

We are happy to announce that Ms. Ghodsee has been awarded 3rd Prize for this story entered in our 9th Annual ANA WINGSPAN Fiction Contest

Temples, Telepathic Tomatoes and the Manicured Monk

by Kristen Ghodsee

Illustration by Stein Saugnes

There are strange people in Berkeley.

Looking up, I saw a man wearing only a pair of tanga swim briefs, a pink cape and five watches on either arm, roller-blading past the front of the pub. Contrary to popular belief, it does get quite cold in California—at least, cold enough to not warrant our adventurous friend's skimpy choice of apparel. He spun around and skated past the front of the pub again, lifting his back leg gracefully into the air behind him, his arms stretched wide like some naked, human hang glider, his cape billowing out from his shoulders. I ordered another beer.

When the waitress came over, I asked in my most casual tone, "Are you aware that there is a semi-nude man with a pink cape skating back and forth in front of your pub?"

Without a beat she answered, "Oh, that's Time Man."

"Time Man?"

The waitress wiped my table with a damp cloth, put down my new beer, and picked up my old glass.

"Three twenty-five, please."

Pulling my wallet out of my bag, I asked, "Is this a regular occurrence?"

The waitress stared at me. "You must be new in town."

"I guess so," I nodded.

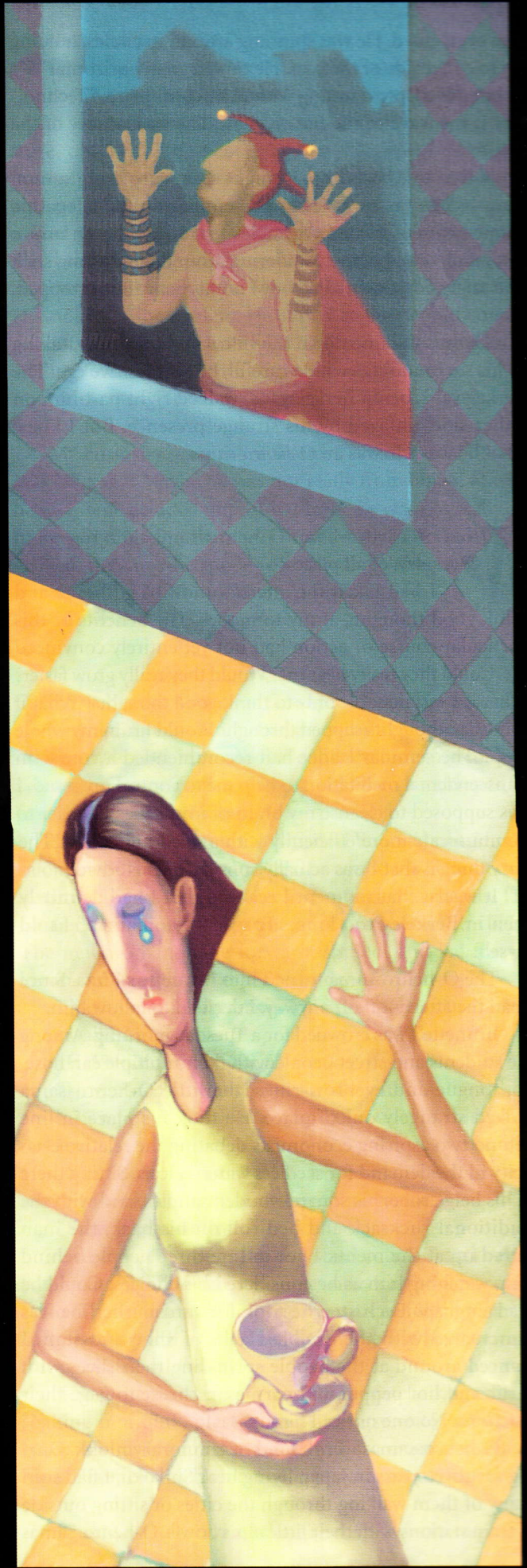
I gazed back out the window. Time Man was now pressing his face against the glass, flattening his nose and waving his arms in the air. I looked around the pub. Nobody else seemed to notice him. Shrugging, I took a sip of beer.

I nodded to Time Man.

He twisted his arms and put all ten of his watches up against the window. The would-be super hero then smiled and skated away into the night.

Since that first experience, I slowly became desensitized to the oddness that so often surrounded me. In Berkeley, there are preachers and self-proclaimed ministers of everything from the Jehovah's Witnesses to the P.A.A.E — the People Against Amoebae Experimentation. On Thursday nights, we have Bicycle Liberation Radio; on Saturdays, drum circles to encourage tree growth and oxygen production.

Walking down Telegraph Avenue, I once had the interesting fortune to witness a very large man wearing an ankle-length trench coat to which no less than fifty old calculators



had been glued. He was spinning around in circles, holding on to either side of the coat. He carved great horizontal "S"s as he walked, proclaiming with utter confidence, "Technology is the wave of the future, man. The waaaaaave of the future!"

Given this backdrop, it might seem surprising several months later as I was leaving a seminar on the telepathic propensities of garden vegetables that I would even notice the small, robed figure wandering around with a long stick and an upside-down salad bowl on his head. But I stopped, stunned.

He was walking down the sidewalk very slowly, taking in his surroundings with a careful, but inquisitive eye. The Berkeleyans, being Berkeleyans, walked right past him on either side, unfazed by his strange presence. But I knew what he was. He was an *O-henro-sama*.



What on earth was an O-henro-sama doing here? In Berkeley, of all places?

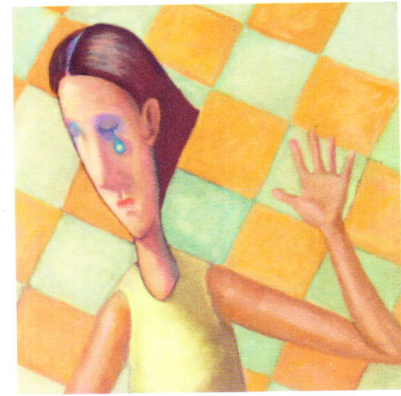
I had taken the afternoon off to go home and think good thoughts at my tomatoes. The benefits of this particular course of action had not yet entirely convinced me. Could they really hear me? Would they really grow faster? What if I was not able only to think good thoughts? What if some bad thoughts slipped through? Would I ruin my whole crop? The seminar leader had recommended a course in transcendental meditation to help me to control my mind. I was supposed to cleanse my brain of impurities in order to communicate more efficiently with a salad ingredient. The scary thing is that I was actually considering his advice.

It was at that moment I realized that I had definitely been in Berkeley too long. "Forget the tomatoes," I told myself.

The O-henro-sama turned into Brunette's Pizza. Since I had the afternoon off anyway, I decided to follow him.

Brunette's was crowded for a Tuesday morning. Among the students and street people with their multiple ear, nose, lip, tongue and eyebrow rings, the little O-henro-sama looked strangely out of place. He took his place in line behind two aspiring economists debating the relative elasticity in the demand for seedless watermelons. Sitting there in his beige robe, his square wooden sandals, and with the traditional rucksack and bed roll on his back, the man stared up at the menu. I got in line three people behind him, watching him as he considered his choices. Could he read English? Each step he took forward in the line was punctuated with the double clacks of shoe and staff. I glanced around at the people sprinkling their slices with garlic and hot pepper and parmesan cheese to gage their reactions. No one noticed him.

O-henro-samas were a kind of temporary monk. During my three years in Japan living near Shikoku, I had seen many of them walking through the cities or sitting outside of train stations with their little alms bowls. O-henro-samas



were usually ordinary people who felt a calling, a desire to leave everything and walk around. That is what they did. They walked. They bought their O-henro-sama uniforms, said good-bye to their jobs, their families and friends, and walked around Japan — from temple to temple — seeking some kind of peace or understanding.

I had always been fascinated by them. In America, people who dropped out of society to wander around were considered homeless bums. In Japan, they were respected, even admired. Apparently there is some sort of long tradition. When they are done, they shed their O-henro-sama trappings and resume their former lives. In a country where loyalty and hard work are so highly valued, this particular phenomenon had always struck me as rather contradictory.

But I saw them everywhere. They did not take planes or trains or buses. When there was water to cross, they were obliged to take a boat or ferry. But other than that, they walked. There were temples all around Japan where they could stay for the night and be fed for little or no money. They criss-crossed the archipelago on foot with their characteristic hats and long wooden staffs. If they needed cash, the Japanese people were only too happy to drop coins in their little wooden bowls. They never needed to ask with words; their "uniforms" said it all. They were O-henro-samas.



I had had quite an intimate experience with these wanderers. I had gone to Japan to study Eastern religions. At the University in Kyoto I had met a Japanese student from Kyushu named Atsushi whose research was similar to mine. He was tall and soft spoken. He wore dark clothes, drank too much beer, and smoked two packs of cigarettes a day. He never sang Karaoke, no matter how drunk he was, and he always went out of his way to find me tortillas or bagels when I was homesick for American food. On my twenty-fifth birthday, we climbed Mount Fuji together. Our sweat mingled with tears of exhilaration when we reached the summit.

I don't like to remember how betrayed I felt when I saw the robe and staff in the corner of his dorm room. I cried and begged him not to leave as he packed his books and clothes into boxes. He kissed me; he promised that he would be back in three months. The day he left, he pressed a traditional good luck charm into the palm of my hand, whispering to me in English that he loved me.

I never saw him again.



The O-henro-sama came to the front of the line.

"How can I help you?" said a cheerful, young woman in a tie-dye t-shirt.

"One cheese slice, please," he said, struggling to pronounce his "I"s.

"Anything to drink with that?"

"Cola, please."

"That will be two-fifty."

The O-henro-sama reached into a little cloth bag tied to his rope belt; he pulled out three singles.

He received his change, dropped it into his bag, and hoisted the gargantuan piece of cheese pizza off the counter, moving over to one of the side counters where everyone stood to eat. He dumped a small mountain of parmesan cheese on his slice.

"Next person in line, please."

Deciding I did not really want pizza after all, I drifted to the counter on the other side of the store, watching him eat. He had some troubles dealing with the extremely stringy cheese, and was forced to tear it apart with his fingers.

"Hey dude, could you pass the pepper?" someone said.

The monk looked up, picking up the garlic shaker.

"No, dude, the red stuff."

The O-henro-sama picked up the pepper and passed it to the man.

"Thanks, dude. Cool robe."

The O-henro-sama nodded his head.

After he had finished his pizza, he wiped his face clean with several napkins, and headed out.

I followed him down the crowded sidewalks of Telegraph as he passed the street vendors and tarot card readers. He paused to ponder at a T-shirt that read "Make Love not Microchips" as he waited for a street light to turn green. He crossed and disappeared through the doors of Rapunzel's Music.

I hurried after him.

Rapunzel's is an institution in Berkeley, one of the largest music stores in the whole East Bay. If you want something rare or discontinued, the best place to check is Rapunzel's. Three floors of CD's, records, cassettes, videos and magazines filled a huge warehouse-like building. The O-henro-sama checked his rucksack at the counter.

"Let me guess," said the man behind the counter, "You're probably looking for Gregorian chants, right?"

The O-henro-sama shook his head.

"Just looking, please."

The man shrugged. "Yeah sure. Take your time."

For the next half an hour I posted myself at the used Dylan section and watched as the monk drifted through the store, observing the people as they flipped through the thousands of rows of CDs. Every once in a while, he would pause at a listening station. Carefully removing his hat, he placed the headphones over his head. His face was completely expressionless as he went from Placido Domingo to Toni Braxton to Metallica. He flipped through magazines. He looked at the posters. He stared at the people buying piles of CDs, handing over their blue and gold credit cards, smiling to themselves with consumer satisfaction.

He eventually went to the counter, claimed his bag, and left.

My curiosity grew more intense. What was he doing? Was he crazy? Maybe he was not really from Japan. Maybe he was some deluded impostor. Maybe he was not really an O-henro-sama. But there was something about the way he walked, the way he spoke so softly that made me feel he was authentic. Maybe he knew Atsushi.

But what was he doing here?



The O-henryo-sama was far ahead of me. His footsteps seemed aimless, but he had an uncanny sureness about him. He walked for about ten blocks, turning corners randomly. I was starting to get tired when he stopped in front of The Delilah Salon. He went inside.

I hurried to catch up to him and lingered outside the salon, casually glancing through the window. The O-henro-sama walked up to the cashier and extended his hands. The cashier smiled, waving to one of the women in the back. The new woman came forward, smiled, and led the O-henro-sama to a little table. He sat down.

The O-henro-sama was going to get a manicure.

I walked in.

"Hi! How can I help you?"

"How much do you charge for a haircut?"

"Shampoo, condition, cut and blow-dry is thirty-five dollars."

"You know, I'm not really sure what I want. Do you mind if I look through some of your magazines?"

"Sure, take your time."

I sat down in one of the oversized couches, and began paging through the hair style magazines on the glass coffee table. The manicurist had tried unsuccessfully to start a conversation with her odd customer. She was now concentrating on filing his nails.

The O-henro-sama sat upright in his chair, one hand soaking in a pink, plastic bowl of soapy water while the other was busily administered to by the woman across from him. His face was blank. His eyes wandered around the salon.

This was a full service salon. There were women getting

their hair cut, colored, and permed. There were women in large, dentist-like chairs with green goo on their faces and cucumber slices over their eyes. There was one woman having her eyelashes tinted; another was having her eyelids tattooed. There was a row of chatting women with their feet submerged in large, vibrating foot baths. In the back of the salon was a doorway where the well-dressed cosmetic "engineers" occasionally disappeared with their clients for the more "private" treatments.

In the middle of it all the O-henro-sama sat quietly. A few of the women seemed uncomfortable with his presence. After all, this was a woman's domain. But seemed was calm and relaxed. The manicurist finished with one hand and began on the second.

"Have you found anything you like?"

"You know, I just can't decide," I said.

"One of our stylists might be able to help you."

"No, thanks. I'm gonna think about it a little more."

I went outside and crossed the street. I waited on the bench of a bus stop until the monk came out. He seemed a little hurried.

He turned down the street, his footsteps faster than they had been before. I waited until I thought he was far enough ahead of me, and then starting walking. The O-henryo-sama eventually stopped in front of a movie theatre. He bought a ticket and went inside.

I ran up to the box office.

"The Japanese guy who was just here. What did he buy a ticket to?"

"The one with the funny hat?"

"Yeah."

"*The Annihilator.*"

"Can I have one ticket?"

The man in the box office looked at me suspiciously.

"Are you stalking him?"

I stared at him.

"No!"

"Okay," he said, giving me the ticket, "Seven dollars."

The movie was starting just as I walked into the theatre. What followed for the next hour and a half was the most mindless series of explosions I have ever seen. The main

character was once of these ex-body-builder-types turned actor. He was on a mission to rescue his dead wife's brother from a tribe of evil Chinese horse breeders in Tibet. Apparently, they had some connection with an intentional terrorist group threatening to occupy Hong Kong. I did not really follow the story because I kept staring at the O-henro-sama. He was sitting in the fifth row munching on a bucket of popcorn. Of all the movies he could have chosen, he chose the most stupid and violent film in the theatre. What kind of O-henro-sama was this anyway?

After a forty-minute chase scene and several decapitations, the hero eventually set sail out of Hong Kong harbor, muscles rippling, amongst the grateful cheers the city's residents. The credits started rolling. The O-henro-sama got up.

I had to know.



I followed him out to the lobby.

"Excuse me," I said, in my most polite Japanese.

He turned around.

"I'm sorry for asking a very stupid question," I said, struggling to remember the words, "But you are an O-henro-sama, right?"

The man smiled. It was the first expression I had seen on his face all day.

"Yes," he said, bowing. "I am."

I bowed back to him. "I know this is another silly question, but what are you doing in Berkeley?"

"I am visiting the temples."

That was not the answer I had expected. "What temples?"

"The American temples," he said.

I shook my head. "I don't understand."

He looked around the lobby of the movie theatre. There was a young couple holding hands buying popcorn. There were some kids playing video games by the bathrooms.

"These are your temples." He switched to English. "Would you like to have a Double Cappuccino Surprise?"

There was a coffee shop across the street. I smiled. The Temple of Artificial Stimulants.

"Sure." ■

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will be announced in a future issue of WINGSPAN.

For further information contact: 10TH ANNUAL ANA WINGSPAN FICTION CONTEST,

c/o McDavis Associate, Inc.,

5-22-5-403 Higashi-Gotanda, Shinagawa-ku, Tokyo 141-0022 Japan

Fax: (03) 3446-5002. Email: fic-info@mccedit.com