**The Other Shore**

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*Inspired by the painting, "A Buddha’s Tear," by Iwasaki Tsuneo, in the book, Painting Enlightenment: the Buddhist Art of Iwasaki Tsuneo, by Paula Arai.*

**1.**

A Japanese painter sits at a low table in his studio. Kneeling on the *tatami* mat, legs tucked beneath him, he takes in a long, slow breath to calm his mind and still his heart. Outside the pandemic is wreaking havoc on the world. Hospitals overloaded, police patrol the streets of Tokyo. His wife can only do the shopping once a week now. There is no rice left on the shelves. No milk.

He continues his slow breathing as sandalwood incense smolders steadily in the alcove behind him, keeping steady time.

Hands placed together in prayer, he recites the *Heart Sutra* from memory.

FORM IS EMPTINESS, EMPTINESS IS FORM色不異空。空不異色

**2.**

Fifty years had passed since the painter had returned from the war in the Pacific. Taking up a job as a high school science teacher, he had worked in the same school until his retirement five years. Decades had passed. But somehow the memories of the war had not faded.

They had been terrified young boys, none older than 19. Abandoned in that remote place by the imperial army, they had managed to survive eating roots and dirt, and seeking water in the crevices of the pitcher plants after every rain shower. How could there have been no food in that lush jungle? Hunted by the aboriginal tribesman, he had been sure they would take his head. But it had been the relentless stinging insects that had eventually worn him down.

**3.**

Glancing down at the table, he picks up a tiny copper water-dropper and spills out several precious drops into the well of his purplish-black inkstone. Last summer, he had painstakingly harvested dewdrops that had collected on lotus leaves in a temple garden in Kyoto. Keeping the precious dewdrops frozen for months, he had been waiting for just this moment.

Grinding the ink slowly in the puddle formed by the water in the inkwell, the familiar fragrance wafts upward: the acrid smell of soot and animal glue cut by the addition of camphor oil into the inkstick. He continues rubbing the ink in circular motions as he intones the *Heart Sutra:*

*Gate, Gate, Paragate, Parasamgate, Bodhi Svaha!*

How do I cross to the other shore?

**4.**

Among the detainees had been Kato. Fragile and terribly nearsighted, the painter had started watching out for him. Born in the far north of Japan, Kato spoke with a thick accent which made the painter laugh, despite their dire situation. Being a northerner, the heat of the island had been unbearable to Kato, and within weeks of their capture by Australian soldiers, Kato had fallen dangerously ill with dysentery. The painter had not left his side, and before Kato died, he had taught the painter the Heart Sutra. They had chanted it over and over again in the heat and filth of the prison camp. And then Kato was gone.

Gone, gone…

The painter wondered if maybe he hadn’t died as well in that prison camp. And all the years since—in this peaceful house with his wife and their children—maybe all of it had only been nothing but a hallucination. A dream he sees day after day as he wanders around lost in the depths of the *bardo*.

**5.**

Unrolling the long, narrow piece of rice paper, His eyes rest on the lotus he had painted at the top of the scroll weeks earlier. He had not drawn the flower—only a solitary lotus leaf, with one tiny dewdrop, poised at the leaf’s curling edge.

He adjusts the paper to look at the bottom, where he had drawn the dewdrop splashing into the pond below

Like a waterfall, spilling over a precipice, the downward motion of the falling dewdrop forces his eye straight down toward the muddy pond below, where the painter had drawn a multitude of ripples, around each of which he had written the 260 characters of the sutra, in tiny calligraphy, each less than a half an inch in height.

**6.**

Compared to the writing of the sutra along those concentric circles of rippling water, the last bit would be easy.

Using a pencil, he draws a faint line on the paper. Barely visible, it connects the edge of the lotus leaf at the top of the painting to the point at the bottom where the dewdrop splashes into water. He calculates the space it will require to end the sutra at the water’s edge—with not one inch of extra space. He has to adjust the size of the characters so they would perfectly fill up the space along the line.

Scarcely breathing, he uses his magnifying glass, mounted on a small wooden stand, to write the tiny characters. Packing them so closely together that from a distance, they will create the appearance of a solid line, tracing, the fluid path the dewdrop makes as it travels downward toward the pond.

After finishing, he doesn’t dare look at the result. One mistake and months of work—not to mention the gold pigment and all those dewdrops gathered from the lotus leaves in Kyoto— would be wasted. Outside, clouds have gathered. He had been sure the rains were over and summer was here. But there they are, dark roiling rain clouds. Worry sweeping over him, he looks down at the table and smiles faintly.

Almost able to hear the splash as the dewdrop hits the water, he whispers,

*Gone, gone, everyone gone to the other shore, awakening, Bodhi Svaha!*