

MICHAEL CALIGARIS

Shoebox

I want to say it had a delicate frame, thin and not very wide, one that stowed away a pair of her mother's silk slippers brought over from the homeland: black cardboard, a red ideograph centered on its lid, gold trim in the shape of cherry blossom petals. But then again, her family was finally living on a different island. They called it *The West: Land of Opportunity*. The box had probably been the opposite: a large, thick stronghold made for a pair of her father's American work boots, ones that he would muddy out in the mango groves. Bark colored cardboard with a Redwing label on the front. *Made in the USA* scribbled along its side.

In all honesty, I know this is insignificant—speculating such silly things, like the class of shoebox my great-grandmother used to place her daughter inside of. My grandmother had been a small baby—*chibi-tori*, little bird, they called her—she would have fit inside them both. And she would have been placed at the end of the dirt road just the same, because being born the thirteenth child, a most hideous omen in those days—where immigrant farmers would light candles for a rainy season; exhale into the incense—does not come with choices, especially ones as superfluous as what sort of box to be placed in—small or large, slippers or boots, *Japanese* or *American*. There was only that one absolute: put out with the trash. To be placed at the end of the dirt road, the end of *her* road, life sucked out by the Hawaiian August sun inside a cardboard coffin; a simple measure for a bad crop. Merely another memory of another day, where it would only linger until the next season, inevitably merging with all those others—pineapple harvest, macadamia picking; an amalgamation of Hawaiian farming.

But this is not the way she chooses to tell it:

It was nightfall—a *full moon*, my grandmother stresses—when she was birthed in that bungalow on the island. And after a long day of labor in the fields, it came to be that her mother had a change of heart—against her husband’s wishes; the community’s superstition. She decided, as she looked down into her big brown eyes, fuller than any moon, that she was going to love the curse out of her; swaddle her in cotton sheets, just enough white to mask the evil underneath. *The shoebox was only what my father wanted. She come take me out of the shoebox.* And from there she grew to play stickball by the lemon trees, to watch the planes fly overhead, to know the love of a man in uniform, to have a family of her own where a shoebox was only a home for shoes.

But then again, this all comes from a woman who understates the time of internment camps: *the siren very loud but it let us come in from the fields and cool off; no more Japanese school, but it for best, now I speak good English; they burn all my books, but it make a nice fire, kept us warm.* It’s always this constant state of backwards reverie. So, who’s to say exactly how long she lay inside that cardboard frame? Maybe it was hours, perhaps days, or even months? Pining for nourishment, hidden amongst the tall grass, feeding off the palmettos’ fallen coconuts, soaking up each and every tropic rainstorm, slowly and steadily, until she was able to sprout up and out and live amongst the ocean breeze.

Who’s to say?

There is a full moon up above. It glows, golden sand. I must reach for it again—arms outstretched, wiggling fingers—until I feel the warmth inside. To fill in those craters, where I perpetually wonder: the lengthy time in which a mango ripens; the coarse texture of a *Honu’ea* shell; the unwavering scent of sugarcane from the seat of a *Schwinn*; the ache of a bending back underneath a horizon of citrus; the roar of planes over a rising sun; the inside of a gasmask; an entire language set ablaze; a shoebox.

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