

By Meg Eden

The Water Trade

In Japanese folklore, water has always been a pathway to the world of the dead.

- “*Manekute no Yurei – The Inviting Ghost Hand*”

The water trade, an occupation

my mother would never approve of – muddy

like the river in my fishing town,

where I sometimes played and came out with my sleeves

stained. How many times I played

alone, now, a paid companion—

I prepare the men’s baths, thinking about the way

my mother prepared baths for me: both of us

climbing into the hot water, our bare flesh touching— funny:

how two people can touch that intimately,

yet step out of the steam and find themselves

two strangers inhabiting the same space.

And all of this is made in water:

at training, a girl taught me how to move my body

against a client’s to create an orgasm without being entered.

A barrier is needed to make fantasy.

I realize this is why men like pornography:

there is always a barrier between them and the woman

in the photo. Our job as women is to maintain the barrier.

The worst thing we can do, she told me.

is break him out of his dream.

She taught me how to prepare them. *Prepare,*

as if dressing a corpse. I think about the women at the river

who washed bodies for burial when I lather

the soap on his back, his lower parts. He moans.

We create excitement out of nothing,

we are god-like in that way.

I continue a tradition of paid companionship:

started by geishas, survives in my soaplands.

They used to call this the floating world, which it is:

the pleasure world. Not just the occupation here,

but I myself— *I am a floating world. I am floating away slowly,*

less and less remains of me.

Sometimes the men ask where I come from, what

my name is, but these answers change with each visit.

To my customers, I am “Jean,” I am Western,
sophisticated. I get my first business card
and it carries the lie of me. I have dreams about Jean:
unlike me, she grips the men confidently. Wanting

them. Sometimes, Jean plucks out my eyes
and tries to replace them with her own, but each time
they fall out like pebbles. In those dreams,
she asks me what I’m called
and I forget my own name.

How it is that I have been intimate
with so many men yet still don’t know their names?

And how it is that I have had a man dig
his fingers into my back with longing,
yet I still feel freshness in the memory
of my new stepfather, his imported family
making me a foreigner. It’s been years
since I ran away, but no one has found me, let alone looked.

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