

# The Art of Fly Swatting

By Ken Yoshikawa

## Cast

Ken - Japanese American, 20s - 30s

## **Content Warning: Trauma, Abuse, Sexual Content**

### Notes from the Playwright

The style of this play involves theatrical storytelling, spoken-word poetry, and negotiating the transitions between these two elements. There is intention behind some of the transitions being slightly vague as one section flows into another. Some moments are minimally highlighted while others run right through from prose to poetry. The texts in bold lettering are the titles of the pieces and are not meant to be read aloud. It may work to use other visual means to cue the transition into and out of a poem. All Japanese characters are either defined or pronounced at some point in the script. A list of all terms is provided on the final page. If a production team is unsure of pronunciation, the playwright encourages them to bring in a native Japanese speaker to share their knowledge and that that individual be remunerated for their effort.

## Part 1: Microscope

*(Onstage is a cushion and seat, a small but long table with a calligraphy set. The light is clear, maybe blue in the back. The actor either enters or is already onstage. He is writing a word in the top third of the long piece of paper: a Japanese Kanji. 顕微鏡. It is focused work. Maybe he makes a mistake. Maybe he sets that one aside and tries again. When he's finally done, he relaxes a bit.)*

### Ken

Very careful. Be very careful.

気をつけて [kiwotsukete],

お大事にして [odaijinishite].

Two phrases. Common phrases. The first, literally, 'apply energy' or 'apply spirit' or 'apply mind'. Not so different than 'pay attention'.

The second is a little more subtle. While, yes, get well soon: it asks the recipient to do what they do in the spirit of being 'daiji': important, or serious. It's nothing like asking someone to 'take this seriously'. It's more like gently asking someone to hold themselves with importance. Enough importance. Keep yourselves in check now.

But do hold yourself as valuable so that when we part, maybe we'll forget the words, but not the feeling. Something in the eyes remains as a memory that becomes a part of us.

I wonder, do you remember being born? I don't.

Apparently, in Japan, my mother was in labor for 48 hours without pain-meds. She remembers this very well. I didn't want to leave. What can I say? I know how to hold on.

Apparently I also never crawled. My mother, bless her soul, carried me everywhere for 11 months until, one day in London, I climbed out of my baby bed and walked right into the living room.

I also remember one day throwing up a bunch of white goo into her lap. She doesn't remember this.

She does remember my father picking me up above his head, where conveniently looking down at him I threw up mightily all over his face. All over his big square glasses.

I don't remember this. But he sure does.

It's funny how we vicariously live our own patchwork lives through the memories of other people. We remember certain moments, often crucial to our development, but then forget so very much.

My family is, as families are, complicated. My Dad's a Japanese National and my Mom is Italian-Irish-American. A businessman and an educator.

They met at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign,

          were married in Newport, OR,

          and had me in Nagoya, Japan:

          the 4th most populous city in the land of the Rising Sun.

So how do you name such a child?

My father's first idea was Yoshikawa Yoshitsune.  
And my mother fearing for a life full of "yo. Shit"s, shot that down  
And they settled for Ken. But which one?  
    There are a few Japanese synonyms for Ken ,  
        if you look, like over 200!  
            For instance: smart, dog, sword, health, or prefecture.  
                I contain multitudes, like a fractal.  
                    I am a monosyllabic overactive imagination.  
    But my father chose for me the first syllable in the word for  
microscope.

He has worked since about my age now, for a prolific and international car-  
parts manufacturing company called Nippon Denso.  
He's very good at his job, and as an added benefit he spoke effective English  
and so his company sent him across the globe as a representative of the  
home base.

The first 6 years of my life were actually spent in Europe.

    The next 4 in Australia.

        The last 19 here in America.

            The whole 360 of my life.

Time and Memory.

If time isn't linear, does it take a shape? Can time be a bell? That if I hit it hard  
enough could I tell my past self to turn back? Would I even want to?

What about a whirlpool? If I stir the moment enough times, what if I could  
send back a message to show up as a gut feeling, or a dream, in a babier  
me? Would I even listen? What about a Jenga tower? How many regrets  
could I remove from my own life until it falls over altogether?

I don't remember being born. But I knew someone who said he did. He said a  
lot of things.

This is a story about fathers and no fathers. This is a story about choice and  
not choice, truth and not truth.

Time, memory: the pages of our book are bound by imagination,  
    for with the story of our life,  
        we must be very careful.

## Part 2: Machine

I'd like to share with you a poem

### [Steel Wing]

My father is as Japanese as they come.  
He values hard work and instructs me to focus.  
And as much as I hate to say it his words aren't prerecorded  
as if he ran tape through his teeth  
with his eyes closed.

No.

He studied so hard that his chopsticks would shake  
like his heart all awake,  
he would travel the world and do what it takes.  
And he did.

We chased pigeons in London,  
ate Roman spaghetti,  
snapped shots of Dutch windmills,  
fished Down-Under jetties,  
and had a phrase:

One of us would point to the sky & say:

飛行機だ！ [Hikoukida!]

The other said

あっ！ 本当だ！ [Ah! Hontouda!]

Look there's a plane!

O! It's true!

Hontou, is a Japanese word for true.

It literally means to hit the book, the script, the present, to hit reality, the origin,  
to hit the root.

The Japanese are nothing, if not disciples of context & target practice.

They pack their words like their country land: old, efficient, full of many  
meanings.

For instance, the word for machine is the same as opportunity.

So perhaps we were shooting down  
as many opportunities with the truth as we could,  
'cause it was only so many steel wing rides  
till one drove a wedge between us.

When I asked my mother what's Australia gonna be like?

She told me they walk on their hands

and wear hats on their feet,

god knows what their mouths do

and how they do eat.

But they proved to be nice

and from first to fourth grade

we lived under the world  
and were made in the shade.

Playing hot and cold after school with her  
drawing curtains for candy bars  
Major Chip Hazard, attendant,  
to hail down Genesis; a very new scene,  
A Sega-beginning to be raised by a dream machine.

Let there be light from the flick of a switch.  
Reincarnate from Aladdin to Dark Wing Duck.  
Does anyone else remember how awesome Streets of Rage 2 was?  
All the while, my father's socks early in the morning,  
when I'd parachute my sheets over the heat vent,  
it'd be another 12 hours  
till his socks in the evening came off with a glass of wine.

But, I'd sneak out anyways, like stalking Santa Claus  
wondering what treasures lay in his brown leather briefcase.

Let there be daddy from the flick of a switch  
Upload to the boss fight,  
where in your room of all places  
your mother says through his frames:  
"I can't do this anymore."  
Watch the pixels pass your soul into 64 bits.  
It took me 17 years to beat that level:  
it was a brief case of fatherhood after all.

We held an electric string across the planet  
and he'd ask me what I wanted to be when I grew up.  
おかねをどうするかお前? [okane wo dou suru ka, omae?]  
What will you do for money?  
And I'd say something different every year:  
I want to be a software engineer, make video games:  
build a world for us.  
Dad, I want to be a police negotiator like Samuel L Jackson.  
that I may talk you down from one rising Sun to another.  
I want to be an actor.  
お父さん [Otousan], I want to save the world.  
Now I see I'm born to manufacture fantasies.  
He always told me video games would melt my brain.  
Well I've got cups full of imagination coming out my ears

So, since my family portrait is an ocean  
that holds a torn memory.  
If I smear it with as much brutal beauty as I can  
perhaps I can fill it or at least not notice  
that I can't reset my life by blowing in the cartridge.

I will never forget his smile  
and how much I hate the sound he makes  
when he speaks English;  
that thinking when he goes fry fishing,  
he pulls dinner from the river already cooked.  
Of the day when I wouldn't let him leave,  
until he swung on the swings with me  
I took a picture,  
knowing that this child hadn't died inside,  
through all the years of business, business, business.

When I asked you if you were happy  
choosing your job over your family  
choosing your heritage over the new horizon  
You just said yes.

You don't fuck with the truth, like I do.  
I can respect that.

What I'm trying to say  
is that I still point to the sky.

---

It's like that with memory, reaching for a cloud that's already changed and will  
never come again, is already rain on a mountain.

What I mean with this is, processing memory, asking why, reveals so much  
more, like when you don't vacuum thoroughly enough, your dad calls you 馬鹿  
[baka] and hits you once on the head. 'Cuz you're stupid.  
It's when you call a girl at Saturday school *baka*, because that's what you  
were called, and of course you were sorry, but you did it. Really.  
I mean it's knowing when you lose your train ticket on the subway, your dad  
says 馬鹿かお前? [baka ka omae?] and goes to swing at you but you duck  
and he says “よけるな! [Yokeruna!] Don't dodge it!” and makes sure you get  
what you deserve.  
Gotta keep your head in the game, or the game will get in your head, and then  
you'll have to get the game out of your head so you can stick your head back  
into the game again.

As きつい [kitsui], as hard as my father sometimes was on me, I know he  
really cares. Things are a bit different in Japanese parenting, but it has its  
comic value. No, he did something very precious, something not everyone in  
my position gets the opportunity to receive. He gave me the golden ball of  
Japanese language, told me to practice my throw and my catch.  
And despite every inning how I trained less and less, I never forgot the shape  
of its heft in my hand. He knew that was the line between us. His English  
would one day fade, and as my Japanese has begun to follow suit, we've  
been leaning on the music between us. Maybe just the silence.

**[In Love with the Universe 1]**

*(Music plays: Sweetest Thing, by U2)*

I'm in love with the Universe! I'm talking spiritual magnetic!

Like I'm INTO it.

Like, SO INTO IT, IT'S INTO ME,  
IT'S IN ME.

Like face first in my toes, ripping off my nails with my teeth.

Ouroboros smells like the bacteria that grows under your big toe.

I'm talking choice cheese shit.

Like \$25.00 a pound,

1 second relief for anxiety.

I'm talking Diddy Kong Racing on Christmas Day.

Mom's in the kitchen making dinner

and this song. This song.

The lights were gold. The lights were gold. Solid gold.

Like an angel incarnated as a magic tick hanging from my fingers, that believed that maybe it can finally crawl into a peaceful hole full of blood somewhere and drown.

I tried to find it on my mothers elbow skin, tugging like a bus handle or a bouldering grip so I might climb into her heart.

But my mother, see she's a Taurus and has good boundaries.

So the tick retreated to my knuckle.

Like this: pull it up. See? The skin is thick enough to stand! And then when I push it down. Dopamine. Yes please. Again.

*(He does it for a good pause. The stage is quite still except for this little moment. He notices himself, the audience. More quietly)*

The best part being after it becomes a castle of calloused meat, it becomes hard like the skin on the ends of your fingers which of course means I can bite it, chew it, and eat it.

One day the siege would come, but for now it roosted and thrived.



## Part 3: Pendulum

America, what a town.

To me America was a VHS school locker, a dreamscape of mystery, and the epicenter of cool.

My first memories of it, before my parents split, I was a little little thing night-riding in an immaculate gold Toyota Camry with my Mom and my grandparents, playing Achy-Breaky heart [and C'è 'na luna mezz'u mare Mamma mia m'a maritare] on cassette player.

But this time, this time was different.

We parted ways in paradise, my mother held me as I waved after my father's silhouette in a Honolulu cab. Goodbyes leave bite marks, and hanging cuticles. I showed up with blood in my teeth and an Australian accent. Essentially on the back of my mother.

Because the tick remained, I was one just the same.

I was the moon. My mother the Earth. You can't catch something that is always in your orbit, in fact it's more like crashing if you tried. But gravity is powerful for a damn good reason, and I say we trust the physics, even if we don't understand it.

My mom worked her way through education, got herself a teaching license and joined the ranks of public education.

I was just like everyone else. A transplant of quiet rage and sadness contained by the stability of mundane life. Eventually came high school. I needed an elective, and chose theatre, did plays, went to the dances, played the video games, kissed a pretty girl or two.

Through my time in high school I also had a friend named Mitchell. Now, Michi means road in Japanese, and Ken could mean fist. And while that isn't the actual meaning of my name, my buddy and I were 'Fist' and 'Road'. That kind of precious good shit. We did choir and theatre, and were a brace of idiots.

One day Mitch and I sullied ourselves in the most strange and under-bellied drugs. One that has promulgated innumerable short-sighted and poor souls into the fringe of social courtesy. Dungeons and Dragons. We found ourselves mired amid the home of a necromantic neck beard named AJ with two children ever-overdosed upon the synergistic, ungovernable, and amplified ambrosia of Mountain Dew and Japanese animation.

Twas at these sessions in that dusty Gresham game room where we met our erstwhile commandant of spiritual enigma. Another guest in AJ's house. A white guy, bald, with sharp eyes and noble masculine bearing. His name is John.

He sported a Korean spouse and a lanky, pre-teen wrestler son. He found AJ's style not worth his time and eventually, through magic means of subtle movements of the mind, our new acquaintance sabotaged this spastic subterranean simulation, tricking the untrackable klepto Kobald non-player-character into the Dungeon Master's very own trap. Ka-Splat! Big rock. Very dead.

Poor AJ, he was agog, aghast, and very fast disbanded we our nerdy outfit.

Til one day,  
Mitchell, my dear bro, informed me that we were to escapade toward the bald man's residence, and so scooped me up into his beat-up coup and toward John's house we gallivanted.

En route to our destination, nay the dominion of our destiny, the domicile of this Delphic cul-de-sac sac Don Quixote, my chum via cellular device divulged the details of yours truly, "'tis my Japanese friend, Ken, 'tis he I'm hauling over to hang out. Hurrah!"

To which, he rerouted to me the courageous exclamation,  
"He says Kenjimoto is coming over! Kenjimoto is come"

Upon the strangely threshold stood we, knocking,  
The Green Man from the fountain left o'me leers,  
And then opens the door, why so much tension.  
Hello! You must be Kenjimoto-SAN.  
I'sked "Any house rules I should know of, sir?"  
No, none at all but your enjoyment, here,  
Please come inside; now make yourself at home.  
We walked into the sorcerer's abode.  
We gamed, we chatted poetry and manhood,  
He taught us how to punch and soon enough  
This alpha man gave Mitchell his new name,  
Thus we were Benji and a Kenji made.

I wish I could level every detail of my experience with you. It was nice to have a place to go, new friends, adults and weird creative ones at that. He was so charming and funny! I had a new identity and a daddy O.

### **[In the Eyes 1]**

Have you ever fallen in love with someone  
who was mired in the pits of Hell?

And when you reached down to pull them out,  
did they look you square in the eye,  
grip your wrist  
& drag you in?

There is so much God in the eyes of the Devil.  
His were blue and they were beautiful to me.

You see, before I met the man who was my master,  
I felt the only way I would know real love was by pinning myself through the  
throat to my high school walls like a lonely poem.  
I imagined people passing by would squeeze grief through the punctuation &  
at least make a puddle in the cave I had dug beneath my good grades.  
With my ear to the floor I could hear something beautiful beneath the stones.  
But, I snapped my finger nails digging for it.  
So, I sat there watching,  
hoping computer clicks and poetic drips  
would drop by drop erode a hole through it  
And one day he was there, as teachers often are.  
He watched over me as I went and knocked on Mama Ayahuasca's doors to  
infinity.  
He taught me the codes to hack my underworld and could really hear what I  
was saying.  
I mean what would you do if someone handed you the psychosomatic  
jackhammer of mantra meditation. Hell, I got to work and it was fucking  
amazing. I was incandescent as bit by bit I actually began to break through  
the base to the core of me.

He was my friend, like a father, I gave it to him bag and baggage.

Thinking about this, I need not wonder why, really. It was simple. He was an  
older man who'd lived a sexually prolific life, and I was a young virgin in  
college. I wanted to get laid. I wanted the sex. Gimme the sex, my god.

And of course, one evening at his dinner table, after a game of DnD, he asks  
me, "Do you know the meaning of the word Lucifer?"

Now, in any storybook, what we would have here is a bold red flag. But, I,  
however, was the proverbial cat of curiosity, so I said

Um, not exactly.

It means bringer of light, Kenji. He was the leader of the choir, shedding light  
in the darkest of places.

HOLY SHIT. Are you kidding me? No one, and I mean NO ONE had ever  
spoken words like that with me before.

This answer drew me out. And while I felt as centered and cool in this moment  
as I had ever been, I just said

O, really?

Yes. Kenji. About your knuckle.

Yeah?

I can help you, if you'd like.

Um, yes, I would like that. Please.

He brought Benji and I on a family trip to his mother's apartment on the coast. The bald man invited me into an empty bedroom, sat me against the wall and put a pendulum in my hand. We'd done this before, except for DnD using trance to taproot the subconscious for characters. I was holding a 6 inch chain with a crystal quartz, I just had to hold it. hold it and look at it while he asked me questions. If it swung back and forth it was a 'yes' and if side to side it was a 'no'. Why let my voice get in the way? So simple.

## **[In Love with the Universe 2]**

I don't know how to tell you what I don't fully remember.  
Like the sunshine in December  
Ken's not here return to sender,  
Each decibel a step toward the splendor of surrender  
Man, I see you right in front of me, an image that I render  
With parallel assemblage of my fleet subconscious medicine, thank God that  
you're amazing and this shit, man.  
The edifice you built in me proved parallel to Daedalus, but this was  
necessary in a sense to heal the nervousness, the endless chewed terrain in  
space you terraformed in case you had to skate along the rails that you  
paved within my pate, and it was great, I do confess, but i wonder if the point  
was to convert my doubts to sure-why-nots and all my nos to nothingness.  
Query:  
Does Kenji like girls? Left, right, back, forth?  
Does Kenji like boys? All gone henceforth.  
Was it nature, medication, or hypnotic nomenclature, a bug deleting data,  
dejavu of no adventure, the ever subtle use of clever methods and  
accessories, of sensory subversion through the entropy of memory, erasure of  
your boundaries, a backdoor to the foundry, until it all floods back within a  
reverie.  
A flight that you can't feel  
The feeling you can't change  
Suggested range of healing is too strange and needs concealing.  
But it worked! How the fuck did it work?  
Thank you? Fuck you?  
What did you put in me? What did you put in me?!  
And what's the trigger? The lock, the secret word: the key that hacks the  
clock. Undock device whose use precise made ripples like a rock.  
Heavy. No. Forget it. No. It's paralyzing. Fuck it. Fuck it. Fuck it. No way.  
Sand-bucket. Arm's up. Sand-bucket. The handle, watch it go over the hand  
onto your wrist. It's heavy. The lower the hand the deeper the land.  
He said Sand-bucket. The keyword is Sand-bucket.  
As deep as its reach  
Return to the beach.  
I'm done. Break the pattern. Break the pattern.  
Time doesn't work anymore!  
I'm just 1000%. I'm angelic, right? I'm that God-sent kinda shit, right?  
The good good. Not biting anymore.  
But I'm still this piece of shit.  
Kenji, be kind to yourself.

Not biting anymore.  
Kenji. Be kind to yourself.  
Kenji. Take this pill.  
Kenjimoto. You're good to go.

I'm telling you, the universe delivers! My sophomore year at Reed I met a lovely lady who saw fit to love me in turn. I remember the pomegranate pie she baked me for my birthday. That I believed that much more in myself was a direct nod to John. It was a relatively short match, and I did the right thing and told her in person I had to keep going on my own. It wasn't an easy break up, and over winter break I read the entire Lord of the Rings.

And I persisted with John. I just instinctively knew there was something here for me.

John used psychedelics, and had gifted me experiences that cracked me open to realms beyond anything I had understood before. I was indeed a part of this universe, something powerful.  
And I took this deep thirst to connect to something grander than myself, I took it to the coast of Oregon for a farming intensive after my Sophomore year.

And there I met Jackie.  
She was there first, right in the garden, bright and beautiful. I was second. We went romping around the property ready to learn. Found these pretty pink flowers we thought to taste, to see what they were. Thinking twice about it (her idea) we later learned they were of course *digitalis purpurea*,

Foxglove, a pretty, pretty heart attack. Perhaps it was a sign.  
We loved each other that summer and I invited her to return with me to my dorm at Reed College. She joined me.  
And it was good, til John got jealous. He used his words to convince me that her own insecurities were turning me against him. Of course, she didn't know this, and didn't take any of his subtleties to heart. But she trusted me in my love for him.

### **[In the Eyes of the Devil 2]**

You know, at first there doesn't seem to be a suitable metaphor for the way a scared and needy young man can blindly love a cunning and charismatic maniac.  
But, of the things he taught me, you see, he gave himself away.  
He taught me the art of fly swatting.  
You see a fly, though disgusting to me, is a magnificent creature in the way it perceives time. Perhaps by its being so small and by the quantity of light its brain can process, it pretty much sees the world in what to us is slow motion. So when you go to swat it, it sees your big stupid hand encroaching like a bulldozer and just steps right out of the way.  
But, if you move very  
very

very slowly,  
it won't be able to tell you are moving,  
until you're just an inch away.

Then, you wait until it is cleaning its wings:

Just like that, abuse begins  
by cutting the little strings that lead you home and tie you to your friends.  
Then come the daily doses of moldy weed, hypnotism, and a line that goes a  
little something like this:

"Here's the rule. There's only one. Never lie to me and look me in the eye. If  
you have to lie, look down. If you lie to me and look me in the eyes, I will  
know, and I will burn a fucking hole through you and destroy you."

So that's exactly what I did. I learned how to lie. How to lie to my mother. How  
to lie to my girlfriend. How to lie to myself. How to lie in the dirt and swallow  
battery acid until it dissolved my spine.

He was a special person. I was doing it to protect him from a world that did  
not understand his healing. Manipulative or not he had to do what he would  
do.

He even said: "Kenji, I'm sorry for what I have to do to you, but you will  
understand in time." He saw more than I understood. He was becoming  
enlightened, a real life Buddha here in this weird white man drawn out of the  
linear comic-book of life to see the course of everything. The real deal. Of  
course the world didn't get it.

He'd say "We must stand in the light of our own truth."

And there I was, afraid of him. My master.

"Kenjimoto full of fear" he said, which of course goaded me to step into that  
light. Fine, I'm not afraid I'll prove it to you.

And then he admitted to having slept with a twelve year old Mexican girl,  
because she wanted it. I mean, the list of people he'd violated in his time.

A dangerous fool to believe that it was somehow a strength that I wanted.

I was being compassionate. He was brilliant and valuable. He saw me. He  
knew me. The real evil as he said were Jews behind the media; some shadow  
of evil in my own heart, and he was the cure.

"Don't tell anyone about what goes on here. Don't hurt me like that"

"Kenjimoto I will only ever be what you need me to be for you"

### **[In the Eye of the Devil 3]**

There came a day when I realized I was lost inside a jungle made of smog  
within that home I dug beneath my good grades.

And in that place where my little puddle should have been,  
there stood an oil rig.

I followed the pipes,

to a straw stuck into my master's mouth.

He sucked me down again, again, and told me that I owed it to him.

I wanted it. I didn't want it. I wanted it. I didn't want it. I wanted it. I didn't want  
it....

I could fill this story with a lifetime of words,  
but the only one I needed was the only one I never said. Stop.  
For him the word "therapist" already had its pronoun built into the equation.  
Stop.  
He knew it. Stop.  
In this kind of Hell, the only way is through. Stop.  
To pull the stake from my throat,  
fall to the floor and watch the poem land beside me. Stop.  
He was a gift,  
    the perfect example of the kind of person I will never be. Stop.

Have you ever fallen in love with yourself  
    while you were mired in the pits of Hell?

And when you reached in to pull yourself out,  
    did you smile and say "what took you so long?"

There is so much god in the eyes of humanity.  
Mine are brown and they are beautiful to me.

## Part 4: Neckties

*(As he says the following, he sits back at the calligraphy table and begins to write out three more words 顯示元)*

Looking back, our memories are never without the person we've become.

I was a participant in a textbook sex-magic personality cult wrapped in secrecy. Do I talk about the group sex that was going on? That his wife was in on the healing? The other young men who were wrangled in and the women whom this environment threatened? I want to close this chapter and I just can't seem to finish rounding off the memories, I'm just falling.

Eventually, after two more years, the epic ended with him driving away with a thousand dollars that my grandparents gifted me for graduation, leaving my psyche in a deeply interconnected dungeon of trip-wires.

It wasn't til I came out with the truth, to Jackie, to my mother, to my grandmother, that the true healing could start. That the rotting fissure was exposed and the painstaking spiritual surgery could begin.

*(He produces a knife from under the table)*

If time were a knife, how sharp would it be? Where should it belong? How should it be used? How much blood and who's should it acquire? Could it ever un-moor memory from the dock of care that it may float away forgotten in the seas of bright distraction?

If time were a mother's love, would the hands show up in a dream to hold you, , would they touch you on the cheek and say "you have nothing to apologize for", would there be fireworks at midnight?

That path to myself led me back to my real father in Japan, in November of 2016. An imperfect man, in an imperfect world, with an imperfect son, in an imperfect story.

He missed a few of my birthdays, and so commissioned someone to make me a suit, gave me many lovely gifts. Things from him. From his world.

We don't always get to understand what we hear, what comes to us, what crosses our path, and why.

But sometimes are bound the dark and the light to adorn our life in a meaningful way.



This is an ode to my father's neckties

1. 結び方 [Musubikata]:

the way to tie a father to his son.  
These roadways of inheritance,  
these  
dusty pulse keepers nobly slept  
in a mahogany cabinet at my grandparents' home.  
They are London, Melbourne,  
Milan, and Grand Rapids.  
They are Paris and Nagoya,  
Amsterdam and home.  
Multichromatic elephants and polka dots.  
Take 20,  
30, he said,  
with gently demanding generosity.  
Maybe, each time I tie one  
for an interview or for a wedding,  
I'll learn to tie the clouds  
together: dress fancy the Pacific,  
connect his mirror to my mirror.

2. カッコいい [Kakkoi]:

Wrap it twice around the knot, so you remember.  
  
Keep the front just long enough so you remember.  
  
Master that dimple, just below the knot so you remember.  
  
Yes.  
No.  
Wait.  
Here.  
Just like that.  
はい [Hai].  
良いよ [Iiyo].

3. 正しい [Tadashii]:

I stuffed probably 18 ties into a plastic bag.  
Now, what the hell am I gonna do with 18 ties?  
Can they tie the years I didn't see him  
to the moment I looked him in the eyes to thank him?  
He gave me shoes, a badass coat, even bought me a navy blue suit.  
But when he saw the condition which I'd subjected the ties to,  
I realized I didn't really want the ties,  
but rather the instruction for how to take care of them.

Please, Dad, show me a way to not stuff my life into a plastic bag.  
Show me how to dress so sharp it cuts a wormhole to the sun.  
Is this the right way?  
Are these ties your wormhole to me?

4. 何をしましょう? [Nani wo shimashyou?]

He told me, there has to be distance between two people  
for there to be a conversation.

That if you ask someone directly  
what they want

in Japanese,

it ends up being rude and invasive.

I'm so used to being the other end of your tie

that now that we're together,

looking through the very same mirror

I'm living on the black stripes printed on your thin end,

just that much closer,

just for today.

I contradict every time I ground your memory like a fingernail.

I will never be you, Dad.

But,

I'm fixing my collar, Dad.

I remember everything,

otousan.

Look,

I did it.

Look,

I did it.

Dad, I am just like you.

5. 完璧 [Kanpeki]:

I've decided,

when I leave,

I'll tie each one to the wings of the airplane,

and watch them flutter from the window seat.

## Part 5: Names

If time were the flick of a switch, how long would it take for the lights to come on?

*(He lifts up the paper with the words 顯示元)*

These are 漢字 [Kanji]. They came from China in the hands of Buddhist Monks. Back then, Japanese was an oral language with no ordered written component. They attached their native phonetics, their word sounds, to these pictographs. They also incorporated the Chinese word sounds. Japanese is a highly regimented language now. Most every Kanji has a native Japanese 訓 [Kun] reading and the O.G. Chinese 音 [On] reading.

顯 [Ken]. 示 [Ji]. 元 [Moto]. *(He pins the paper to a wall or some vertical blackboard)*

Ken and Ji are both Chinese *On* readings of the kanji.

顯示 [Kenji] means *manifestation; to appear publicly; conspicuously*.

He didn't know this of course, the racist man was just picking something out of instinct.

元 [Moto] means *source*, and together it means the source of all manifestation and appearances. The name he gave me, in secret, demands to be seen by the world.

Silly white people playing with things they don't understand.

But the thing is. *(picks up the knife)*

The thing is, first of all, Moto is the Japanese Kun reading. It makes Kenji sound really Japanesey. Second of all, I need no excuse to divorce myself from White Supremacy, so here's goodbye to that. *(Cuts it off with a clean slice)*

I could cut this too. Do I want to?

People love Kenji. Kenji. Kenji is a bright shining light. Kenji is still here. Kenji is a story, a young man's hope at being more than he was, but a reach toward something he already had the whole time. We can love him, for I became him. He remains beautiful and sad and is on the mends.

But who actually am I?

My parents named me after the microscope. Here look!

*(He displays 顯微鏡 that he wrote at the beginning)*

Ken. Bi. Kyou.

鏡 [Kyou], the bottom word here.

*(Cuts it off)*

Jìng in Chinese. Kagami. It means *mirror; looking glass*. Funny how names can show you yourself, who you were, and what lies further behind and inside you now.

There is an art to naming people and things.

顯微 [Kenbi]. *Microscopic*.

My father is someone who takes much care with what he's looking at, and hoped the same for me.

Now as a person I'm more a telescope.

*(Cuts it off)*

But I'll take it as encouragement.

微 [Bi]. *Delicate. Minute. One-millionth*.

I know what it means to be a millionth of another person's care,  
under scrutiny,  
studied,  
and misunderstood.

I also know what it means  
to stare out into the night sky  
and know how much the smallest things can matter,  
how big they truly are,  
how much life they can carry.

I know what it means to be flying across the sky,  
the size of a millionth  
waving back at the infinite broadside of the cosmos  
at a planet full of hopeful disaster.

顯 [Ken].

My name is a prayer. Ken.

Ken.

And all things considered,  
my name,  
what my dad had in mind;  
it means *apparent, obvious, clear*.

*Puts the knife away.*

The Japanese are nothing if not disciples of context and target practice.

And my mother,  
and my father,  
they were careful  
very careful,  
when they gave me my very first gift.

# Comprehensive List of Japanese Terms

Definitions sourced from jisho.org

## **Pg. 1**

顕微鏡 [ ken bi kyou ]

*Microscope*

気をつけて [ ki wo tsu ke te ]

*Be careful; pay attention*

お大事にして [ o dai ji ni shi te ]

*Take good care*

## **Pg. 3**

飛行機だ! [ Hi kou ki da! ]

*It's a plane!*

あっ! 本当だ! [ Ah! Hon tou da! ]

*O! It's true!*

## **Pg. 4**

おかねをどうするかお前? [ o ka ne wo dou su ru ka, o ma e? ]

*What will you do for money?*

お父さん [ O tou san ]

*Dad, Father*

## **Pg. 5**

馬鹿 [ ba ka ]

*Stupid; Idiot; Moron*

馬鹿かお前? [ ba ka ka o ma e? ]

*Are you stupid?*

よけるな! [ Yo ke ru na! ]

*Don't dodge it!*

きつい [ ki tsu i ]

*Tough; hard; Severe*

## **Pg. 14**

顕示元 [ Ken ji mo to ]

(Roughly) *The Source of Manifestations*

おばあちゃん and おじいちゃん [ Obachan and Ojichan ]

*grandmother and grandfather*

## **Pg. 15**

結び方 [ Musubikata ]

*Way of tying a knot*

カッコいい [ Kakkoi ]

*Good looking; Good form; Cool*

正しい [ Tadashii ]

*Correct*

## **Pg. 16**

何をしましょう? [Nani wo shimashyou?]  
*What shall we do?*

完璧 [Kanpeki]  
*Perfect; Complete; Flawless*

**Pg.17**  
漢字 [Kanji]  
*Chinese characters*

訓 [Kun]  
*Native Japanese reading of a Chinese character*

音 [On]  
*Chinese reading of a Chinese character*

顕示 [Kenji]  
*Manifestation; To appear publicly; Conspicuously*

元 [Moto]  
*Source*

鏡 [Kyou]  
*Mirror; Looking glass*

**Pg. 18**  
顕微 [Kenbi].  
*Microscopic*

微 [Bi]  
*Delicate; Minute; One-millionth*

顕 [Ken]  
*Apparent; Obvious; Clear*