

Ravens have been recorded swooping over bands of gorillas, teasingly playing at attacking them. These birds show the ability to deceive that comes with the power of language. In this they are no different from humans. Where humans differ from ravens is that they use language to look back on their lives and call up a virtual self.

John Gray



MAZZY LOOKED DOWN onto moonlit clouds. No break in the feather bed cumulus laid out from LA to Tokyo. There had been one shining moment, when a streak of silver glittered on the surface of the sea, like a sheet of worked metal. Then again the cloudscape, the anger at being pulled from a Californian high school to Japan, her father. So she looked to the perfect moon, craters and scars from ancient collisions. Lonely in the thoughts of a lifeless rock, she turned back to the plane and the sleeping passengers. Some comfort in the other bodies.

The Japanese man beside her was in his mid-twenties. Hard to tell with skin that even toned and smooth. He was sleeping. Or his eyes were simply closed. Mazzy would have to wake him to excuse herself past to go to the bathroom. It seemed a shame to disturb his peace, the Buddha-like repose. The faint lines at the corner of his mouth were the only hints of ageing, and the more she looked the more immaculate he seemed to appear. Five hours into a transpacific flight his black shirt was barely creased, and not a strand of his thick dark hair out of place.

Still, she wasn't holding it in across the width of the Pacific.

"Sorry," she said. "Excuse me."

He didn't even seem to be breathing, let alone waking to allow her past. She had to reach over and touch his arm.

He opened his eyes and stared, as if she were some precious creature stepped from his dream.

"I need the bathroom," said Mazzy, pointing down the plane.

Slowly, the man nodded. Though rather to approve some private thought than to acknowledge her presence. Again, she said she had to use the bathroom. This time he smiled and stood, bowing a polite apology as she squeezed out from the seats.

Mazzy walked past the slumbering passengers. Slurred faces

before the glowing screens. She didn't see how he watched her walk the darkened aisle, the way she tied back her long blonde hair. She took her time in the cubicle. Washed her hands and studied her eyes. Her father's daughter, she knew that much. His high, stern, forehead, a serious focus to her resting features. But the wide smile breaking out across her cheeks when needed.

When she got back to her seat the Japanese man was looking out of the window. Sitting in her place. His face almost pressed to the glass. Now she noticed marks under his jaw, a bruise or graze running under his left ear.

Perhaps he saw her reflection, the change of light. He quickly turned and apologised. "Sorry." An American accent to his broken English. "I had to look at the moon."

He shifted over then stepped into the aisle, so Mazzy could move past.

"It's beautiful on the clouds," she said, sliding back to her place.

Before she began the inevitable small talk on who was going where and why, he asked her if she knew the Japanese folk tale about a moon princess.

"A moon princess? I don't think so."

Whether the man took this as an invitation to tell seemed unimportant. He had to tell. He sat straight and erect, spoke.



Once upon a time, an old woodcutter was walking through a bamboo forest when he noticed that one of the trunks was glowing. He took his axe and chopped it open to find a baby girl, no bigger than his thumb. He cupped his hands and carried her home to his childless wife. She was overjoyed they now had a daughter to raise.

They named her *Kaguya-hime*, the luminous night princess.

At first the couple tried to keep her a secret, but she grew into such a beautiful woman that five princes proposed to her. *Kaguya-hime* didn't want to marry any of them. She set each one an

impossible challenge. The first had to bring back Buddha's begging bowl from India, the second a jewelled branch from a mythical island, the third the robe of the Chinese fire-rat, the fourth a precious stone from a dragon's neck, and the fifth a cowrie born from a swallow.

The earnest men set out on horses and ships. All of her suitors failed. One drowned. When the Japanese Emperor heard of this strange and beautiful woman, he journeyed to the village and also fell in love. *Kaguya-hime* turned him down too. She told the Emperor she couldn't marry a man from the earth, and that she must return to her people on the moon.

The Emperor tried to imprison *Kaguya-hime*, and surrounded her house with guards, but the moon people rode across the stars and blinded the soldiers with a strange light. She told the woodcutter and his wife that although she loved them she had to return to her family. Before the horses galloped into the sky, *Kaguya-hime* wrote the Emperor a letter and gave him a cup of everlasting life.

When he read her last words he broke down and ordered the letter to be burnt. He couldn't live forever without being able to see her again. His men took the letter and the elixir to the top of Mount Fuji and set it on fire.

The legend, when Fuji was still an active volcano, was that the smoke was the eternal burning of the letter and the everlasting life.

**

Narrator and listener. As if they were the only two awake on the plane. When the Japanese man had described an ivory carriage ridden down from the moon, Mazzy had felt the skin on the back of her neck turn cold.

After he finished the story, Mazzy had sat for a moment, pictured the snowcapped peak of a perfect mountain, pale horses in the night sky. Then she told him her name and asked him his.

Instead of answering, he said he was tired, and then folded his

arms and closed his eyes. She presumed his insouciance was simply a cultural difference, and put her headphones on and scrolled through the in-flight films.

When the captain announced they were beginning their descent into Narita, Mazzy woke up. The seat beside her was empty. Blanket folded, the headphone wire neatly wrapped. She looked around for the Japanese man, but he must have moved places while she was napping.

Then the plane cut through the clouds and the coastline twinkled with sunlight, a thin line of surf between land and sea.

With the other jet-lagged and flight-stale passengers, Mazzy shuffled towards immigration. Every few metres there was a chirped welcome from a uniformed official. Though she could only guess it was a welcome as her Japanese was not much more than please and thank you. She'd never taken the wrapping from the language textbooks and CDs her father had mailed.

She walked the quiet and empty corridors, like school during lessons when she snuck out of class. The Japanese officials doing the job of hall monitors ready to check your pass, a reason for being where you were. For that she'd have to defer to her father.

Then the booths and fingerprints. Look into the camera. "Can I smile?" she asked, knowing, from the thousands of digital photos that either she or one of her friends had taken, she looked a whole lot better if she dimpled her cheeks and showed an expensive set of gleaming teeth.

Narita was not the bustle of LAX, dogs and guns. Border guards twitchy because half the world wanted to be in California. Not here. Earthquakes and tsunamis. Radiation. Once the official had stapled her student visa into her passport and nodded her into Japan, she felt the fear. All her friends in school. Parties at the lake house, ski season in Europe, and Christmas in London.

At the carousel she looked again for the storyteller, but she

couldn't see him in the line of bag watchers. When the luggage shuttled down the ramp she reached for her case and a strong hand came past her shoulder. For a moment she thought it was him, before a smiling American man said, "I got it."

She thanked him, righted the case and flicked out the handle, before wheeling it across the tiled floor like a faithful hound.

White gloved, and as expressionless as the man who'd stamped her passport, the customs official thumbed through the pages of her blue book, checked she'd ticked the box that said she wasn't transporting drugs or exotic reptiles, and welcomed her to Japan.



WE'RE ALL TIN-GOD psychologists, qualified or not, because anyone who announces they have the credentials to explain the vagaries of the human condition is an arrogant fool. And though I may have documented the social hierarchy of macaques on Ethiopian mountainsides, tagged Mumbai street dogs and followed their comings and goings via orbiting satellites and, as my colleagues often note, constructed theories on conformity that Hitler would have expounded, I'm an average father at best.

For all my papers and experiments, the lecture halls hushed by the weight of words, the false reverence for a man who amongst a host of talented peers was the one lucky enough to have a hit book, *Gangs, Groups and Belonging*, I'm baffled by the world my daughter will inherit. We're the mothers and fathers of an alien creed.

I could barely get Mazzy to look me in the eye the last time we'd met. My ex-wife's poison, I fooled myself. Not the fact I was dragging her from college in San Diego to a Tokyo International School.

"Have you seen that film about them killing dolphins?" she'd screamed down the phone when I told her a semester in Japan would be infinitely more educational than slouching around LA malls or Kensington High Street.

"Find out for yourself," I challenged. "It's everything you think it's not."

I read little about Japan before I first flew out here, nearly twenty years ago. Pages from my guidebook about population and climate, why not to leave chopsticks protruding from a bowl of rice. My brother had dropped me off at Heathrow on a wet and windy November morning. We shook hands and hugged at the check-in desk, then I watched him duck back into the rain and scuttle across the car park.

Although I wasn't leaving England for any particular reason, I wasn't staying for one either. Aged twenty-two, a psychology degree that was worthless without a masters, I needed money, experience.

I qualified as an English teacher and applied for the best paid job I could find, regardless of continent, and flew out to Fukuoka, a city on the southern island of a bubble-deflated Japan. A country I knew nothing about beyond the lazy stereotypes.

The flight was filled with sleeping Japanese students, kids plugged into Walkmans and folding into their seats. I did wonder what kind of mistake I'd made, until the plane banked over Fukuoka and the city blazed like gold bullion.

I arrived at my apartment in the dark, slept on a tatami mat and woke up with a mountain in my window. On my first foray beyond the front door I got lost and flagged down a passing salaryman.

"Train station?"

Spectacled and suited, the familiar caricature of an entire nation, he didn't speak a word of English. But he got the gist and beckoned me to follow, street after street, the opposite direction to where he'd been heading, ensuring I was safely delivered to the ticket gate. I bowed deeply as I said thank you, I knew to do that much. He was bowing too, as if he'd just presented me with a pair of Japan's finest rose-tinted glasses to view my new life.

By arriving in ignorance, no thought of what to expect, the culture shock was joy. Fresh fish and immaculate trains, bright blue winter skies, self-filling baths with chirpy voices announcing they were the perfect temperature. I read Mishima novels and Basho haiku. Sitting cross-legged and watching *Seven Samurai* without subtitles was akin to a religious conversion. Above all the welcome change and surprise was the calmness to public life, the absolute lack of menace which haunts an English street. Perceived or real. On losing my wallet I was that sure it would be returned I didn't cancel my credit card. Two days later it came through the door with a letter from the finder apologising for not being able to bring it round sooner.

Not that I'd discovered utopia. Commuting from a box apartment to a sodium-lit English school and reading the same text to the same students quickly became a clockwork routine. But the escapades where I had walk-on roles in modern fairy tales upended any tedium.

After a night drinking and singing with colleagues, dancing around a karaoke box with teachers from across the globe, men and women washed up in Japan for a multitude of reasons including debt, divorce, martial arts training, an obsession with Asian women or a religious desire to proliferate English syntax, I missed the last train.

No mobile phone. No address of a new found friend. I could either sleep in a park or walk 20km. I started hiking, planning to make my apartment by dawn for a shower and change of clothes before another day teaching. The highway cut through flooded rice paddies, and I trudged the narrow path between burning headlights and plains of water. Then it started to rain. Hard, fat, stinging drops. I was about to walk home in sodden clothes when, from the dazzle of a car beam, a woman appeared wearing a white T-shirt with a kitten print on the front.

She wasn't shocked to see me, the soon-to-be soaked *gaijin* by the side of a highway. She simply stopped in the middle of the path and thrust her umbrella into my palm. I insisted I was okay, but she insisted I wasn't, and grabbed my wrist and forced the handle into my grip. Once I had the umbrella she walked back, and I tell you this despite the risk of cliché, into the dark from which she had appeared.

Enchanted by this fable-like episode, I booked my first vacation.

Blooming first at the southernmost tip of Kyushu, the bright pink cherry blossom sweeps across Japan announcing the arrival of spring. A carnival atmosphere fills the parks and squares with parties and picnics, and I planned to make the most of this fleeting celebration by following the procession across the country.

I hitched to the hot-spring town of Beppu, before catching a

ferry to the castle city of Matsuyama and heading off to explore the depths of rural Shikoku. The smallest and least populous of the four main islands, the rugged interior has avoided the urban sprawl of modern Japan. Famous for its noodles and the yearly visit of 100,000 pilgrims visiting 88 Buddhist temples in a set order, I felt like I was walking into the bygone landscape of a painted screen.

After a lift from the relative bustle of Matsuyama I was soon hiking along a clear and fast flowing river, winding its way between mountains covered in bright green firs. A fine rain began to fall and the peaks disappeared. Despite getting wet, it was perfect. I was walking through an ancient gorge, watching banks of mist drift down from the clouds and over the trees.

But reality struck my Zen moment. My plan of reaching the southern city of Kochi by nightfall would be impossible unless I picked up a ride. The sky had turned charcoal grey, and the side of the road was looking more and more inviting.

Then possibly the oldest man in Japan pulled up and beckoned me into his truck. Shrunken and grizzled without a tooth in his mouth, I found out he was a woodcutter when we drove up to his house and saw logs, hundreds of them, stacked up to the sagging eaves. He gestured crazy axe-chopping motions and patted his puffed out chest with pride.

Thankfully, he turned back to the main road and asked if my legs were strong.

“Strong?”

We rounded a blind corner and stopped by a Road Closed sign that guarded a brand new tunnel cut through the mountain. Although lit by strips of neon, it would be dark by the time I'd walked the ten kilometres to the exit. And no cars following to pick me up. The woodcutter waited and watched my face, his rheumy eyes fixed on mine. Then he climbed out of the truck and opened the tailgate. From a plastic bag he gave me two rice balls wrapped in cling film.

The decision to hike had been made.

I climbed over the barrier and turned to wave goodbye, but the woodcutter had already gone.

Inside the entrance rows of silver chairs faced a stage covered in red cloth for an opening ceremony. I stood at the microphone and tried the switch. No sound except the bunting rippling in the breeze. The tunnel was a triumph of Japanese engineering, every section flawless. If I'd spun around with my eyes closed I could have walked out the way I'd entered.

I sang as I walked, Neil Young and Bob Dylan, sending the lyrics along the length of the tunnel, as though each line were a train, and each word a carriage, before they dissipated into the sky beyond the exit.

It was dark when I emerged a few hours later. Silhouettes of pine trees, graphite peaks. The next tunnel I walked through wasn't illuminated, and I ventured into a black hole. Water dripped and splashed, my footsteps echoed. I groped along with my hands held out like a blind man.

After a few hundred metres I was sucked into a vacuum of sight and sound. No dripping water. My footsteps oddly silenced. I recalled caving in Wales, sitting in the depth of a mountain and switching out the lamp. Body vanishing with the bulb. There, my fellow cavers were a torch click away. Here, in the lonely dark, I could've transformed into a wisp of soul.

I wanted to turn around and hike back to the illuminated tunnel. I could sleep with the comfort of electricity, the buzzing neon. Just as I'd made the decision to return I noticed a tiny glow ahead. No colour except this hovering, ethereal whiteness.

I'd long stopped believing in spirits, but not in the ability of the mind to create one. I walked towards the dot of light, watching it grow, unsure if it was getting bigger because I was walking towards it, or because it was floating towards me.

It wasn't a ghost. Manufactured or real.

It was a vending machine oasis in the middle of nowhere. Across Japan humming refrigeration units wait ready to eject cold

cans of glucose. And here was a loyal refreshment droid on the edge of an abandoned car park. I popped in the necessary coins, clunked out the tins and downed two energy drinks. I walked on air for an hour before my batteries died.

As I was looking for a bush to shelter under the only car I'd seen since the woodcutter pulled over.

A kimono salesman took me all the way to Kochi, thrilled at the chance to practice his broken English while his precious dresses swayed on hangers above the back seat. Although I'd received only generosity and kindness travelling Japan, nothing had prepared me for the moment he untied a drawstring bag and emptied dozens of pearls onto his palm, rolled them around then picked out two. Placing them carefully into my cupped hands he'd said, "*Omiyage.*" Souvenir. From our two languages I worked out he was telling me to give them to my bride on my wedding day.

I'm not superstitious, but perhaps if I hadn't lost them, somewhere between the Japanese countryside and the Nevada desert, I'd still be married.