

To the living and the dead
Masaya Chiba

She was a beautiful person. *She* being my grandmother. I guess, while she was alive, she put others out, doing things that made them feel bad, or being careless with money, and with people too. But I thought she was cool in a rock n'roll kind of way, and I knew she was kind at heart. That reminds me, this text is of course intended to be read by the living, but as I write this I can't help thinking, somewhat melodramatically, (the dead might be reading this too). I'm 25 years old, and I make a living by making paintings almost every day, and that same thought is always at the back of my mind when I paint. And why did I end up thinking this thought? That is what I would like to write here.

When I was a high school student, I was foolish. When you do things that are not allowed, people laugh. Digging a trap, streaking nude, and stuff like that. One day, when I was drunk and at a temple, I took a piss in the offertory box, and made a joke prayer that everyone become unhappy. The next thing I know is mum is on the phone. My grandmother, who was living in Akita, in the north, had died. The fool had learnt something. It's not good to do stuff like that. A few years later and I was a second year art student. At the time I was obsessed with this only half serious "field work" project I called "Power Spot Touring" and as part of that touring I went up to northern Japan. Along the way I decided to visit my grandmother's grave in Akita. With my hands joined for a prayer I proudly reported to her that I was now a little less foolish than I used to be. After visiting her grave I suddenly began to feel kind of sick. Suddenly, when I was in this supermarket under the train station, I was overcome by a strange terror, a dizziness. "Are you OK?" my friend asked, but his face looked like a devil's, so I said, "don't be lookin' at me, man." I kind of realized that I was not myself. The supermarket appeared *really* super, and the "town" turned into a "towering inferno."

Next, I'm collapsed under the railway crossing. For some reason my friend appears with some old woman I don't know. The two of us were going to sleep outside, under the tracks, but the woman said we should follow her, because she'll let us stay at her house. As we were walking I held the leash of the woman's dog, and then the dog began to vomit. When we got to the woman's house she surprised us by announcing, in a naive manner, "I am possessed by a dragon, so I get 3 million yen a month and I don't even have to do anything" and "(Aum Sect founder) Shoko Asahara is the reincarnation of Goemon Ishikawa (the Robin Hood of the Azuchi-Momoyama period)." When I told her that I had felt unwell since visiting my grandmother's grave she went around behind me and said, "your grandmother is suffering in hell now, so she is clinging to you. You can't look so sweet – it's for her sake too." After the being told "I will strike you with a strong light" I was given what is known as exorcism. Just as I was thinking that the heaviness in my shoulders had lifted, I suddenly felt a feeling of release

around my waist, like a sea-bream jumping around inside me. When I said, "my waist feels a little...," the woman said, I put a strong light on you, so your grandmother's spirit is moving down." So that's how it works... According to the woman 55% of humans go down to hell.

The next day, despite the protestations of the dragon woman, we went to see the *sokushin-butsumaru* in Yamagata, where the priests bury themselves underground and keep on praying until they die. When we got there, there were two mummified priests. Both had sacrificed themselves for their beliefs, their ideals. Had it been just three days before I wouldn't have noticed them, but at the time I still had the feeling I was carrying around my grandmother, so I actually felt strangely close to them. And as if just for fun, I saw a bridge crossing to the other side of the Styx. Wow! Want to make sure we don't cross that. No, I'm serious. The poet Mitsuharu Kaneko said, "no matter where in this world you go, there is no where that the dead are not buried." To everyone who is alive, you will all, at some point, pass into the ground. So best be buried somewhere that gets a lot of sun, right? And let us remember to be kind to all those who are already buried. Let's not litter. And let's not just piss wherever we feel like it...

Grandma, I've grown a little smarter since that time before, so I'll come and visit again soon.

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