

“Rice” by Alejandra Kamiya

Today is Thursday and on Thursdays we have lunch.

We talk a lot, or rather what passes for a lot for us. Neither one of us is what you would call a talker.

Sometimes we even eat in silence. A comfortable, light silence, like the air it is made of, in which the flavors of our food can better express themselves.

Other times, when we talk, the words form small mounds that slowly transform into mountains. Between them, there are long silences, valleys of thought in which we wander.

We choose a restaurant in an old house in San Telmo. It has a patio in the middle, a square of sky all its own, with constantly changing clouds.

The conversation with my father progresses at a leisurely pace.

Suddenly, in mid-sentence, he says “... cleaning rice ...” and joins his hands together, forming a circle with his fingers and moving them as if he were beating something against the edge of the table.



What is sudden is not that he said these words, but that I suddenly realized that I do not know how rice is cleaned. What happens all of a sudden is the realization that I know many things about him in just this way, without really knowing, just barely intuiting them.

I know that in his hands, my father must be holding a bundle of something that I do not see. I search my memory for the rice paddies I saw in Japan and imagine that the bundle must be those sort of green stalks.

I deduce, clumsily, that the rice must still be clinging to the plants, and that by shaking the bundle they fall loose. Like tiny fruit or seeds.

Seeing my father’s gestures, I can return to the past, to Japan or my father’s story, which is mine as well. Like the impressionists, not seeking out details but rather the light, like the way I know the trees by the

sidewalk in front of my house, without knowing what kind of trees they are, but also without being able to imagine my house without them.

This is how I converse with my father: confidently but also feeling my way.

He says, for instance, that this country has barely 200 years of history, “a child of a country”, he says, and next to the child I see an old Japan, hands with skin that covers and uncovers the shape of the bones.

If he holds his head in his hands when he speaks of running through tea fields, I know that in the sky there are planes that I don't see and that they drop their bombs.

We look over the menu and order the dishes that we are going to share. My father never got used to eating just one dish. It was my mother who got accustomed to preparing various foods at every meal.

Then we talk about books. He is reading *Mozart* by Kolb, and he takes it with him wherever he goes. My father always has a book and a dictionary with him.

As for me, born and raised in Argentina, I'm too lazy to look up words in the dictionary. But not him. My Japanese father's Spanish is richer and more correct than mine.

He tells me he had some tests done on his doctor's orders and while he waited, he read a good number of pages.

“What tests?” I ask. “A biopsy,” he replies.

I'm afraid. I sense what is lurking around the corner and feel a certainty as concrete as night follows day, a sort of vertigo. All that I never asked over the years comes back to me. Every question comes back and brings others. I want to know why my father chose this country, this child of a country. I want to know what it was like that day he learned the war had begun, what all the days that followed were like till the day he arrived in this land. I want to know what his toys and clothes were like, what it was like to go to school during the war, what the port of Buenos Aires was like in the sixties, and, if he wrote letters to my grandmother, what did they say. I want to know the colors, the words, the aroma of the food, the houses in which he lived. He once told me that when he first arrived, he didn't bathe in the tub, but washed himself first and only submerged himself in the water when he was clean, because that is the way it is done in Japan. I want him to tell me more things like that. Many more. All of them. I want him to tell me about every day, so that it isn't blown away by time. Maybe to write it all down, to capture it in ink on paper forever. Where to begin? Where do the questions begin? Which is first?

I search within, as if I were lost and running in that valley of silence that suddenly opened up between the words. To lose oneself in such a vast place is like being in a prison.

When I stop looking for it, I see the question before me, as if it had been waiting for me. I look at my father and I ask it.

He smiles, takes a sheet of paper from between the pages of his book and pulls a black pencil out from his coat pocket. He draws lines very close together, some parallel and others crossing each other. Then another, perpendicular and undulating, that cuts them all near the bottom end. These are the rice plants in the water. Then he draws very small circles on the tips: the grains. He tells me the grains fill over time and he traces over the lines, but instead of straight lines, he draws lines that curve at the ends: the

plants when the rice grains mature. “The more one fills out, the more educated one is, the more humble,” he says. “One bends like the rice plant from the weight of the grain.” Then he extends his hands and arms and moves them parallel to the floor. “Large clothes are laid out in the fields,” he says. I imagine them to be white and undulating slightly, like the movement of calm water.

He again joins his hands as if he is holding a small bundle and he shakes it like before, against the edge of the table. Now I see clearly, I can almost touch, the grains of rice as they drop loose.



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Alejandra Kamiya is an award-winning writer from the City of Buenos Aires. In addition to Los árboles caídos también son el bosque, she has published Los restos del secreto y otros cuentos (2013) and El sol mueve la sombra de las cosas quietas (2019). Her stories have also appeared in various anthologies.

In the video below, Alejandra Kamiya is interviewed by one of her mentors, author Inés Fernández Moreno, about her development as a writer.

<https://youtu.be/Od89RkvFTeo>