there are countries in the world. However, at some point, vegetables like myself - of ambivalent European descent and lacking a distinctive phenotype or surname - come to a generation in our lineage when our parents forget to tell us where great-great-great-grandmother was from and we are simply Nothing-American, American-American, a hybrid of a hundred nationalities and bereft of ties to long distant ancestors. It is unavoidable, completely predictable, and exactly what our (collective) fore-fathers dreamed of

when they established the United States.

We settle down, the noodles and the onion, and try to agree on who will be eaten for lunch.

Yet in the couple short centuries that America has been its own self, any imitation of millennia old cultures is simply a facade. There is no ancient tradition. The majority of our holidays are based on recent heroes and political necessity, not on half-forgotten sources of myth and mysticism. Although both nations have a holiday to remember their constitution, and a holiday to respect the environment, America lacks traditional holidays like Japanese Moon Viewing and Festival of Dolls. What percentage of the art and artifacts in the big American museums are actually American? Globalization touches and changes every corner of the world and we as Americans have no defense against the rising tide of integration. Instead of maintaining vestiges of ingrained history and culture, we are swept away, immersed, and rewritten. Intangible river pouring into the sea. That is simply The Way Things Are. It is an adventure, one that causes me both intense curiosity and terrible fear; I still feel incomplete.

My noodles are perfect, delicious. I can taste Kyoto even though I have never been there. I can taste the mountains, the air, the new industry and the tradition. Perhaps I will never see Kyoto, but I have tasted it in these perfect noodles.

I was born on the moon viewing holiday. If I ever get high enough on the vegetable-ladder to go traveling, I would very much like to go to Japan around my birthday. I wonder if the cities in Japan turn out any lights to enjoy the astronomical holiday. Probably not. Either way, I am tired of the starless orange-grey color of American city-sky. Perhaps that is the color that American culture has become. The color of Burger King, of Cheerio Boxes, and of dust-covered construction sawhorses.

I carefully set my bowl aside, a clumsy vegetable-woman trying to emulate the perceived discipline of the older people around the shop, who probably aren't trying at all. Of course, it is all completely necessary. A child has little identity until he or she becomes an adult. A vegetable is shapeless until it grows into its mature form. I won't see such growth in my lifetime. Chances are, no one eating noodles and drinking tea here today will.

In a few hundred years, America will have a uniqueness, a mythos all its own. Or apathy and ignorance will spread like a blight and the pragmatists will ensure that we simply do as must be done. I'm not sure which. I am sure that I am not the only one who escapes. Other famous vegetables have escaped into romance novels and high crime. Some are happier when there is no escape. Perhaps it makes them feel safer.

I'm tired of thinking. At home, I settle down with a mug of Earl Grey. My compromise to no one in particular. It seems sensible as I watch my own, pale reflection distort in the cup. I succumb to simple truths. I am certainly not Japanese. I am American. The culture that belongs to me is a non-culture, and it is all cultures; whatever I make of it. Though it is the heart of a superpower, it is still also a tiny plant taking root in overworked soil, separate from and dependent on every other plant and flower. I accept this and reject it as tea leaves accept and reject water.