

Elegy for a Lost Tomorrow

Representations of Loss in the Works of Isao Takahata

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*A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of Art History*

2015

Signature Page

This thesis entitled:
Elegy for a Lost Tomorrow: Representations of Loss in the Works of Isao Takahata
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has been approved for the Departments of Film Studies and Art History

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

Abstract

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Thesis directed by Associate Professor Melinda Barlow

The films of Japanese animation director Isao Takahata are notable for their vivid and complex characters, deep engagement with Japanese history and culture, and for their increasingly bold visual innovation and experimentation over Takahata's half-century spanning career. Yet these are also films replete with loss, nearly all of Takahata's theatrical works emotionally and thematically constructed upon foundations of death, transience, and grief. Children dying in the fire-bombings of the Japanese countryside during the Pacific War; a woman reflecting on lost parts of herself as she wanders through distant memories; a celestial daughter born to experience the joy and sorrow of mankind's transient plane; these are the kinds of stories Takahata tells, and this study is primarily concerned with exploring the heart of absence that exists within each of them. Through close readings of three Takahata features in particular – *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988), *Only Yesterday* (1991), and *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* (2013) – and other films around the periphery, alongside engagement with texts about Japanese spirituality and broader works about the human experience of loss and wandering, this study aims to both trace the core themes of one filmmaker's career, and to analyze loss as a dynamic and fluid ethereal force. With the animated canvas of Takahata's films offering a perfect medium upon which to study loss, its hand-crafted, transient form enhancing and challenging the ways in which loss is cinematically analyzed, this study asks readers to reconsider their relationship not only to the moving image, but also to the emotional forces of

absence, wonder, and grief. Guided by a series of short interstitial personal remembrances from the author, this study is as much an exploration of emotion and human processing as it is an examination of film and form, crafted with the implicit goal of demonstrating how closely aligned these typically disparate fields of study are within the human mind and heart.

Acknowledgements

The realization of this project would not have been possible, first and foremost, without the guidance and inspiration of Professor Melinda Barlow, who not only introduced me to a large number of texts utilized in this study, but who has also encouraged in me a way of thinking and writing about art and life that led to the core substance of the entire project. Nothing you are about to read would exist without her influence and friendship, and I am eternally grateful for both.

Special thanks must also be given to Professors Erin Espelie and Kelly Sears, who served on the defense committee for this thesis and were the first people besides Professor Barlow to read the project in full. Their advice was an inspiration to me while I worked on the project, and the discussion we had during the defense is a high-point in my academic career. I could not have asked for a better group of people to be the first to read my work, and my thanks goes out to each of them.

Many thanks to my brother Thomas Lack, who dutifully served as a sounding board for me as I developed ideas throughout the research and writing of the project, and who helped a great deal with musical analysis and terminology in the third chapter. I don't know how I would get a big project like this done if I did not have Thomas to turn to.

Thanks to my entire family for their support, especially my mother – apologies, again, for making you cry with those interstitials – and to our new puppy, Phoebe, who served as a light for me when the content of this project made everything else seem dark. I would say something here about my late father, but I think the text to come says all one needs to know.

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Prelude: *On the Shores of Big Pine Lake*

*Tremble, oh my gravemound,
in time my cries will be
only this autumn wind*

*Tsuka mo ugoke
waga naku koe wa
aki no kaze*

Bashō, 1689¹

When I close my eyes, I can see the lake stretched out before me. Its dark surface twinkles softly from the late summer sun shining in the clear blue sky above, and its surface is peppered with small islands and miniature peninsulas, all densely forested with towering pines. The dance of land and water continues as far as my eyes can see, past the tall power lines that jut unobtrusively above the trees, though I know where the edge of this lake resides, and the path on its opposite bank that leads to another lake even calmer and more remote than this one.

The soft breeze is soothing, the slightly humid heat intense but hardly overwhelming, and the smell of the air is clean and fragrant, a mixture of pine and grass and dirt and water, all scents that are natural and reassuring. Even with a healthy number of people milling about, the day is mostly quiet, save for the cries of the Loons who swim upon the lake's surface and sing their simple, beautiful tune before diving their long necks into the water in search of fish, or often just a pleasant underwater travel. Their song is slower and more resonant than Loons found in other,

¹ Anonymous translation. Japanese text and date courtesy Makoto Ueda, *Bashō and his Interpreters: Selected Hokku with Commentary* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 263.

more densely populated parts of the world, a few simple notes arranged with striking melodic power. Whether out on the lake itself or resting upon its shores, their song echoes about the pines and islands, mixed with the soft, still atmosphere in a sensation of hollow fullness – a great force of life and energy expressed through a din of calm.

Every summer we come here, my father and my brother, my uncles and my cousins; it is a home away from home, a place that feels more intimately familiar than many locations I have spent far more time amidst. The shores of Big Pine Lake reside little more than an hour over the border into Ontario; that last hour of the drive is the calmest and most beautiful, as civilization seems to recede in full, and dense forests, small rivers, and a never-ending patchwork of lakes takes hold of one's sight. The final road to the lake is not paved, a narrow sliver of dirt carved amidst the imposing tree-line, and once one arrives, the assortment of wooden cabins arranged on the lake's craggy mouth are but small distractions from the dominance of this ancient, natural setting.

Down at the shoreline, next to one of the wooden docks, I see my father wading in the shallows and practicing his fly-fishing. The long rod arches back, and the even longer line seems to dance in abstract patterns as he casts it out into the water. My father has been coming here for the better part of forty years; the fly-fishing is a newer interest, one he practices here even though it is best put to use back in the wholly different rapids and rivers of Colorado. His back is turned to me, but the bald spot on his head shines in the sun, and I sense that could I see him from the other side, he would be wearing a small but palpable smile of concentration and fulfillment – that he would be pleasantly lost in this moment.

When I was ten, my father took me here for the first time, just as he was brought to this place by his father when he was ten. Two years later, we brought my younger brother too, and

this year, we are accompanied by my mother, a gradual shift in tradition for what has long been an activity dominated by the men in the family. She sits on the water's edge in a cheap fold-up chair, reading; her head is also mostly bald, but she covers it, in casual occasions like these, in a bright orange outdoorsman's cap. My brother is walking down to the dock, carrying a cooler and tackle box to our boat, and a little ways down the shoreline, my uncle and his son do the same, done with their brief lunchtime rest and boarding their boat for an afternoon of fishing. In front of another cabin, further still down the shore, my two younger cousins are playing a mixture of baseball and fetch alongside their dog.

My father is perhaps the least conspicuous sight in this image – and yet when I look upon the scene, whether or not he is directly in my line of vision, he is always and absolutely the anchor, the center of this little isolated haven, the one for whom I am here, and the one whose quiet appreciation of this place radiates infectiously towards me, a spiritual sort of inheritance given and maintained in life.

This is a world that no longer exists – not in this form, nor in these sensations, nor is it graspable as anything more than a fragment of a past that cannot be replicated. I can visit this place again, and see that same calm lake, and smell those same tall pines, and hear those same blissful loons; I can stand in the same spots, and travel in the same boats, and catch the same fish; I can even do so with many of the same people, arranged in much the same way they are now. But the anchor is gone, and without him, the shores of Big Pine Lake no longer feel solid or comforting, but wandering and adrift. I cannot revisit this place like I did before, and I cannot experience or access it as I once did. Going there without my anchor is like visiting a foreign and fantastical land, one whose contours are unfamiliar to me, and whose physical presence seems less tangible than the murky fathoms of memory.

This is a world that had been lost to me. As sure as I am that it ever existed, I am equally sure that I cannot go back.

Why, then, does it feel so real?



Prologue: *Jisei*

Accessing the heart of absence in Isao Takahata's artistry

*The snow of yesterday
that fell like cherry petals
is water once again*

*Hana to mishi
yuki wa kinō zo
moto no mizu*

Gozan, 1789¹

The Tama Hills are blanketed in a shroud of cold, blue mist, and at the edge of a decimated forest stands a group of *tanuki*, gazing out upon a vast urban housing development and mourning their lost home. The earth around them is dry and barren, filled with withering grass and the lonely stumps of dead trees. Autumn has come, and for these *tanuki*, it feels as though Spring shall never arrive.

“Give us back our hills!” wails Bunta, a *tanuki* who has spent years away from Tama searching for an answer to their plight, and who has returned to a homeland irrevocably changed. “Give us back our field! *Give us back our home!*”² The others can

only stand by in somber silence as their friend falls to the ground, sobbing. It is a moment of tremendous vulnerability – of an unrestrained emotional outpouring in an utterly desolate space.

The *tanuki* – or Japanese raccoon dogs, a species indigenous to the island nation and who are central characters in Japan’s folklore and mythology – are mischievous creatures by nature, and on the whole, Isao Takahata’s 1994 film *Pom Poko*³ is a humorous and free-wheeling affair, following the *tanuki* of the Tama Hills in the period after Japan’s 1960s economic boom and subsequent urban expansion. As the Hills are deforested and carved apart to make room for an exponential increase in housing, the *tanuki* wage a war of mischief with the humans, using their powers of transformation and illusion in the hopes of awakening a spiritual fear in the hearts of those who tear down their comfortable rural home. And as the *tanuki* sabotage construction equipment, shapeshift into humans and other animals, and even stage a literal parade of Japanese ghosts, spirits, and mythical creatures, Takahata and the artists of Studio Ghibli present a string of comic set-pieces and visual splendor that is as joyous as it is melancholy. For no matter how indomitable the trickster spirit of the *tanuki* may be, this is a tour through a Japan that no longer exists, a countryside that has been modernized and paved over, a folk tale of displacement that culminates in this moment of abject sadness, as the creatures who loved these hills and forests most realize that, despite their best efforts, the world they tried so hard to hold onto is lost, and can never be returned.

At their lowest point, with Bunta weeping on the ground, the sun begins to rise. In a sudden burst of inspiration, Shokichi, the young but spirited de-facto leader of the group, has an idea. “Let’s change it back,” he suggests, the rising sun gradually returning color to

the hillside. “Our final operation. Make it the way it was.” The others like this idea – to use their power of illusion to see the old scenery they loved so much one last time.

“But what would it prove to do something like that now?” Bunta asks dejectedly.

“Nothing,” replies the matriarch Oroku, grinning broadly. “But it will be amusing.”

And so, smiling again, the *tanuki* gather themselves atop a construction crane, their hands clasped in prayer and concentration. The world grows quiet for a moment...and suddenly, from the *tanuki* emanates an explosion of nature. The crane is transformed into a vast, thick tree, and from the tree sprouts countless roots. Grass pours like water out of its foundations, covering the construction site in a thick blanket of greenery, and continuing on to the houses beyond. Out of this sober, colorless urban space, trees grow tall and wild and unrestrained, and the leveled ground shifts to become mountainous once again. Old-fashioned Japanese houses, made of wood and stone and thatched straw roofs, reappear in the now resurrected valley, and the dirt roads bordered with luminescent green marshes are summoned back into being. Piece by piece, the suburb of drab grey metals and intersecting paved roads is replaced by endless expanses of trees and lakes and hills, small human settlements nestled comfortably amidst the foliage. Small roadside shrines appear once more, and the kind rural humans the *tanuki* remember from long ago are resurrected too. From the edge of the *tanukis*’ illusion, a modern woman recognizes a long departed family member, out walking along the dirt road, and runs after her with tears in her eyes. Others follow, all enraptured by this miraculous vision of a distant past.



The tanukis' illusion – transforming the construction site back into their natural home

Back at the epicenter, several of the *tanuki* catch a glimpse of their younger selves, roaming through the field like they did in days long past, innocent and untraumatized by the relentless march of time. The *tanuki* cannot help themselves; they break their concentration, transforming from their anthropomorphized state back into four-legged raccoon dogs, and rush after their past selves, desperate to grasp once more the life they had back then.

Isao Takahata, like his longtime friend and colleague Hayao Miyazaki,⁴ has gifted the world with countless cinematic visions of existential wonder and intimate human insight. Quietly disarming in its immense visual expressiveness, this particular sequence is a defining one in Takahata's half-century spanning career, a rapturous and impossible vision imbued with a piercingly deep well of feeling, and one which encapsulates nearly all that defines Takahata as an artist. It presents a complex intersection of fantasy, culture, and folklore, its setting informed by Japan's deeply rooted connection to the natural world – Autumn as the liminal space of death that haunts these *tanuki*, and summer, the season of happiness and vitality, being the time in which they resurrect the historical Tama Hills –its protagonists reflective both of Japanese folklore and the cultural belief in the spiritual validity of the natural environment and those creatures that dwell within. It is a meditation on urban versus rural development, on the stark differences between the Japan of today and the Japan of history and memory, and as such also

exists as a broader statement on the universal conflict between progress and tradition. It is crafted through a prism which may at first look childlike – talking animals, a fantastical transformation, the rich colors of animation – but is thematically oriented at those old enough to understand the serious implications at the heart of the image. And in its breathtaking visual power, the sequence is an implicit statement as to the power of animation, the expressive force of the medium personified through Takahata and company's ability to summon the Japan of the past back into being right before our eyes, with a hauntingly immediate fluidity that would be impossible in any other form of visual art.

But most importantly of all, it is a sequence which emanates a great and palpable sense of loss. As the absence felt in the contemporary Tama Hills is replaced with the natural rural space these mythical creatures long for, that absence becomes all the more tangible – a sense of something irretrievable, a vision of a joyous tomorrow that has receded into the realm of fantasy. This emotion – which encompasses many complex ideas, but is most easily called loss – is the force which links the many varied ideas of Isao Takahata's remarkable and diverse filmography, the emotion I sense emanating most strongly from the heart of his work.

This loss takes many forms. For the *tanuki*, it is the loss of a home, and all that it symbolizes: a culture, a comfort, an identity and way of life. For the war-ravaged protagonists of *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988), two orphans struggling to survive during the relentless firebombings of the Pacific War, it is the loss of all those things, but most importantly, the loss of hope – of hope for a future, of hope for a present, of hope for a life outside the boundaries of fear and desolation. For Taeko Okajima, the 26-year-old protagonist of *Only Yesterday* (1991), that loss stems from an absence of self, her journey to the Japanese countryside and accompanying procession of childhood memories underlining how little she has pursued her true self in her

adult years, the film expressing a yearning for the life not lived, and the chances never taken. For the Princess Kaguya, the eponymous folktale heroine of *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* (2013), it is the loss of life itself, the yearning for an unrepressed life lived in the wonder of the moment, and which is denied by the failings of the human world and the universal pain of transience.

Yet for all of these characters, this sensation of loss is that which drives their actions. It compels the brother Seita to work recklessly in pursuit of keeping his little sister Setsuko's childlike hope alive; it drives Taeko to visit rural Japan, reflect upon her past, and to make new choices for the future; and it ignites in the Princess Kaguya a sense of both existential melancholy and existential reverie – for only with an awareness of transience can the joys of the world around her shine brightest.

This is Isao Takahata's complex vision of loss: That it is something which motivates us, as human beings, a powerful emotion that emanates from the core of our heart and soul and being, and which defines who we are by the absences we feel strongest. Loss, to Takahata, is the force that makes life meaningful, precisely because it makes the act of living so frequently painful. It is the thing that prompts our strongest emotions and most meaningful decisions, and it is under the umbrella of loss that each of Takahata's many other artistic obsessions – of exploring Japanese culture and folklore, of interrogating the nature of progress, of reflexively examining the art of storytelling and pushing the envelope of visual representation – is ultimately made relevant, for these are all ways in which we mediate and reflect on the transient properties of the world in which we live.

My old friends and I all refer to Isao Takahata, the director, by the nickname “Paku-san.” Paku-san’s hobbies are music and studying. He possesses rarely seen and highly sensitive compositional skills, but by nature he is also a real slugabed sloth. People say that humans are descended from apes, but when we look around the studio, we sometimes wonder if there might also be some descendants of the pig character Cho Hakkai, or Zhū Bājiè as the Chinese call him, in Saiyūki⁵ ... And if that’s the case, then when all is said and done Paku-san must be the descendent of some giant sloth that once crawled the plains of earth in the Pliocene era.

Hayao Miyazaki, 1990⁶

Make no mistake: Hayao Miyazaki comes from a place of deep affection when he describes Isao Takahata as being descended from a giant sloth. Affection no doubt tinged with a hint of frustration, as Takahata’s particular working methods have on more than one occasion slowed progress at Studio Ghibli to a crawl, but affection nevertheless. For in addition to being a truly great filmmaker – one whose work has been a consistent inspiration to Miyazaki since he joined Tōei Dōga⁷ several years after Takahata began his own career – Isao Takahata is a fascinating and multifaceted character, one whose unique interests and personality, as with all great artists, comes across strongly in his work.

Takahata – or Paku-san, as one might call him were one his friend (the name comes from Takahata’s habit of noisily munching on bread in the morning, the Japanese onomatopoeia for which is *paku paku*)⁸ – harbors a noted fascination for all kinds of art, from music (as Miyazaki notes), to literature (he graduated from the University of Tokyo with a degree in French Literature) to painting (he describes himself as an avid enthusiast of all sorts of art exhibitions, and has even published a book on fine art).⁹ His films and television shows are mostly adaptations, of stories and literature from at home and around the world,¹⁰ though his work is undeniably rooted in the particulars of Japanese culture. He is an animated man who wears his emotions on his sleeves, generally soft-spoken but prone to passionate discussion about the

stories he tells; watching Takahata in interviews or behind-the-scenes footage, one senses he feels deeply for the characters and scenarios he creates.

And he is, indeed, prone to indecision and lethargy, despite his long list of credits and accomplishments. Miyazaki is hardly his only collaborator to notice this. After both Miyazaki and, later, Toshio Suzuki¹¹ found themselves unable to invest the time needed to produce Takahata's works – Suzuki calls it a 24-hours-a-day, 7-days-a-week job – a younger producer at Studio Ghibli, Yoshiaki Nishimura, found himself visiting Takahata's house every day for eighteen months trying to convince the director to create the film that would eventually become *The Tale of Princess Kaguya* – after a subsequent eight further years of work.¹² “...At some unknown point, I – the giant sloth – began to sneakily avoid responsibility,” Takahata himself wrote in 1996. “And since Miya-san [Miyazaki] is responsible for Studio Ghibli, whenever I do any work I have tended to create a great deal of trouble for him by, among other things, causing delays in production schedules.”¹³

Most puzzlingly of all, Isao Takahata is a director of animated films who does not himself draw, a rarity in the world of Japanese animation. In contrast to Hayao Miyazaki, who is so hands-on with his own animation that he is said to have personally revised up to 80,000 cels during the production of his 1997 film *Princess Mononoke*, Takahata leaves the storyboarding and animation of his features up to others. This is why, although Takahata fulfills more than enough requirements to be easily labeled an *auteur*, I prefer to think of him as a ‘conductor,’ one whose aesthetic talents lie in the ability to recognize the varied artistic merits and voices of others – like character designer and art director Yoshifumi Kondo, background artist Kazuo Oga, and once upon a time, even Hayao Miyazaki himself – and corral those identities under a unified artistic vision that is stronger for its multiplicity of parts. “If you want to make an animated film

from your own drawings,” Takahata mused in 2014, “I think you would become very narrow and limited by your own style and abilities. The role of the director is to gather very talented people, and to direct his vision.”¹⁴

As a result, Takahata directs based on instinct, emotion, and a deep, almost philosophical consideration of the story being told. As noted in the 2014 documentary *Isao Takahata and his Tale of the Princess Kaguya* (Dir. Akira Miki, Hidekazu Sato), he imparts images to his collaborators “through a vast flow of information,” describing a mood or an idea as much as a specific image or composition. “It is said that his inability to draw frees him to come up with new approaches to animation,” notes the documentary, and this may be the most important point one can make when discussing Takahata’s work. For he is, it must be stressed, one of the great experimenters in the history of industrial animation, a filmmaker who has consistently pushed boundaries from his first film to his last, and whose legacy, if it can ever be easily defined, will be dominated by discussion of the many ways in which he pushed animation towards places it had never previously gone, either in Japan or the world at large.

Having joined Tōei Dōga in the early 1960s, at the beginning of the period we generally accept ‘anime’ to have stemmed from, Takahata has eternally been a key figure in the development of Japanese animation. In fact, I would go so far as to say that his first feature film, *The Great Adventure of Horus, Prince of the Sun* (1968),¹⁵ is the most significant animated work in Japanese film history – and perhaps the most important commercial animated film ever produced, anywhere in the world, for the ways in which it boldly breaks with the aesthetic, narrative, and ideological codes embedded in the ‘Disney’ model of Western animation, and which was dominant the world over at the time (and might still be, had a film like *Horus* never come along to challenge it). Especially in Japan, early commercial animation owed a great debt

to the popular works of the Walt Disney Company, and before the distinct visual style and character designs of anime came into being, it was common for animated features to look an awful lot like those found in the West – and for the singing animals, simplistic stories, and homogenized themes that characterize Disney films to dominate Japanese animation as well.

The Great Adventure of Horus, Prince of the Sun broke with all of that, in ways both outright – as in its narrative about the triumph of collective will over individual power, a complete reversal of Western narrative codes in which the individual is prioritized – and subtle. It too has talking animals, but they are complex and even dark characters, who exist not as comic relief for the protagonists, but as extensions and reflections of the ensemble's interior psychology. It has musical numbers, but they are almost all sung in a choral voice, an extension of the film's belief in the power of community; those numbers sung by an individual are, not coincidentally, somewhat sinister and used as a tool of seduction by the film's antagonist. The visuals still exist in a state between the Disney-esque drawings of early Japanese animation and the unique aesthetics that characterize modern anime, but the boldness with which Takahata and his collaborators express character motion – the film's action sequences are visceral and immediate to a degree that remains powerful, nearly fifty years later – and especially their willingness to give themselves over to visual experimentation – such as the climactic 'Forest of Doubt' sequence, set in an internalized realm of fear and uncertainty, brought to life with surreal imagery and a fluid stream of consciousness – proudly proclaims that Japanese animation has already begun to forge its own path.

Most crucially, *Horus* contains a depth of character psychology utterly unheard of in commercial animation up to that point, reflexively interrogating the nature of heroism through the protagonist Horus, and exploring themes as vast as human morality and existential anguish

through the conflicted co-lead Hilda, a young woman related to antagonist Grunwald and who reluctantly carries out his bidding. Her psychological turmoil is never simplified or treated anything less than seriously, nor are the complex notions her presence raises left undeveloped. She is the film's thematic touchstone, and in her creation is sown the seeds for every great female protagonist Isao Takahata and Hayao Miyazaki would ever create; perhaps even the whole rich history of psychologically vivid and complex characters, both male and female, in Japanese animation.¹⁶

Horus was the last project Takahata ever completed for Tōei Dōga, unsurprising considering that the film ran severely over-budget and over-schedule, was a financial disaster, and in its vivid socialist themes, served as a feature-length repudiation of Tōei Dōga's attitude towards the labor union (both Miyazaki and Takahata, along with many other members of the film's staff, were leaders in union struggles taking place at the time). Yet although it marked the end of the early phase of Takahata's career, it was the beginning of something far greater. Watching it, one can sense Takahata emerging as an independent artist, one who has much more in common with filmmakers of the French New Wave – the film's bold widescreen compositions reminiscent of Francois Truffaut – or of Italian Neorealism – the film's leftist politics and choral voice recalling the films and theories of Roberto Rossellini and Cesare Zavattini – than of contemporary animation. One could even argue Takahata fostered a politics and spirit in common to the filmmakers of the then-current Japanese New Wave – such as Nagisa Oshima or Shohei Imamura – although his style and execution is largely divergent.

Regardless, Takahata's career is consistently marked by innovation, from seemingly small technical details such as the pre-recording of dialogue (in Japanese animation, dialogue is traditionally dubbed in after the visuals are completed), to large scale experiments with

representation and form, as seen in the soft, comic-strip visuals of *My Neighbors the Yamadas* (1999), or the watercolor sketches of *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*. He has told traditional linear stories, but he has also employed thematically complex flashback structures – as in *Only Yesterday* – crafted features out of vignettes and episodic pacing – such as *Yamadas* or *Pom Poko* – and, in the grand tradition of Japanese artists like Yasujiro Ozu, made quiet features that prioritize detail and atmosphere above incident – a classification that applies to each of the three films featured in this study.

In all cases, it is clear that Takahata tells the stories he wishes to tell, in the way he wishes to tell them, and it is this highly independent spirit that contributed to his and Hayao Miyazaki's formation of Studio Ghibli in 1985, a venture that has granted both filmmakers complete artistic freedom, while also leading to astounding levels of commercial success (or, in the case of flops such as *My Neighbors the Yamadas*, allowed the success of the studio in general to prop up some costlier experiments). Though Miyazaki is the studio's best-known figure, having directed or written 12 of the studio's 21 feature films, all of them commercial successes, Ghibli has been just as much an artistic haven for Isao Takahata, and it is within Ghibli that Takahata has crafted his most accomplished works – including each of the three films discussed in this study.

If Hayao Miyazaki is, as I have argued in the past,¹⁷ the world's greatest living commercial animation director – an easy claim to argue, given the sheer breadth, depth, and cross-cultural accessibility and embrace of his filmography – then Takahata may be the world's boldest, the most accomplished when it comes to challenging what animation can do, interrogating what it can mean, expanding upon what it can perceive, and enhancing what it can suggest.

Certainly, one of the ways Takahata – along with other anime artists of his generation, including Miyazaki – has pushed at traditional conceptions of animation is to turn his artistic lens back upon reality. Realism is a generally unexplored concept in Western animation, where fantasy and comically heightened scenarios continue to dominate the marketplace, but is at this point a healthy subset of the diverse anime landscape in Japan.¹⁸ We have artists like Takahata to thank for setting such a precedent, for he belongs to a particular subset of animation filmmakers who typically minimize or deny fantastic elements from their films, oftentimes focusing on contemporary day-to-day lives, historical narratives, or in the case of television shows like *Anne of Green Gables* or *Heidi, Girl of the Alps*, literary adaptations. The monsters of *Horus* and the anthropomorphized animals of *Pom Poko* are just about as fantastic as Takahata gets, and while ‘grounded’ fantasy is a signature of all of Studio Ghibli’s productions – dominated by Hayao Miyazaki’s magical realist tendencies – Takahata’s works, particularly some of those featured in this study, tend to be the most sober and grounded of them all.

In fact, one could even question – particularly when acclimated to the Western model of animation, which avoids real-world scenarios and adult drama like the bubonic plague – whether films like *Grave of the Fireflies* or *Only Yesterday* need to be animated at all. A story about two children struggling in wartime Japan; an adult-oriented drama about a young woman considering her past and future – wouldn’t the conventional wisdom be that telling these stories in live-action might make them more ‘identifiable’ to the average viewer than when rendered as a ‘cartoon?’

For many viewers, myself included, the answer is *no*. The truth of the matter is that I personally feel I identify *more* with great works of hand-drawn animation than I do with most live-action pictures. I have extensively studied and written about the works of Studio Ghibli in particular because they resonate with me, on basic levels of identification and emotion, more

powerfully than any other films I have ever encountered. And I know it isn't just me. I remember sitting with my father in the sixth or seventh row of the Esquire Theatre in Denver, at a 2005 press screening for Hayao Miyazaki's newest film, *Howl's Moving Castle*, and feeling the reverie the work ignited inside both of us. It was one of those life-changing theatrical experiences, to feel a sense of wonder and catharsis and existential release within the confines of a motion picture auditorium, wherein one is never again able to look back. Before he passed, my father – hardly a lover of anime, or of Japanese culture in general – grew to love the films of Studio Ghibli nearly as much as I do. The two of us processed films very differently, and yet within these animated movies, we found ourselves equally enraptured – and we are only two members of a global community who likely feel much the same way.

This naturally presents a complication when analyzing such films through a critical lens. It is not merely as simple as asking *why* or *how* one identifies with an animated image – when nearly all film theory is centered around the notion of identifying with photographic representation – but in my case, asking why I identify with these particular images *more* than others.

It is a dilemma that has vexed me, sometimes unconsciously, for nearly as long as I have written about cinema (that special screening of *Howl's Moving Castle*, ten years ago now, came one year into my career as a film critic). I summarized my thoughts on the matter, to the best of my ability, in my 2014 study *Seeing With Eyes Unclouded: Representations of Creativity in the Works of Hayao Miyazaki*, writing:

As viewers who have likely experienced similar emotions as these characters, also having gone through the process of maturation and self-identification, these visual qualities have the potential to resonate forcefully. A great actor is also capable of deftly illustrating the interior life of his or her character, of course, but as Miyazaki explains, “a drawing with emotion can be extremely powerful if it accurately captures what you want to express.

Frankly, I like the sort of power that can be depicted in animation far more than the clever movements in live-action films.”¹⁹

Animation is – when tackled with true passion, and not done in a heavily commercialized, assembly-line fashion, as it often is in both America and Japan – an inherently emotional process. It involves an artist sitting at a desk for many hours a day, sketching a movement or illustrating a background in meticulous fashion, creating a visual reality from a starting point of nothingness. For the end result to have identifiable power and impact, the process must be committed to with the whole of one’s emotional being ...

The films analyzed in this study are at their core about ethereal and emotional states, interior sensations and abstract concepts that are impossible to quantify. The artifice of animation makes the medium uniquely qualified to summon and explore such states, because for a truly great animated film to come into being, the heart and soul of the creator must be poured into every frame, traces of the animator’s passion left in every line and brushstroke. It is a medium that invites the artist to commit themselves wholly, and can engage the deepest parts of the viewer as a result. At its best, animation asks its creator to pull from his or her own internal being while simultaneously looking past themselves to a world beyond, a world that has not yet come into existence but could – to ‘see with eyes unclouded’ the deepest truths of both our world and this realm of imagination.²⁰

It is not a bad start. The same words could be applied to Isao Takahata – who, even if he does not animate himself, trusts others to throw themselves into their work with such reckless emotional abandon, and is absorbed in the film’s interior world just as heavily – and to each of the three films in this study, all of which are, in their explorations of loss, tackling some mightily heavy and ethereal themes. Yet there is more to the issue than just this, and I believe a more fully formed theoretical framework is needed to describe the ‘power of animation.’ Considering the inherent emotional qualities of animation is a starting point, but the connection between the animated film and viewer runs deeper than that. It lies, I think, in the way the creation of hand-drawn animation replicates the basic processes of experience, perception, and memory inherent to the human mind.

In her 2002 essay “Loving a Disappearing Image,” Laura Marks radically retools some of the basic tenants of identification in film theory, and while she was writing about experimental

film and video, her insight provides a compelling foundation on which to formulate a new conception for the potential power of animation. The crux of her argument, as she lays out, is to “reconfigure identification so that it is not with a coherent subject but with nonhuman or inanimate objects, and with the body of the image itself. They compel identification with a process, which is material but nonhuman.”²¹ Later, she elaborates:

Recall that cinematic identification was first defined by Christian Metz as identification with a character (secondary) or with the look of the apparatus itself (primary); more recently, secondary identification came to be redefined as an oscillation among many subject positions. Secondary identification remains understood as identification with a person, or a personified being. In contrast, I suggest that secondary identification may be with an inanimate thing or things; and that primary identification itself may be an identification with dispersion, with loss of unified selfhood.²²

These notions are crucial, for they allow us to craft a clear, basic framework that elucidates some of the central processes through which we identify with an animated image in the first place.

Marks is writing about celluloid and video, about the transience of the archival or original object itself, but keep in mind that hand-drawn animation²³ is a series of ‘objects’ in and of itself – of background paintings, of key animation frames, of in-between cels, etc. – and that if ‘loving a disappearing image’ requires that we “trust that the image is real in the first place,” as Marks writes, then the basic animated form is also a material basis applicable to these ideas.²⁴ The drawings exist. They are tactile, physical objects, and marks of their physicality, in the best animation, are left within the image; even outside of Takahata’s experimentations with animated form in his later work, where the artifice is more openly acknowledged, Ghibli has a habit of leaving brushstrokes in the backgrounds, or of allowing the texture of the animation paper to survive through the photographic process, and those little signs of human craftsmanship are reminders of the image’s tangibility.

“Loving a disappearing image means finding a way to allow the figure to pass while embracing the tracks of its presence, in the physical fragility of the medium.”²⁵ Like our own transient bodies, Marks argues, we are drawn to impermanence, to signs of imperfection, to decay, to palpable materiality. In the case of animation, this sense of corporeality can open the door to identification. We identify with the human form as conjured by the animators (which is, in and of itself, a dispersive form of identification²⁶), but perhaps even more importantly, we identify with the landscape, with the colors, with the imperfect shadows left by one layer upon another – with the animation process itself, uniquely and in contrast to how we perceive live-action photography. Crucially, Marks’ theories leave room for this sort of identification to be just as powerful, if not moreso, as traditional conceptions.



From Only Yesterday (1991). Background image animated by Kazuo Oga.

With this foundation in mind, let us extend Marks' ideas even further. In the 2007 documentary *The Artist Who Made Totoro's Forest* (Dir. Maiko Yahata), the works of Studio Ghibli's renowned background artist, Kazuo Oga, are highlighted, and his process is put under the microscope. Oga's backgrounds – the artistic commonality between Takahata and Miyazaki's respective works at Ghibli, and the images responsible for some of the most iconic moments in films like *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988; Dir. Hayao Miyazaki) and *Only Yesterday* – are known for their detailed, evocative nature, for their rich colors and incredible emotional power. The images seem so vivid, it looks as though one could stroll right into them, wandering down a forested dirt path past a shrine, or through a narrow tree-lined corridor before bursting into a wide-open field of flowers.

Oga's process is based entirely on experience. Photographs are never enough, he contends, because when one ventures into the real setting one wishes to emulate or draw inspiration from, one sees things with one's own eyes, using these experiences "as a point of departure for your creativity." Oga and artists like him do not merely observe and reproduce – they experience, process, internalize, and then recreate, an artistic expression that is based upon the real world being filtered through human experience.

It is not unlike the process of mourning, as Laura Marks conceives of it.

In revaluing melancholia, I would like to argue that the mourning subject need not rediscover his/her coherence at the cost of ceasing to love the lost loved one, which is how Freud describes "successful" mourning. Rather, I suggest mourning can involve the *loss* of self and its reconfiguration and redistribution.²⁷

This is a notion that seems so central to human experience: That we lose, that our perceptions and sense of self disintegrate, and that over time, they reemerge in new, personally relevant patterns. This sounds like the process of animation Kazuo Oga describes – to rebuild

with pencil and paper the world one has experienced from memory and emotion and instinct, allowing that disintegration to happen before art can truly be made.

Under this paradigm, animation can even be said to have a quality of ‘resurrection.’ “Loving a disappearing image,” writes Marks, “can be a way of rescuing something that was not loved in its own time.” She is speaking of neglected film being appropriated by experimental artists, but the idea is readily applied here. For instance, in the sequence from *Pom Poko* described above, Takahata, Oga, and the other artists at Studio Ghibli summon the historical Tama Hills back to life before our very eyes. It is the most impactful moment in the film, but in a way, the entire feature is engaging in this process, because in depicting the gradual destruction of Tama, it also preserves a piece of that place in the animated image. In *The Artist Who Made Totoro’s Forest*, we learn that Takahata needed Kazuo Oga on his team for this very reason, because Oga lived in that region during the depicted time period, and therefore knew it intimately. He could, based on memory and instinct, insert details both tangible and ethereal into the backgrounds, ones that historical photographs could never adequately convey. As Marks explains, in pondering the philosophy of Roland Barthes:

Photography ... blocks the act of memory. It fixes the past and substitutes the signs of the image for the creative engagement of memory. To view a photograph of a lost loved one, then, is a melancholic act in which the viewer “knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him.”²⁸

In this way, there is something emotionally liberating about the act of animation. One could watch a video of the rural Tama Hills and see the ‘exact’ details of how it once existed, yet it would be difficult to argue that such an artifact carries more emotional weight than Kazuo Oga’s drawings. Through his artistry, an emotional process is being enacted and conveyed in the material being of *Pom Poko*, one of taking a no-longer-existent physical space out from the

realms of memory and bringing it back to the land of the tangible – a spiritually and emotionally active form of artistic representation, rather than one of concrete reproduction.

For Marks and for animation, then, it all returns to the same origin point of loss. Transience – even if it is something as relatively untraumatic as the process of ‘losing’ an experience at the moment it has passed from the ‘present’ into the ‘past’ – is with us always, for we are decaying beings living in an impermanent world. Art that can convey this, in one form or another, is art that we naturally identify with – and animation most certainly falls under that purview.

The works of Isao Takahata are, therefore, a most relevant case study for extending and exploring this conception of animated identification. He tackles animation from a similar philosophical angle, as do his collaborators; simply looking at the aesthetic arc of his filmography, one sees Takahata and company grappling with how much to represent in an animated image, and how honest their varying approaches to animation feel to the human experience. Of *Only Yesterday*, Kazuo Oga reflects that he “thought the backgrounds were simply too detailed. This was a lesson I’ve never forgotten. I don’t think it was necessary to include that much detail. The backgrounds could have been simpler.”²⁹

And so that is precisely what Oga and Takahata did – softening the brushstrokes and leaving more room for empty space in *Pom Poko*, abandoning traditional cel animation altogether in *My Neighbors the Yamadas*, and creating *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* in a deliberately ‘unfinished’ ‘sketch-style,’ with lots of empty space and visible pencil lines, the parts of animation that are either filled in or literally erased in a traditional production. The arc of Takahata’s filmography is not merely one of exploring and coming to terms with transience on a

thematic level, but of allowing it to creep into his images, eventually embracing its aesthetic presence like an old friend.

This is one of the greatest lessons of Isao Takahata's career: That animation is not just a medium capable of powerful identification, but one uniquely suited to explore some of the greatest questions human beings can ask – to draw meaning from loss upon a canvas that is comfortable with transience, to a degree that is extraordinarily cathartic. These films and these images dig into our hearts and ask us to ponder our own existence, to think upon our own tragedies and losses and elegiac feelings, and to use these stories to feel emotional release – to take that absence and somehow feel whole.

In researching this project, I stumbled upon the term *Jisei*, the concept of the Japanese death poem – or, as Yoel Hoffman phrases it, a “farewell poem to life.”³⁰ Such poems have been written for many centuries in Japan, originally by court nobility and warriors, but they gradually spread to Buddhist monks, scholars, and even Samurai; the development of the Haiku in the sixteenth century popularized the *Jisei* further among laypeople, and during the Meiji period (1868-1912), the *Jisei* became entrenched as a part of Japanese culture, among people of all backgrounds.³¹

It is a curious concept to those of us in the West – to write a poem before dying, a final message to the living composed in verse. Yet I find the *Jisei* attractive, for these poems, and the general intent and idea behind them, convey so much about Japanese conceptions of life and death. They are filled with all the imagery the Japanese associate with transience – with flowers blooming and wilting; with seasons passing and changing; with souls headed off towards a great looming mountain, or on a ship bound to the moon.

Moreover, they convey a sense of calm, a feeling of acceptance and tranquility in the face of one's passing, which is so key to the Japanese ideal of how death should be greeted. They are a reflection, Hoffman argues, of "the *spiritual* legacy of the Japanese."³² In her memoir *Where the Dead Pause, and the Japanese Say Goodbye*, Japanese-American author Marie Mutsuki Mockett recalls her early experiences of culture shock in experiencing how the Japanese approach death and loss:

It was clear to me from childhood that Buddhism was wrapped up in the grim business of death. This gave me the impression early on that the Japanese were unnaturally obsessed with death. Every home we visited had an ancestor shrine, with large-scale, solemn, black-and-white portraits of the deceased person, who never smiled. When we visited my mother's friends, the first thing we did was to pay our respects to the dead relatives, many of whom my mother had known. She would tell me stories about them – about how Dr. Yamaguchi had fed her after the war when she was hungry. One night we stayed in the home of her former boyfriend, who had died but left behind a wife, with whom my mother was friendly. I couldn't sleep that night. Our futons had been laid out in the "most honored room" in the house, which included a large black-and-white portrait of the dead man solemnly staring down at me from the wall. I couldn't take the directness; I was too accustomed to the dead being tucked away, as they are in my own Western culture.³³

Inviting death into our homes, rather than expelling it from our thoughts – unlike Mockett, my initial instinct upon learning of this is a powerful sense of catharsis. In my culture, death is reserved for hospitals, for designated sick-rooms, for graveyards and columbariums, realms of grief and loss that are compartmentalized entirely from the land of the living. When I was little, and my grandparents passed, I was taught that they went to heaven, somewhere far away from us; we might see them again someday, if we went there too, but until then, they were out of reach on some far-off shore.

When Marie Mockett's grandfather, a Buddhist priest, was close to passing, he taught her an entirely different lesson.

Before he died, my grandfather taught me to listen for the *hototogisu*.³⁴ He said that when I heard it singing at the temple, it would mean that he was with me, that he had ridden the

bird's back from Taiwan to Japan when it migrated in May ... As soon as I stepped out of the taxi onto the temple grounds, the *hototogisu* began to sing in the cherry trees overlooking the temple. I imagined the spirit of my grandfather on the back of his favorite bird.³⁵

The dead do not leave us in Japan, at least not permanently. Their souls migrate to the mountains, or to the moon, or drift into animals, or off into the Pure Land of the West, from which it is possible to return. Temples and shrines are found all over the country, the spirits of the deceased worshipped there or in nature, their pictures and even ashes kept in the home to keep their memory and spirit alive. During festivals like the *Obon*, the Japanese visit ancestral homes and temples, and the spirits of the departed are believed to return for the festivities. "Grief is not a one-way street in Japan, for the dead miss us as much as we miss them," Mockett explains. "Even if we cannot take the time to go on a pilgrimage, the dead are always longing for us and waiting to return to us."³⁶

It is not uncommon, in this fashion, for the Japanese to worship multiple Gods, or to believe with equal strength in multiple religions. Many foster equal respect for both Shintō and Buddhism, the two largest religions in the country, and it would not be unheard of for a person to also follow Confucianism and Christianity. "It is precisely this generous spirit of the Japanese," writes Hoffman, "who without qualms embrace one idea and its opposite at once, that reveals a deeper understanding that life and death cannot be formulated in a single idea, because reality is more complex than any logic, and at the same time so much more simple."³⁷

Or, described another way:

One by one, the crew professed not to be religious at all. But even as they said this, almost all of them had opinions about the side-by-side existence of Shintō and Buddhism.

"It's very convenient," said Okisa, our driver. "If one god doesn't work out, then you can just go to another shrine!"

"There's always another god," Usui, the cameraman, agreed.

“It would feel very strange to have just one god,” Okisa said. “Like, how would that work?”

The men gazed into their beers, and the table grew quiet. I realized they were trying to put themselves there, in that place where there was always only One God with One Point of View and that He was a he. It made them uncomfortable, and presented an inflexible worldview to which even they, unreligious and modern Japanese men, were not accustomed.³⁸

Reading this passage, I feel a certain camaraderie with these men. I have lived in America all my life, and long felt just as uncomfortable as they are with the inflexibility of our faiths and worldviews. Eastern religions, and the Japanese conception of death in specific, makes so much more sense to me. On the most basic level, it seems vastly easier to grieve when grief exists as part of the communal space, within a cultural multiplicity of beliefs and philosophies, rather than shoved into a series of small and inflexible series of boxes. Mockett’s book is a powerful read because, in recounting her experiences across Japan in the wake of the 2011 tsunami, she encounters so many points of view, so many open-hearted perspectives on facing loss, and on coming to terms with the own transient nature of our human hearts and minds. My favorite perspective is this one, a lesson on the Shingon sect of Buddhism, as taught to her by a priest named Ryūshin:

“The point of Zen, as I understand it, is to be nothing. To be in the void.” He scoffed. “What is . . . nothing?”

He picked a dish up off the altar – the gesture was meant to seem casual, but it was full of dramatic flourish. Look at this dish right here, he said. Will this be here in a million years? No. So it is here. But it is not here. You know about atoms? Kūkai³⁹ thought about atoms long before we were able to see them. If we had a thread that was thin enough, we could thread it through the cup and it would go out the other side. And so the cup is here, but it is not here. If enough time were to go by, the cup would not be here, but if we were to look for its atoms, we would find them scattered around the universe, which means the cup would be everywhere. And in the same way, the Buddha is everywhere. The point of Shingon is not to be nothing, but to understand that everything is and is not actually concrete. That’s it.⁴⁰

As I reflect upon such lessons, it occurs to me how much these attitudes towards death have swayed me, have pulled me towards Japanese culture, long before I was consciously aware of them. As death is kept more ‘out in the open’ in Japan, it is naturally a more developed part of their art than it is here. When it comes to Japanese cinema, for example, one cannot talk about the great films or the great directors without thinking of death. The canonical works of Japan’s cinematic Golden Age are littered with stories of death, both historical and contemporary, all openly pondering what it means to live and to die. Think of Akira Kurosawa’s *Ikiru* (1952), about a modern Tokyo man searching for meaning as he faces a terminal illness; or of Masaki Kobayashi’s *Harakiri* (1962), a period film which aggressively interrogates the uniquely Japanese notion of ritual suicide. Like Isao Takahata, Keisuke Kinoshita used the world of folklore to explore old age and death in his 1958 classic *The Ballad of Narayama*, an old story about the ancient tradition of families having to take an elder, upon reaching the age of 70, into the mountains and leaving them there to die. Then of course there is the work of the greatest of all Japanese directors, Yasujiro Ozu, whose every film is so deeply informed by Shintō and Buddhist aesthetics, whose every work is, in one way or another, about the passage of time, and about the human trajectory towards death and decay. Ozu’s tombstone is engraved with just a single character: 無 (*mu*), or *nothingness*.

Mockett recounts journeying to *Eiheiji*, one of the two largest temples of Zen Buddhism, where Dōgen himself once lived and taught, and where a rotation of 200 monks live in residence. “Two stone tablets inside the gate bear the following inscription,” she writes.

““Only those concerned with the problem of life and death should enter here. Those not completely concerned with this problem have no reason to pass this gate.””⁴¹

To me, these are words to live by. I am consistently inspired by the Japanese ideal of examining loss with clarity and pragmatism, with keeping an open heart towards the dead, and an open mind towards the thought of one's own passing.

In examining the art of Isao Takahata, let us walk through the gate, and see if we, as viewers, might manage to do the same.

Endnotes

1. Translated by Yoel Hoffman in *Japanese Death Poems: Written by Zen Monks and Haiku Poets on the Verge of Death* (North Clarendon: Tuttle Publishing, 1986), 179-80.

2. Dialogue from *Pom Poko* is derived from the English-language subtitle track on the 2013 “Studio Ghibli ga ippai (Collection)” Japanese Blu-Ray release, translated by Rieko Izutsu-Vajirasarn, Nao Amisaki, Steve Alpert & Jim Hubbert.

3. While the films in this study are Japanese, and the original Japanese-language versions shall be the only ones engaged with throughout, I have elected to refer to Studio Ghibli’s films by their English-language titles in the text. Though these are not always literal translations of the Japanese, the English-language titles for Ghibli’s features are unique in that they have either been chosen or approved by Studio Ghibli in Japan, where each film has an officially designated English title used on art books, storyboard collections, and promotional materials within the country. I therefore feel confident that these titles accurately reflect the intended spirit of their respective films, and that they are the proper titles to use in an English-language study. For additional notes on the original Japanese titles of Isao Takahata’s films, how they are translated, and what other names if any they go by, please refer to the *Isao Takahata Annotated Filmography* in the Appendix.

4. Hayao Miyazaki, the iconic director of such animated masterworks as *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988) and *Spirited Away* (2001) is one of the key figures in this study, a co-founder of Studio Ghibli alongside Isao Takahata, and whose working relationship with Takahata stretches back to the 1960s, when they first met and collaborated at Tōei Dōga, in addition to serving as leaders in the company’s labor union disputes of the decade. In the early days of their relationship, Miyazaki frequently worked under Takahata, who typically served as director, in crucial positions such as Key Animator or Animation Director. For Takahata’s first film, *The Great Adventure of Horus, Prince of the Sun* (1968), Miyazaki was technically employed as a Key Animator, but exerted such artistic influence over the production that a new title of ‘Scene Designer’ was invented for him. Through the 1960s and 70s, the two collaborated on a number of television shows and films in this fashion, until their partnership ended with the 1979 television series *Anne of Green Gables*, when Miyazaki left to direct his first film, *Lupin the III: The Castle of Cagliostro* (1979). From there, Miyazaki never transitioned out of the role of director, and he and Takahata worked on their projects separately. In the early days of Studio Ghibli, they produced one another’s films, but after Toshio

Suzuki joined, and subsequently produced everything, they have had less direct involvement in one another's work – though their friendship and respect for one another has held fast throughout the years.

5. A reference to the classic 16th-century Chinese novel *Journey to the West*. Zhū Bājiè is one of the three beings who accompany the monk Xuanzang on his eponymous journey. He is a monstrous creature, a mix between a human and a pig, but is nevertheless a complex character, whose propensity for laziness and gluttony lands the travelling party in hot water on multiple occasions over the course of the journey.

6. Hayao Miyazaki, "Descendent of a Giant Sloth," in *Starting Point: 1979 – 1996*, trans. Beth Cary and Frederik L. Schodt (San Francisco: Viz Media, 2009), 201.

7. Tōei Dōga, now known as Toei Animation (Dōga is the original Japanese word for animation, though it has long since gone out of favor), is one of the largest animation studios in Japan, and in many ways the most historically significant, having created television shows with broad worldwide popularity such as *Dragon Ball Z* (1989-1996), *Sailor Moon* (1992-1997), and *One Piece* (1999-Present).

8. Hayao Miyazaki, "All I Want Is to Maintain a Workplace to Create Good Movies," in *Starting Point: 1979 – 1996*, trans. Beth Cary and Frederik L. Schodt (San Francisco: Viz Media, 2009), 87.

9. As revealed, respectively, in *The Charm Behind Kazuo Oga's Background Art* (2007; Dir. Tomo Nakanishi), and Mark Olsen, "Isao Takahata of Studio Ghibli Surfaces with 'Princess Kaguya,'" *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 21, 2014. <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-isao-takahata-princess-kuguya-20141021-story.html>

10. For instance, Takahata was one of the early directors for Nippon Animation's *World Masterpiece Theater* series of anime, which aired in different forms between 1969 and 1997. The series adapted various works of literature, mostly Western, for a family audience. Takahata most prominently directed *Heidi, Girl of the Alps* (1974) and *Anne of Green Gables* (1979), neither of which have been officially dubbed or subtitled in the English language.

11. Another important character in the story of Studio Ghibli – as much so as either Takahata or Miyazaki, in terms of getting these films made and seen – Toshio Suzuki has produced or executive produced nearly all of Takahata and Miyazaki's films for the studio, in addition to serving as the company's President from 1990 to 2008. Both Miyazaki and Takahata credit Suzuki for the continuation of their personal friendship, for although the two have worked together since the 1960s, their strong and varied personalities may have made an ongoing relationship untenable

were it not for Suzuki. While Suzuki is not an animator, he is as devoted to the creative success of these films as anyone else at Ghibli, and deserves recognition for their successful creation and release.

12. As revealed in the documentary *Isao Takahata and his Tale of the Princess Kaguya* (2014; Dir. Akira Miki, Hidekazu Sato). This version of the film, released as a bonus disc with the 2015 North American home video release of the film from Universal, is an 86-minute cut-down of a longer documentary released in Japan, originally titled *The Making of the Tale of the Princess Kaguya: The 933 Days of Ghibli Studio 7*. Quotes from this film are taken from the subtitle track on the Universal DVD release, translated by Ian MacDougall.

13. Isao Takahata, “The Fireworks of Eros,” in *Starting Point: 1979 – 1996*, Hayao Miyazaki, trans. Beth Carey and Frederik L. Schodt (San Francisco: Viz Media, 2009), 460.

14. Olsen, “Isao Takahata ...”

15. *Horus* has gone by many different titles over the course of its long, complicated release history, and unlike the later Studio Ghibli features, there is no ‘official’ English-language title. The original Japanese title, *Taiyō no Ōji Horusu no Daibōken*, translates literally as *The Great Adventure of Horus, Prince of the Sun*, which I have elected to use here. The film has more commonly been known in English as *The Little Norse Prince* or as *Little Norse Prince Valiant*, neither of which seem to have any clear connection to the Japanese. The film was recently released on DVD in North America by Discotek Media, in its first fully subtitled and uncut English-language release, under the simplified title of *Horus, Prince of the Sun*.

16. This paragraph adapted from my DVD review of the film, “Celebrating the landmark impact of Isao Takahata’s ‘Horus, Prince of the Sun,’ and a wonderful new DVD release”, published January 24, 2015 at www.jonathanlack.com.

17. An argument presented in my 2014 study *Seeing With Eyes Unclouded: Representations of Creativity in the Works of Hayao Miyazaki* (Undergraduate Honors Theses. Paper 726. http://scholar.colorado.edu/honr_theses/726). This work, which traces an arc through three of Hayao Miyazaki’s films, is intended to be a companion piece to this study on Isao Takahata. Reading one is not necessary to fully understand the other, but the two exist in conversation with one another, and as a whole are intended to illustrate a larger picture about these two closely connected artists and the relationship between their work.

18. For those unfamiliar with the diverse subject matter and styles of animation in Japan, I have provided an excerpt from *Seeing With Eyes Unclouded* that offers a broad overview of the difference between Western and Japanese conceptions of the animated form:

...The fact remains that animation in the United States is bound by an easily definable set of generic definitions, and in the recent years of the CGI boom, those boundaries have narrowed even further ... Animation theoretically describes a mode of cinematic production, but in the United States, it can accurately be considered a genre unto itself, and as it is a genre perpetuated in aggressive pursuit of commerce, focusing on franchise extension and merchandizing to the near-total detriment of narrative substance or, indeed, audience identification, its intellectual worth in the Western world is limited.

The Japanese animation industry is also inherently commercial, and it would be impossible to argue otherwise ... Yet the Japanese animation environment also allows an artist like Miyazaki room to exist where he never could in the United States, because although we collectively refer to the industry with one far-reaching word – ‘anime’ – the last thing Japanese animation could ever be accused of is homogeneity. Encompassing a vast amount of narrative forms, character types, settings, and time periods, and pitched to a broad set of demographics that include both men and women, children and adults, anime does not play by one set of rules, but by many. Unlike American animation, it is not a genre unto itself, but a broad and diverse artistic medium that plays host to all the genres one finds in live-action cinema – drama, comedy, horror, action, adventure, fantasy, etc. – and many more of its own invention (you could never have a TV show like *Dragon Ball Z* or *Neon Genesis Evangelion* in American animation, let alone in any nation’s live-action cinema, and those are examples of two vastly different popular anime series). The only broadly identifiable trope one might be able to point to as ‘uniting’ all anime is a heavily generalized conception of the art style, which actually shows far more nuance and stylistic diversity than a western viewer unfamiliar with Japanese animation may be able to spot on first glance.

Because anime is a medium, and not one rigidly defined genre, the opportunity exists for someone like Hayao Miyazaki, Isao Takahata, or the other directors at Studio Ghibli to make passionate, thoughtful art – in multiple genres and pitched at multiple demographics, no less – that has a genuine shot at popularity. Japanese audiences are not conditioned to expect one thing of animation the way American viewers are, and therefore, many kinds of works can be successful. (15-7)

19. Hayao Miyazaki, “Thoughts on Japanese Animation,” in *Starting Point: 1979 – 1996*, trans. Beth Cary and Frederik L. Schodt (San Francisco: Viz Media, 2009), 76.

20. Lack, “Seeing With Eyes Unclouded,” 20-1.

21. Laura Marks, “Loving a Disappearing Image,” in *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multimedia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 92.

22. Marks, “Loving,” 97.

23. While there are of course multiple forms of ‘hand-drawn’ animation, what I refer to here is the process most commonly known as ‘cel’ animation – background layers illustrated on paper, with translucent ‘cels’ laid on top for moving image components such as characters – though this has been an erroneous term for decades, and does not even apply to all of Isao Takahata’s films; *My Neighbors the Yamadas*, for instance, was animated using digital technology to achieve the desired ‘comic-strip’ aesthetic, though it retains a clear ‘hand-drawn’ quality.

24. Marks, "Loving," 97.

25. Ibid., 96.

26. An animated human-being is a representation of a human being, of course, but as it is not a *photographic* representation, it is a materially different sort of thing, even when the animators aim for realism (as Takahata does in films like *Grave of the Fireflies* and especially *Only Yesterday*). We are identifying, in these cases, with a human who is not a human – a curious concept indeed. Marks accounts for this too, writing that "primary identification can be an identification across differences," one that "invites the viewer to *take part* in a dispersed subjectivity." The material difference between our physical, 'real-world' bodies, and the animated, 'pencil-and-paper' bodies of the characters on screen need not, under this paradigm, be a barrier to identification – the difference can in fact make us *more* active in that process, because there is a greater underlying push and pull between the film and the viewer.

Marks, "Loving," 97.

27. Marks, "Loving," 103.

28. Ibid., 105.

29. From *The Artist Who Made Totoro's Forest*.

30. Hoffman, *Japanese Death Poems*, 26.

31. Ibid., 43.

32. Ibid., 28.

33. Marie Mutsuki Mockett, *Where the Dead Pause, and the Japanese Say Goodbye: A Journey* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), 187.

24. A species of cuckoo with special transient relevance in the East. "One written form of *hototogisu*," explains Yoel Hoffman, "consists of the Chinese characters for 'time' and 'bird.' This 'bird of time' often appears in poetry as a messenger of death." Hoffman, *Japanese Death Poems*, 142.

25. Mockett, *Where the Dead Pause*, 14-5.

36. Ibid., 201.

37. Hoffman, *Japanese Death Poems*, 29.

38. Mockett, *Where the Dead Pause*, 161.

39. The celebrated eighth-century Buddhist teacher who, among his many accomplishments, brought Shingon Buddhism from China to Japan; although Shingon did not become the dominate sect of Buddhism in Japan, he remains a revered and respected figure. Mockett recalls a conversation with her cooking teacher, Asano, who told her that Kūkai “...helped establish the roots of Buddhism in Japan ... It’s impossible not to be in awe of him.” Ibid., 135.

40. Ibid., 150-1.

41. Ibid., 99. Emphasis mine.



Chapter One: *Home, Sweet Home*

Searching for hope in the *Grave of the Fireflies*

*A graveyard:
autumn fireflies
two or three*

*Hakahara ya
aki no hotaru no
futatsu mitsu*

Gensho, 1742¹

The first image in *Grave of the Fireflies* is an invitation to hopelessness.

A teenage boy stares at the viewer against a stark black background, his body bathed in a harsh red glow. His eyes, cast in shadow by the brim of his uniform hat, are trained forward, fixated, but without a hint of life behind them. His thin, sealed mouth betrays no sign of emotion.

“September 21, 1945,” he narrates, as a soft rusty haze fades in behind him. “*That was the night I died.*”²

He blinks, and turns his head to stare at a pillar, also submerged in the strange rusty light. A body slowly fades in, leaning against it, hunched over and emaciated. The melancholy ghost

looks on, apprehensively, and takes a few steps forward to get a better look. The body – his body – is filthy, covered in dirt and clad in torn, ragged clothes. The eyes are empty, the lips parched, and his final breaths come as a shallow, irregular thumping in the chest.

Reality emerges from the haze. A busy day at a train station, travelers bustling to and fro, a few taking note of the body leaning against the pillar. His is not the only one.

“Such a disgraceful sight,” one passerby remarks jadedly, as he leaves a small rice ball next to the near-corpse. *“Don’t want Americans to see this!”*

The gesture is not enough. The boy, heaving through his final breaths, hears a young girl’s voice echo out from a distant past. *“Mama!”* she cries. The boy falls sideways, his skin stretched taut over a skeletal frame. *“Setsuko...”* he murmurs, as a fly crawls over his face. His eyes momentarily quiver. And then he is gone.

It takes Isao Takahata less than 90 seconds to solidify an atmosphere of despair. This boy – Seita, our protagonist – is already dead, his future written on the floor of a train station from which he shall find no absolution. His sister – Setsuko, the girl whose name shall be his final word – exists only as a fragment of memory within Seita’s decaying mind. When Seita’s ghost locks eyes with us in the first frame, he is inviting us to see what he sees, to be complicit in whatever past or future he finds staring out from him in the darkness. What he glimpses is death, an ignominious grave to which all roads lead. It is the film’s starting point, and its destination. In less than 90 seconds, hope has evaporated.

But then, suddenly, there is beauty.

Day transitions into night. A janitor, who has found in Seita’s pockets an old and weathered tin can, walks away from the main floor, littered with corpses and soon-to-be-corpses, out towards the station’s back door. He shakes the can absent-mindedly, wondering what’s

inside, before performing a baseball-style wind-up and pitch, tossing the can out into the evening. It lands in a patch of dirt and grass, and from it spills ash and fragments of bone.

In an instant, a procession of small yellow lights – of fireflies – flickers to life. As they flutter toward the heavens, the earth is bathed in an otherworldly luminescence, and from the spot where the tin can landed, a little girl rises, surprised to find herself there. Looking towards the station door, she sees the boy's body, surrounded by darkness, and starts towards it – but then Seita's spirit is there, amidst the fireflies, putting his hand on her shoulder and wearing a warm smile. Setsuko's face lights up brighter than the fireflies, the pure smile of an innocent and happy child. Seita smiles too, dusting off her hood in a paternal sort of way, and picks the tin can up off the ground. Its faded label returns to its original state; "Sakuma's Drops," it reads above a bright, friendly assortment of fruit. He hands it to her. She embraces it, grinning, and Seita holds out his hand. Together, they walk away, the fireflies still dancing about in their hypnotic, chaotic patterns.

In less than four minutes, Isao Takahata has hit the viewer with perhaps the most disarming sense of emotional whiplash ever to grace an animated feature film. From a plunge into despair, we are catapulted into this realm of ghostly wonder, where death is strangely beautiful and happiness crosses the faces of our desolate and deceased protagonists. The fireflies shine brightly, and in their grave, the viewer senses something marvelous. The fear and hopelessness of death has not dissipated; its presence is felt in this mystical tomb as well. But there is something greater at work here than just sadness – and perhaps that rapturous presence, whatever one might call it, makes this vision of death scarier and more emotionally turbulent than if it were depicted as a force of pure darkness. The sense of astonishment one feels watching this opening sequence unfold feels like reaching out and touching the sublime.

Both Isao Takahata and Hayao Miyazaki were grappling with sublimity and transience at this moment in their careers. *Grave of the Fireflies* was released in 1988 on a double-bill with what would go on to become Miyazaki's (and Studio Ghibli's) most iconic work, *My Neighbor Totoro*. Optimistic and joyous where *Grave of the Fireflies* is elegiac and traumatizing, *Totoro* seems a counterintuitive screening partner at first – Takahata has admitted the pairing was problematic³ – until one considers that *Totoro*, like Takahata's wartime requiem, is ultimately a tale of children faced with loss and having their first encounters with something 'greater.'

The film follows two young sisters, Satsuki and Mei, as they move out to the countryside with their father to be closer to their ailing mother, who is convalescing in a remote hospital. *Totoro* is known best for its sequences of fantasy featuring the eponymous character, a large and friendly forest spirit who helps make Satsuki and Mei feel comfortable in their new home, and lends Satsuki a hand when Mei goes missing in the film's climax. Yet there is an emotional instability at the heart of this work, one that bubbles over most overtly when Satsuki and Mei each have separate meltdowns near the film's conclusion, but which is felt most strongly when Totoro himself is on screen. When the children are with Totoro, they are in communion with a larger natural force, learning to respect, revel in, and draw strength from the natural world around them; put another way, Totoro teaches the children to process their grief and fear by placing it within a context of wonder.



Different forms of wonder – My Neighbor Totoro (left) and Grave of the Fireflies (right)

That wonder exists in *Grave of the Fireflies* too. It is felt in the eerie contrasts of the opening sequence, or when Seita and Setsuko take a trip to the beach, or when Seita releases fireflies within his and Setsuko's new cave home; and because wonder can be dark as well as rapturous, it is also felt when bombers rain hellfire over the Japanese countryside, or when Seita gazes out across the charred ruins of his hometown. R.W. Hepburn writes that:

...Wonder marks a distinctive and high-ranking mode of aesthetic, or aesthetic-religious, experience characterizable by that duality of dread and delight. So conceived, sublimity is essentially concerned with transformation of the merely threatening and daunting into what is aesthetically manageable, even contemplated with joy: and this is achieved through the agency of wonder.⁴

This is, perhaps, the core thematic link between the two films, for like *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Grave of the Fireflies* is a story about two siblings trying to build a new home for themselves amidst drastically changing circumstances, attempting to keep hope alive in a world that seems so far beyond the realms of mortal contemplation. Wonder plays a major part in the journey of Seita and Setsuko, just as it does for Satsuki and Mei, its presence stemming from a haunting or disorienting status quo, its sensation informing both characters and audience of something greater beyond that which scares or disheartens them.

The experiential difference between the two films is, of course, vast. Few films fill me with happiness as purely or effectively as *My Neighbor Totoro*; and I cannot say I have ever

encountered a picture as emotionally traumatic or difficult to watch as *Grave of the Fireflies*. It is a film so replete with loss, in so many different forms and permutations, but the loss of hope – robbed from the viewer in the opening moments, and gradually, painstakingly drained from the characters over the next 90 minutes – is the absence which cuts deepest. If *My Neighbor Totoro* is a film that teaches us how wonderful the world is when one grasps that childlike sense of hope – that there is comfort and wonder embedded in all things, even or especially in times of hardship – *Grave of the Fireflies* is an immersion into a life lived without hope, a lacerating lesson in how daunting and horrific this form of loss can be.

The film is based on the acclaimed 1967 short story by Akiyuki Nosaka, who in 1968 won the 58th Naoki Prize – a prestigious Japanese literary award comparable to the Pulitzer – in recognition of both *Grave of the Fireflies* and *America Hijiki* (1967). It was a tremendously personal undertaking for Nosaka, who stated in his Naoki acceptance speech that “everything that went into the make-up of my person today can be found in the air raids, the war ruins, and the black market.”⁵ Belonging, like the fictional Seita, to a generation caught between the draft and the relative safety of countryside refuge, Nosaka spent his “formative teen-age years experiencing the terrors of the air raids and the chaos of the postwar period.”⁶ He too was orphaned by the firebombs, left alone to take care of his 16-month-old sister, and her death from malnutrition – like Setsuko – would be the guilt that drove Nosaka to eventually write *Grave of the Fireflies*.

Nosaka’s story is written in an openly traumatized voice, as though the words are forcefully spilling out from behind a thinly poised veil of composure. Sentences are long and rambling, packed so dense with details and incident as to be disorienting; as translator James R. Abrams notes, Nosaka “places periods not so much to end a sentence but to conclude a train of

thought, and some of his ‘thoughts’ run on for pages.”⁷ And yet for all its gruesome descriptions of war and human decay, Nosaka’s prose is, on the whole, emotionally guarded, direct and matter-of-fact in walking the reader through this horrible wartime gauntlet experienced by Seita and Setsuko. The following passage, describing Seita’s lonely death inside the train station, is particularly emblematic:

The hunger was already gone, there was no more thirst, his chin lay heavily on his chest, “oh my, he’s so dirty,” “looks dead to me,” “shameful isn’t it, with the American army arriving any minute, such a sight in the station,” his ears alone remained alive, distinguishing the various sounds around him, a sudden period of silence – night – the sound of *geta*⁸ echoing through the building, the clatter of a train passing over his head, the noise of feet suddenly breaking into a run, a child calling for its mother, the low whisper of men directly by his side, the clamor of station employees roughly flinging buckets, “today, what day?” what day is it, how long have I been here? his sense reviving he became aware of his body, in the very V-shape of his sitting posture sinking sideways to the floor, looking fixedly at the faint dust of the floor quivering in response to his weak breath, while thinking only what day is it? what day is it? Seita died.⁹

Takahata’s adaptation – both within this scene and throughout the film – is nearly identical in structure and content, yet the form and style could hardly be more different. Where Nosaka tumbles through story with an endless, forceful clatter of language, Takahata’s film is calm and quiet, lingering on visual details and crafting sequences out of emotional atmospheres and character interaction. To read Nosaka’s prose is to be consumed with fear and anxiety, thrust into a non-stop stream of narrative in which the endpoint is set, and there seems to be no recourse or escape. To watch Takahata’s film is to fall into a state of melancholy contemplation; it does not barrel along, but lingers, submerging us in the emotional experience of Seita and Setsuko’s final weeks with a gentleness that is all the more haunting for its sense of quiet immersion. As

Takahata himself explains:

To live is everything. In turning *Grave of the Fireflies* into animated form, I wanted to show my audience how these two siblings lived. It’s different from following a storyline. A strong story doesn’t need details. The story alone would be enough to appeal to and

impress the audience. Here, I had to show the details because the story itself is very simple. You see, *Grave of the Fireflies* wasn't really a story, per se. It's about two children who apparently died. There wasn't anything else. I had to try to get the audience to experience the experiences and lives of these two children and the circumstances they were in. That's why I decided to emphasize the details.¹⁰

This is an insightful explanation as to the tonal and atmospheric character of the film, but it does not answer one of the key questions that has dogged *Grave of the Fireflies* through every step of its critical history: Why tell this particular story through animation? Even in Japan, where anime encompasses so many genres and is aimed at so many different audiences and age-ranges, a piece of historical fiction about two orphans slowly marching towards death amidst the firebombings is hardly an easy subject matter to accept. “No one would ever consider making a very sad story like *Grave of the Fireflies* into an animation,” Takahata himself admitted. “The main characters die, you know. It's hard to get films like that made.”¹¹

Yet once one has seen the film, it is impossible to argue against Takahata's instinct to bring Nosaka's story to life via animated images. Take the opening air raid sequence, for example, in which the film flashes back from its ghostly prologue to the morning Seita and Setsuko's lives are torn asunder. We watch as Seita hurriedly prepares to flee for shelter with his sister, bids farewell to their mother, and carries Setsuko on his back as they navigate an escalating maze of fire, explosions, and panicked human masses, eventually arriving at a small hillside shelter. There is a practical dimension to creating a set-piece such as this through animation, of course, as the scale Takahata aims for – ranging from high aerial shots of the bombers flying through the sky, to intimate human-level images of Seita rushing through a village enveloped in fire – would be prohibitively expensive for any live-action film other than a major Hollywood blockbuster. In animation, the only limiting factors are imagination, time, and resources, and while those factors certainly contribute to cost – and would create increasing

financial risk in Takahata's later, more experimental works – it is still much easier to stage disaster on the scale this story requires through animation.

But that is not a sufficient explanation for why the air raid sequence – or, indeed, the film in general – carries such a visceral impact. One does not merely identify with these horrific images, but gets lost inside them, consumed within the experiential world of the characters. Think of all the moments this sequence offers one would likely never see in a live-action rendering of the same events. The first half of the set-piece, before the bombs begin to fall, is consumed with small, seemingly inconsequential details: Seita frantically burying the family's food in the yard; the mother tying a hood onto Setsuko's head, as Setsuko struggles against her; Seita running back into the main room of the house, with Setsuko on his back, to retrieve Setsuko's doll, and the little circle he runs as he tries to locate it; or perhaps most startlingly, the 15 seconds of animation spent watching Seita put on and tie his boots, as the first bombs fall from the sky outside. Combined with the rapt attention paid to physicality – performances this vivid and carefully observed could never be culled from actors this young – those little details, all likely to be ignored in a live-action feature, become everything, a series of external gestures and expressions that draw us into the interior world of the protagonists, and thus enhance identification.

As the air raid itself unfolds, both the visual scale and the intensity of artistic expression increases. When the bombs begin to fall, they do not look like photographs of bombs; in fact, they hardly look real at all, moving in such a way that they appear otherworldly, like little flying creatures composed of streaks of flame, falling through the air both rapidly and imperceptibly at the same time. Even when the skies grow cloudy, smoke starts to billow from every roof, and the dirt roads are filled with a terrified sea of humanity, those bombs cut a calm path, piercing

through it all with an eerie lack of ferocity. It is a portrait based not on reality, but on a feeling, on a perception of an experience – the sort of thing that photography, even of the highest caliber, would be unlikely to capture, because animation is an exteriorization of an interior state of mind. Like Kazuo Oga drawing upon his time in Tama to bring the historical Tama Hills back to life in *Pom Poko*, Isao Takahata utilized his memories of the war to imbue scenes like these with resonance. As he explains:

I was ten, and in fourth grade, in 1945 ... That was the year Okayama was air raided. Not only was my house burned, my immediate older sister and I ran away together. I had a large family, but we ran in the wrong direction, towards the center of the city. The fire bombs were dropped and started fires all over. We had to go through fire by sprinkling water over our heads. By that time, the whole town was ablaze. I was lucky to be alive. My sister was injured and scars remained. We were reunited with our family about two days later. It was a nightmare, the most horrible experience of my life. I used my own experience of this air raid in the film. For example, you never feel it's real even when you're bombed with fire bombs. It's burning bright, but you don't feel like the fire will spread. Fire bombs would be falling all over, but they don't really explode. Sometimes it looks like just the bombs themselves are burning. I reproduced this experience in the film, especially the air raid scene in the daytime. It was sort of quiet. A sort of strange feeling. Previous Japanese war films didn't show that.¹²

Nor could they, for previous Japanese war films were not animated. The 'power of animation,' as I have conceived of it here, comes from its ability to echo and recreate the basic human processes of perception, in which animation itself becomes a canvas on which to resurrect, alter, and reevaluate memories, experiences, and even dreams. In this case, Takahata's past – his unique recollections and reactions to the trauma of war – become the material basis for the animated image, rather than photography or a literal representation, and that lends a sort of emotional purity and immediacy to everything that we see.¹³

Film critic Roger Ebert, one of the first mainstream proponents of Japanese animation (and Studio Ghibli in particular) in the West, mused on this very phenomenon, to thought-provoking effect, in a 2002 interview:

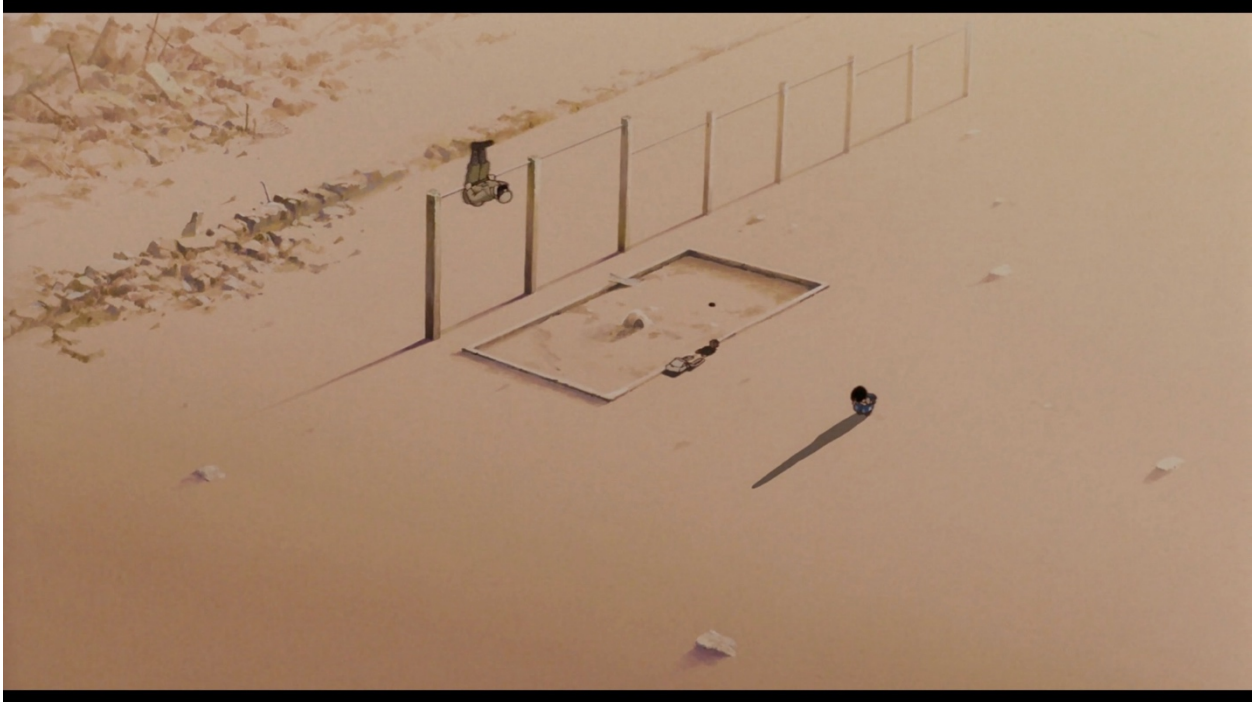
I was trying to picture this as a live-action film, because ... you would never think of this as an anime subject. And it occurred to me that if you did make it live-action, it would probably look something like an Italian Neorealist film. Maybe something by De Sica, or Rossellini, someone like that. It would be kind of bogged down in realism. Maybe it would be a very good film ... but it wouldn't be as pure, or as abstract, or as crystallized as the anime approach allows. You would have real streets, and real bombs, and real people, and real blood, and real hunger, and you'd have lots of shots of a little girl who is starving. And here, you have a little girl who's starving, but in a way, what you have is the *idea* of a little girl who's starving. And then that's what moves you. If you had to see a real little actress, of 5 or 6 years old, making mud pies or eating stones, the very fact of that image might get in the way of the meaning of that image. So in a way, the fact that ... the story is realistic and the artistic approach is stylistic works by not having two levels of realism clash against each other. It's almost like it's purer ... that these stylized characters have this extremely unstylized, and very harrowing, experience.¹⁴

Ebert was not an animation historian or theorist, but in his own typically insightful way, the sensation he describes cuts straight to the heart of the issue: That in an animated film such as *Grave of the Fireflies*, power comes from the difference between 'sign' and 'signifier,' where – without venturing too deeply into the murky waters of semiotics – the animated Setsuko exists as a 'pure' artistic representation of the many complex ideas her character encompasses (just as the bombs, during the air raid sequence, serve not as literal images of bombs, but illustrative symbols of what those bombs mean and convey). A live-action actor is, of course, always doing a certain amount of 'signing,' as they themselves are not the actual character, but we are, as viewers, used to immediately identifying with the physical human form. A live-action character exists in closer proximity to the 'signifier' than an animated equivalent.

Over and over again, throughout *Grave of the Fireflies*, Takahata utilizes these expressive, emotional possibilities of the animated form to fill a narrative that could so easily be a monotone march of suffering with rich and complex pathos. After the air raid, Seita goes to the local school, transformed into a makeshift hospital, searching for his mother – and finds her barely alive, burned and bandaged and bloodied beyond all recognition. The doctor tells him they

will try moving her to a hospital, but Seita knows there is likely little to no hope for her survival. The following cut, from a close-up of Seita's point-of-view on his mother's inhuman and unknowing face, to an exterior shot of a vast desolate plane, a blurry yellow sky framing an endless stretch of bombed-out wasteland, seems to express the emptiness Seita feels in his heart. After seeing his mother in such a way, his home and his parent destroyed beyond recognition, what does he have left to hope for? To live for?

The answer, of course, is Setsuko, playing with a family friend in a sandbox off in the distance. Seita centers himself, his eyes cloaked in sadness, as he approaches them apprehensively, knowing the difficulty of what must come next. Terse and distant, he gives Setsuko their mother's ring, to keep in her little purple-and-gold purse, and tells his sister that their mother is a "little sick," but will get better soon; that she is being moved to a real hospital in Nishinomiya, where they will be accompanying her to live with distant relatives. It is the first of many platitudes Seita will tell his sister, and his face looks pained through every word. He goes to sit at the edge of the sandbox, facing the ruined village beyond, while Setsuko stays in place, facing the other way, her face quivering, trying to hold back the tears that just keep coming. Takahata holds the image far past the point of comfort, across six shots and nearly a full minute of film. In a cutaway to Seita, he looks more disturbed by his sister's strained tears than we have yet seen him. Finally, he jumps to his feet, shouts "Hey, look at this!" and grabs onto a nearby gymnastic bar, one of the last structures standing in the bombed-out schoolyard, and begins to do flips. In a long shot, the siblings are dwarfed by emptiness, little specks in an empty expanse of monochromatic dirt and rubble; Setsuko casts a long thin shadow, while Seita moves relentlessly, desperately trying to get her attention.



The moment is one of profound awakening for Seita and, in the film's immersive way, for the viewer. In this desolation that mirrors the grief in Seita's heart, in a pit of abject sadness the depths of which the film shall not return to for some time, Seita realizes that the one thing he absolutely cannot live with is a little sister who feels just as hopeless and defeated as he does. Setsuko is Seita's rock, as she is the film's, for when the sadness of this situation has penetrated through her natural innocence and joy, where is there room left for hope to reside? With no home, a dying mother, and a father off making war, Seita is all she has left – but that means Setsuko is all Seita has as well, and in that moment outside the school, she becomes his mirror. If he sees his own terror and anguish reflected back upon himself through her eyes, he is nothing; if he can keep a spark of hope alive inside her, perhaps he can believe it still resides within his own heart as well.

And so he decides to throw himself full-force towards keeping that hope alive. From the time they arrive in Nishinomiya, each of Seita's actions, no matter how foolish or prideful they

become, stem from this single-minded determination to keep a sensation of hope alive within his sister, and therefore within himself. To recreate – figuratively at first, and more literally later – the home they once shared, a home where they both felt safe and loved and happy. At times, Seita seems to succeed so fully – to put such a broad smile on his sister’s face – that we are almost fooled, as is he, into believing happiness may be a genuine, continuing possibility for the future. But of course, every one of Setsuko’s laughs is laced with melancholy, for the viewer already knows her ultimate fate, and Seita, even in his tunnel vision, must have a sense that once something is lost, it can never be fully reclaimed.

The loss – of a mother, of a home, of a future, of a hope – touches everything. Seita hides their mother’s cremated remains in the garden of their new home, away from the mirror that is Setsuko’s eyes; but she later deduces their mother must have passed, and once she confronts the sadness, Seita is forced to as well. Seita takes Setsuko on a trip to the beach, allowing them to briefly take pleasure in a source of natural wonder that seems pure and untouched and everlasting, unobstructed by smoke or rubble or sadness. Seita even begins to remember a time when the two came here with their mother, and for a moment, the happiness of the past starts to blend with the present; but then Setsuko stumbles upon a decaying corpse in the sand, and an air raid begins, and the beach, too, is tainted by war. Seita travels to the city to pull money out of their mother’s bank account, so that the siblings can fend for themselves, apart from the restrictions of their strict foster family, and especially so that he may spoil Setsuko with rice and other tasty foods; but of course this is short-sighted, burning a bridge between the siblings and the safety net of their relatives, one that will never be fully mended. In one of the film’s most purely beautiful and joyous sequences, Seita and Setsuko encounter fireflies one evening, on a

road outside their family's house, and the little procession of lights leads them down to the lake, a beautiful enclosure that fills Setsuko's face with joy; soon, the place shall be her grave.

Yet it is the Sakuma's fruit drop can that serves as perhaps the greatest symbol of Seita's desire to keep Setsuko – and, in her reflection, himself – happy, a band-aid solution he brings forth every time Setsuko is pushed to the edge of hopelessness, and which brings her, however briefly, back to a state of simple childlike wonder. Structurally, the can feels like a ticking time bomb in the film, its every reappearance pushing us one step closer to when the fruit drops shall eventually run dry, along with hope, and eventually life itself – the point at which that can shall be refilled with the burnt remains of Setsuko's body. The can and its contents symbolize the truth that, no matter how strongly Seita tries to recreate home, to keep hope alive for his sister and himself, each action he takes only causes him to recede further and further into his own grief and confusion, leading him farther down a road from which there is no going back.

That road – of loss, of absence, of places and things that cannot and should not be reclaimed – leads Seita to break all ties with his remaining family, and move himself and Setsuko to the small shelter by the lake where they first met the fireflies. It is a beautiful place, a location so rich with foliage and color and character, and for all intents and purposes, it is their own. There, Setsuko can be happy, and Seita can feel hope – even if this hope exists only as a function of shutting out all the horrors and responsibilities of the outside world. Moving there, he has successfully created a home for them; he has also irrevocably sealed their doom.

As critic Wendy Goldberg writes:

Nosaka Akiyuki states that when the children move into the fantasy world of the cave, "For Seita, it's like he can try to build a heaven for just the two of them ... After all, it's a double-suicide story." Here, Nosaka refers to the plays of Monzaemon Chikamatsu (1653-1725), who composed more than a dozen highly successful plays on the theme of *shinjūmono* (love-suicide). In the typical plot, reminiscent of Shakespeare's *Romeo and*

Juliet, the male figure falls in love with a woman of a different social class. They run away together, refusing their prescribed social roles; their only solution is to die in a mutual pact.¹⁵

The romance in *Grave of the Fireflies* is not sexual, as Goldberg notes – and Setsuko, age 4, is hardly cognizant of any participation in a symbolic suicide pact – but the general structure is indeed that of the *shinjūmono*. For whether Seita is conscious of it or not, his actions are that of a person so consumed with escape – from the outside world, from his internal grief, from the crushing responsibility that comes with an awareness of transience and hardship – that the only place he can flee to is a fantasy, one that cannot sustain his life or the life of his sister for long. The further he places his hopes in the perceived purity and innocence of Setsuko, who contains the carefree childlike sensibilities Seita wishes to hold on to, the more he transforms himself and his sister from victims of hardship into fleeting objects of transience.

It is no coincidence, after all, that Seita and Setsuko's new lakeside home should be the residence of the fireflies, beings that, in Takahata's words, represent the "shortness of life – fireflies die in a day or so, and that links to the children."¹⁶ Seita and Setsuko share an affinity with the fireflies that seems to go beyond simple appreciation; in their presence, the children are filled with a wonder and joy so strong that it verges on magical, an effect recreated for the viewer in one of the film's most visually stunning and suggestive sequences.

On their first night in their new cave home, Seita and Setsuko decide to catch fireflies together. Cupping a few of them in his hands, Seita urges a laughing Setsuko to crawl beneath the mosquito net; the only light entering the cave is a soft blue hue emanating from the misty lake outside. Seita follows, and as he slowly parts his hands, a soft yellow light fills the image, illuminating Seita's face and flickering across Setsuko's as well. "Now, let's see a firefly light show!" Seita enthusiastically tells Setsuko. Crouching on the floor, he removes a wooden lid

atop a bucket, and we see that it is filled with fireflies. Now there is a slow explosion of light, as little dots of ambience flood from the pail, and transform the small cave into what looks like a vast expanse of stars. Lying on their backs, looking at this mystical world the fireflies have created, Seita smiles to himself, for the first time in ages; he even remembers the lights of a naval show he once saw with his father, and feels some nationalist pride and hope for the war.



“The fireflies are a multivalent symbol,” writes Goldberg, “signifying the children’s deaths and their spirits; the fires that burned the towns; Japanese soldiers and the machinery of war; and the hopeful regeneration of life through nature – something pure and untouched by grief and war.”¹⁷ When the fireflies illuminate the cave, it is easy to feel immersed in this final sensation, to forget, for a moment, what a precarious position the siblings have found themselves in, and even be fooled, as they are, into thinking these fireflies represent something everlasting.

Children, too, are believed to be something eternal; if the spirits of ancestors are one's connection to the past in Japanese culture, children are a window into the future. In her musings on loss, Marie Mutsuki Mockett recalls her unusually serious and dignified Aunt Shizuko, and her mother's explanation for why a person might seem so devoid of joy:

I asked my mother about Aunt Shizuko's seriousness, and her response was, "Aunt Shizuko did not have children." Over the years, I have often heard this as an explanation for why someone has seemed "off" in Japan. To have children is to be allowed access into a particularly happy and life-affirming viewpoint. Not to have children – or to lose them – is to be in danger of losing hope for the future.¹⁸

But of course, children, like fireflies, flicker out eventually. As the firefly light canvas begins to fade, Seita brings himself back to reality. "I wonder where Dad is fighting now," he asks himself despondently. He glances over at Setsuko, who now seems to be his only truly lasting source of light in this darkness, and rolls over on the ground to embrace her.

The next morning, Seita goes to fetch water, and comes back to find Setsuko digging a hole outside. "It's a grave," she tells him. "Mama's also in a grave, right?" Seita's face breaks in shock and horror. Setsuko gathers a handful of dead fireflies from the ground, and tosses them into the little hole; in a startling jump cut, Seita and Setsuko's mother, still ragged and bandaged, is thrown atop a pile of dead bodies.

As Setsuko dumps more fireflies into the hole, Seita bursts into tears. His future, his past, the fate of his sister – all of it points toward that same little grave.

When Seita and Setsuko flee their family home during the initial air raid, Seita spares a moment to retrieve a picture of his father resting on his mother's dresser. Clad in a naval uniform, standing straight with sword in hand and a stern expression on his face, the father looks like an older version of the man Seita – dressed throughout the film in a khaki uniform of his own – tries

so hard to be. Later, at their Aunt's house, Seita recalls taking a family portrait, when he and Sesuko were younger; as Goldberg notes, "Seita stands next to [his father] in his school uniform, linking himself visually to his father, the person he wishes to become."¹⁹ And throughout the film, from his flashback on the night of the fireflies to the day he spots a Japanese plane soaring towards the enemy during another air raid, Seita displays an enthusiasm towards the military, towards the Japanese spirit – towards the survival and prosperity of the father we never see.

Setsuko never seems to miss her father; it is possible she is too young to have ever really known him, and she certainly lacks any real understanding of the war or what he represents as a soldier. But to Seita, this absent father is everything: A vision of masculinity, of responsibility, of morality, of all he has been taught and all he has been made to believe. Even at his most hopeless, Seita at least has this father to trust in; after the first air raid, when Setsuko realizes their house is gone and asks Seita what they are going to do, Seita tells her that "Dad will make them pay."

The father is therefore more than just a parent in *Grave of the Fireflies*; he is the face of Japan, the symbolic representative of the nation's wartime actions. In times of extreme suffering, he is even a sort of God, a reverential figure of faith Seita uses to place his hardship into a larger context. *Things are hard here at home, but I know Father is out there fighting – and that means that there is meaning to all this suffering.*

As a result, one of the film's roughest blows comes near the end, when Seita travels back to the city to withdraw the rest of the money from his mother's bank account, in hopes of using the funds to buy nutrition and medicine for the dying Setsuko. That night with the fireflies turned out to be their last easy day in the cave; from there on out, Setsuko grew sickly and malnourished, and Seita's life became an increasingly desperate series of attempts to steal food

and resources. He has pinned all his final hopes on this trip to the city, on the idea that this money might buy himself and Setsuko a little more time – and it is only at that moment, listening to two older men chat idly about an approaching storm in the bank, that Seita learns Japan has surrendered.

He is stunned. Indignant. “Is it true? The Great Empire of Japan lost?” “Yes, it was unconditional surrender,” one of the men replies. Seita looks horrified, lost, untethered – he asks what happened to their fleet, to all those great ships he thought his father travelled in. “All sunk! Not even a ship left,” the man casually replies. Seita grabs the man’s shirt, shaking him furiously for more information, wondering what this means for his father, but gets only an annoyed shove in response. Seita pauses for a moment, the truth sinking in, before leaping to his feet, running awkwardly towards the door, and shouting “Dad, I hate you!” Outside, he stumbles to the ground again, breathing heavily, and removes the torn, frayed portrait of his father from his uniform pocket. “Now even Dad’s dead,” he mutters. Though Seita has no explicit confirmation of this, whether his father physically lives or dies is almost beside the point; everything the man represented has suddenly gone up in flames, thrown aside in the gesture of unconditional surrender, the ideal and the faith the father represented disappearing along with it.

“Now even Dad’s dead,” Seita chants again. “Now even Dad’s dead. Now even Dad’s...”

The enormity of this moment cannot be understated. Seita has constructed his worldview on the ideal his father emanated. One could even argue that Seita’s arc – of trying to fend completely for himself and his sister, to build this little Kingdom isolated from the outside world – mirrors the arc of Japan in the Pacific War, an act of supreme hubris that could only ever end in ruination. Seita has lived in the image of his father, and of his country, and now both are gone, departed without so much as a goodbye, an explanation, or an apology. It is in this moment that

the weight of everything Seita has lost and will soon lose comes crashing down upon him. He has not merely been robbed of a future – the true pain comes from the knowledge that this future was never real to begin with. Like the absent father, it was always a phantom.

In this way, it is easy to read *Grave of the Fireflies* as a staunch and uncompromising anti-war film, a tale specific to Japanese history, but universal in how it argues that when a country wages war, it ultimately victimizes its own people, robbing them of opportunity, hope, and perhaps even the basic beliefs on which they have constructed their identities. The film is not nationalistic, but it portrays nationalism with a pointed and critical perspective, mourning for a country that would sacrifice its own bedrock of humanity to prove a shallow point – to fight an unwinnable war. And it speaks not only for Seita and Setsuko, the tragic heroes of this particular story, but for all the estimated 123,510 Japanese children made orphaned and homeless by 1948, many of whom suffered or died just like Seita and Setsuko.²⁰ Takahata subtly reminds us of these victims throughout the film, whether by showing all the other male teenage bodies dying alongside Seita inside the train station, or, as Goldberg argues, through “people’s casual reactions, even indifference, to the devastation of war,” reminding us “that Seita and Setsuko’s story is only one of many tragedies.”²¹

Surprisingly, Takahata himself has often taken a different approach in describing his intent with the film, rejecting any overt ‘anti-war’ themes²² and even expressing frustration over audience response to his protagonist’s actions:

Many people in Japan sympathized with Seita. I was actually quite surprised by this. When I was making it, I saw him rather like the children of today. He saved money and thought he could manage on that, which is quite strange for those days. So he doesn’t obey his aunt. He thought he could live without relying on her. But unlike the children of today, he could do housework. His mother was weak, so he could do all of those things. He felt he could manage to live. Just like the children of today, he didn’t try to get along with others, even if he was humiliated. He had his sister to protect. He was short-

tempered too, and had no perseverance. Children today think they can buy anything if they have enough money, and Seita, too, thought money could buy anything and solve everything. But in reality, in those days, money didn't help much. It was during the war, and I know this from my own experience. There were so many people that survived by persevering, even under much harsher circumstances. But Seita wasn't patient enough. He thought he could live on like that. I hoped the audience in Japan could see that although they sympathized with Seita, living like him could mean death. But the Japanese audience didn't really see this. They only felt sorry for Seita. Criticism towards Seita's character would not have surprised me, and I even hoped to hear it, but I didn't get this kind of feedback. I think it's important that audiences go into a theater with a clear mind.²³

It is easy to find Takahata's words shocking, especially after an initial viewing of the film, when one is likely so traumatized by the events of the narrative that finding anything *but* sympathy for Seita is difficult. Even Akiyuki Nosaka, in transforming his real-life wartime experiences into the fictional narrative of *Grave of the Fireflies*, felt that Seita had a certain nobility to him. As translator James R. Abrams explains:

Nosaka has admitted strong feelings of guilt for running away from his home during the air raid and for showing less concern than Seita for the care of his weakened younger sister. That Seita dies is not so much to provide a convenient ending for the story as to emphasize his innocence and heroism, characteristics that Nosaka feels that he himself lacked.²⁴

Yet viewed through the prism Takahata provides, the narrative material certainly exists to mount an effective criticism of Seita, as critics like Wendy Goldberg have done. He displays vanity in rejecting his Aunt's home in Nishinomiya, and it is his pride, not the air raids or the adults in his life, that leads most directly to Setsuko's malnourishment and death. In continually refusing to make amends with his family, to accept help when it is offered, he strands Setsuko in this fantasy land he has created, and it is there – not in the ruins or the flames – that Setsuko withers away and dies.

All of this is true, and yet I still find myself returning to a starting point of sympathy, every time I consider Seita and his tragic downfall. And whatever Takahata's specific words

might be, I can only sense the most passionate empathy for this character coming across in his film. Why else would he stage scenes as beautiful as the night of the fireflies, as desolate as Seita trying to console Setsuko outside of the hospital, as sublime as those images of Seita and Setsuko's ghosts wandering the afterlife together, happy and whole? Seita does the wrong things, but he does them due to a terror of confronting a life without hope or happiness, choosing to neglect and rally against loss, rather than accept it into his being. Such an action is no doubt foolish. It is also, I would argue, innately human.

In watching the interview where Takahata says the words quoted above, the director slowly grows more and more agitated in his discussion of Seita. His body language is uncomfortable, frustrated even, as though saying these words causes him pain, and considering these heavy ideas makes him well up with emotion. He clearly sees *Grave of the Fireflies* as a film with contemporary resonance, one made not to memorialize the past but as a message for the future, and perhaps this is why he is so disappointed with Seita's actions and our natural inclination to sympathize with him. The horrors of the Pacific War may have been a great tragedy indeed, but war, loss, and hardship are eternal, and the choices we all make in times of personal and national crisis define our identity. If Takahata is angry at Seita, perhaps this is only because he cares so much; because in Seita's mistakes, he sees reflected the tragic flaw of the human condition – a flaw in himself, and in all of us.

When Seita returns to the cave by the lake, on a dark and overcast day, Setsuko is already lost. He finds her emaciated and delirious, chewing on marbles in place of fruit snacks. "It went up. It went down," she mumbles. Seita tries talking to her, but she understands none of it, instead offering him two different rocks, which she believes to be steamed rice and cooked soy pulp. As

Seita cuts into a watermelon for her, in a last-ditch effort to give her nourishment, Setsuko rolls onto her back. He puts a bite of watermelon in her mouth, but she is too weak to even chew. “*Oishii*,” she mutters weakly, with a faint smile on her face. Seita lays the watermelon slice on her chest, promising to go make her some rice gruel. “*Nii-chan*,” Setsuko whispers. “*Ōkini...*”²⁵

Seita walks out of the room, with one last backwards glance at Setsuko. The camera pans up. The camera pans down. “*Setsuko never woke up.*”

In Japan, cremation is generally the rule for disposing of the dead. It is not only practical, but is seen as a deeply meaningful and spiritual practice. Yoel Hoffman explains that when Buddhism spread to Japan in the seventh century, and cremation was first popularized, “the smoke rising from their bodies [symbolized] the birth of a new perspective on death. This world was no longer the best of all possible worlds, but a polluted one from which the dead soar to another place, the Pure Land (*jodo*) in the West, ruled by Amida, the Buddha of Everlasting Light.”²⁶

No matter one’s belief, the cremation itself is a crucial step in the process of mourning. Unlike in the West, it is not done by an anonymous funeral home worker away from the eyes of the family, but by a Priest, with loved ones in tow. It is a moment of immense significance. As Marie Mutsuki Mockett explains:

...It is at the cremation that people must experience something which the Japanese call *owakare*, or “the great parting.” In Japanese, *wakare* ... means “parting,” and the word can be used in many contexts. When I take a guided tour of, say, a formal Japanese garden in Kyōtō, I am usually told at the end of the tour, “And here is our *wakare*.” Here is our parting. This is a signal that I will now be on my own. When you add the prefix “O” in Japanese, you automatically elevate a word so it takes on a sense of honor ... So it is with parting. There are many partings in life, but the great and most honored parting, the *owakare*, is the most significant of all, because it is permanent. Ushering the body of the dead into the crematorium is the *owakare*, and it requires the presence of family and a priest for it to be handled with dignity.²⁷

Performed ‘correctly,’ the cremation should be a cleansing and cathartic process. Short of a Priest, Seita is given all the materials to send Setsuko into the next world with proper care. Provided with a large ration of charcoal – the first and only generous ration he receives in the aftermath of the air raid – Seita places his sister’s body in a small wicker basket, alongside her blue hood, her purple purse, and the doll she once made him retrieve from their home. He sets the basket aflame, and sits with her all day, as the sun sets and the sky turns from blue to pink and back to blue again, the fireflies lifting up from the grass as the smoke from Setsuko’s remains finally dissipates.



The ritual gives Seita no sense of absolution. Some in Japan believe “that the spirit of the dead person remains near the world of the living for forty-nine days.”²⁸ So it seems for Setsuko, whose spirit touches that lakeside home long after her body has grown cold. Before the cremation, a montage of quiet, lingering images plays, still-life shots in and around Seita and Setsuko’s cave, where Setsuko’s spirit glimmers here and there, happy and at play amidst the overwhelming sense of absence. “These brief moments flicker like a firefly,” Goldberg astutely observes, “causing joy in their illumination but also pain at their loss.”²⁹ Over it all plays a gramophone recording of Italian soprano Amelita Galli-Curci, singing “Home, Sweet Home” from the opera *Clari, or the Maid of Milan*. Here, the lyrics hardly sound celebratory; they are instead an elegy.

*Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam,
Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home;
A charm from the skies seems to hallow us there,
Which seek thro' the world, is ne'er met elsewhere.*

*Home! Home!
Sweet, sweet home!
There's no place like home,
There's no place like home!*

Watching this montage, one feels dead inside, which is nothing to how Seita must feel, living amongst those trails and hills and trees where Setsuko played, and where her spirit still seems to linger. And so he leaves, collecting Setsuko's ashes and bones³⁰ in the fruit drop can she loved so much. He wanders, so bereft of hope and meaning and purpose that he wastes away in public, on that crowded train platform, dying the most ignominious death possible in a country where corpses are viewed as pollution, and there can be no dignity in death without funeral rites and a meaningful place of burial.³¹ In Nosaka's story, it is explained that Seita's body is later cremated anonymously, alongside "the corpses of 20 or 30 other homeless children at a temple above Nunobiki, his bones consigned to the crypt as an unsurvived soul."³² Setsuko's ashes, meanwhile, are left as trash in that lonely spot in the dirt, from which the fireflies are awoken.

It is to that place the film returns for its final image, as Setsuko's spirit joyfully runs to Seita, sitting on a bench, and falls asleep in his embrace. Seita's eyes fall back into melancholy, and he looks again toward the viewer, as he did in the very first shot. What he sees this time is Kobe, in the present day, its tall city skyline illuminated by an endless expanse of electric lights; Seita and Setsuko are still bathed in the red, otherworldly glow of the fireflies, dancing about the siblings as they maintain their ghostly vigil.

There are many thoughts in Japan about what happens to children when they die, places they go where they are punished for causing so much grief to their parents, or are stranded in

limbo without enough karma to transition to the next plane of being.³³ None of these explanations are sufficient to tell us what has happened to Seita and Setsuko, seemingly stuck for eternity on the outskirts of Japanese society, perpetually haunting the nation that failed them, Seita doomed to care for his sister in death as he failed to do in life. Nor can they fully explain why, at the end of a journey that has been so overwhelmingly sad, this final image of two ghost siblings underneath a dark night sky should be so beautiful – why there should be any semblance of wonder or comfort at the end of such a harrowing path. R.W. Hepburn writes that “an unqualifiedly pessimistic view of the world would not sustain wonder, but only perhaps dread or nausea or a sense of the absurd.”³⁴ Takahata’s vision, here in the end, is not pessimistic; it is beautiful. How can we rectify that duality? How can loss and wonder exist side by side, in a scenario as dark and haunting as this? Is it even possible to do so, to understand how we feel, watching image like these unfold?

Ultimately, there is no hope in the *Grave of the Fireflies*; yet that sensation of the sublime, of something larger and more meaningful than this aching sadness, persists. Perhaps there is no way to rectify it in this context; perhaps Isao Takahata, at this moment in his career, was unable to do so, only able to convey a complex feeling, without being able to tell us why or how it is felt. But he would continue searching. For Seita and Setsuko, there never was any hope; but for Taeko Okajima and the Princess Kaguya, perhaps there is something greater beyond the encounter with loss. Perhaps, in that dark and permeating wonder of transience, lies a reason to live.

Endnotes

1. Translated by Yoel Hoffman in *Japanese Death Poems: Written by Zen Monks and Haiku Poets on the Verge of Death* (North Clarendon: Tuttle Publishing, 1986), 169.
2. All dialogue from *Grave of the Fireflies* is quoted from the English-language subtitle track on the 2012 “Studio Ghibli ga ippai (Collection)” Japanese Blu-Ray release, translated by Rieko Izutsu-Vajiasarn. Minor adjustments have been made here and there, and the original Japanese has been substituted for the Blu-Ray’s translations in a few key spots.
3. “The film was very well received from the start because of its themes, of course. People thought it was a very meaningful work,” Takahata explains in a DVD interview. “It was a little awkward in a way, because it was double-featured with *My Neighbor Totoro*. The response was different depending on which film was shown first. *My Neighbor Totoro* would make them happy, then this *Grave of the Fireflies*... Those who saw *Totoro* first didn’t want to see *Fireflies* to the end. Those who saw *Fireflies* first didn’t have that problem, and stayed until the end. The double featuring was a problem, I’d say. [Laughs.] As an overall reaction, I think it was well received and well attended from the first release.” “Isao Takahata on *Grave of the Fireflies*.” Dir. Tim Werenko. On *Grave of the Fireflies*, Collector’s Series (Central Park Media, 2002), DVD. Translated by Kevin McKeown.
4. R.W. Hepburn, “Wonder,” in *‘Wonder’ and Other Essays* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984), 151.
5. James R. Abrams, “Translator’s Note,” *Japan Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (1978), 461-2.
6. Ibid., 462.
7. Ibid., 463.
8. A form of Japanese footwear, these are wooden clogs today worn most commonly with traditional clothing.
9. Akiyuki Nosaka, “A Grave of Fireflies,” trans. James R. Abrams, *Japan Quarterly* 25, no.4 (1978), 446.
10. “Isao Takahata on *Grave of the Fireflies*.”
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. This principle holds true for several of Studio Ghibli’s most entrancing sequences. The similar 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake set-piece in Miyazaki’s *The Wind Rises* (2013) is perhaps the most visually ambitious scene Ghibli has ever staged, and like the air raids in *Grave of the Fireflies* is stunning in how fully it immerses the viewer in the

atmosphere of disaster. Hayao Miyazaki was not alive during the earthquake, but like Takahata employed his vivid memories of the Pacific War air raids – from Utsonomiya, where Miyazaki too was made to flee with his family – to lend the sequence authenticity (Studio Ghibli, *The Art of the Wind Rises*, trans. Jocelyne Allen (San Francisco: Viz Media, 2014), 71). These are, of course, examples of using personal experience in historical fiction films, but the principle certainly applies to Ghibli's flights of fantasy as well. I think in particular of my favorite Studio Ghibli scene, a moment from Miyazaki's *Porco Rosso* (1992) in which the main character, a fighter pilot, recounts seeing the planes of all his deceased fellows flying in an endless line towards the heavens. Haunting, eerie, and immensely powerful, the sequence feels like one is stepping into a dream. In a sense, one is – the power of animation lies in being able to take whatever images and emotions exist inside the mind and bring them to life through pencil, paper, and camera. In that way, it can be a tremendously intimate format as well.

14. "Film Critic Roger Ebert on *Grave of the Fireflies*." Dir. Tim Werenko. On *Grave of the Fireflies*, Collector's Series (Central Park Media, 2002), DVD.
15. Wendy Goldberg, "Transcending the Victim's History: Takahata Isao's *Grave of the Fireflies*," *War/Time*, January 2009, 47.
16. Isao Takahata, interviewed by Eija Niskanen, Japan, June 2005; quoted in Goldberg, "Transcending," 49.
17. Goldberg, "Transcending," 49-50.
18. Marie Mutsuki Mockett, *Where the Dead Pause, and the Japanese Say Goodbye: A Journey* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), 188.
19. Goldberg, "Transcending," 46.
20. Jerome F. Shapiro, "Ninety Minutes over Tokyo: Aesthetics, Narrative, and Ideology in Three Japanese Films About the Air War," *Bombs Away! Representing the Air War over Europe and Japan*, ed. Wilfried Wilms and William Rasch (Boston: Brill Academic Publishing, 2006), 382.
21. Goldberg, "Transcending," 48.
22. Something Takahata has done as recently as this very year (2015), stating, in an interview with *Kanagawa Shimbun*:

Grave of the Fireflies is considered an anti-war film, but while anti-war films are meant to prevent wars and stop them, that movie doesn't fulfill that kind of role, even though that might surprise most people. No matter how often you talk about the experience of being in the horrible position of being attacked, it would be hard for that to stop war. Why is that? When statesmen start the next war, they'll say, "We're fighting a

war so we won't be in that position." It's a war for self-defense. They'll appeal to your emotions by using the urgent thought, "We don't want that tragedy to be repeated."

Takahata's definition of what constitutes an 'anti-war' film is perhaps surprisingly narrow by Western definitions, though in Japan, which has been demilitarized since the end of World War II, being 'anti-war' is inherently a more complex position, for it involves a debate over constitutional definitions as to what role Japan can or should play in militaristic affairs of any kind. Takahata and Miyazaki both have recently spoken out on multiple occasions against changes to the definition or substance of Japan's constitution – positions which have earned them controversial coverage from Japanese nationalists – in response to ongoing debates over whether Japan should begin taking military action once more (a debate which was taken to the next step earlier this year, as Japan's parliament officially re-interpreted Article 9 of their constitution to allow for military support of overseas allies). Takahata spoke about this very issue in the same interview, and his perspective, tied inherently to his memories of the war, is just as relevant in considering the politics and message of *Grave of the Fireflies*:

We don't need to become a "normal country." We should continue being a unique country. If we become able to make war, we will surely make war. When the Cabinet decided to recognize collective self-defense, Article 9 was suddenly destroyed. Aren't we facing the most shocking crisis ever? I know, because I know war. What's important is the time before war begins — now. If it begins, we'll be swept away by it. So we need to completely slam on the brakes, not just a little. That's what Article 9 did.

[During World War II] there were a lot of people who cooperated reluctantly, but most of us marched down the procession of lanterns, cheering for victory. Ordinary people would call other ordinary people who didn't agree with them "unpatriotic." Young people say to "read the air." When I hear that, I fall into despair. We Japanese haven't changed at all. Cooperating with those around us is fine, but "reading the air" doesn't mean cooperation, it means agreement. Falling into step is becoming an absolute value. [...] Since old times, this attitude has led Japan into the bog of war. I call it a "slithering attitude," but whenever I hear about "reading the air," from now on I can only feel that sense of risk.

Quoted in Eric Stimson, "Isao Takahata Offers His Thoughts on War, Constitution," *Anime News Network*, Feb. 26, 2015, <http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/interest/2015-02-26/isao-takahata-offers-his-thoughts-on-war-constitution/.85346>.

23. "Isao Takahata on *Grave of the Fireflies*."

24. Abrams, "Translator's Note," 462.

25. The simplicity and power of the Japanese writing here is too strong to muddy with translation. "*Oishii*" means something is delicious or sweet; "*Nii-chan*," is an affectionate term for 'older brother,' said by a younger sibling (in subtitles, it is usually just translated as the character's first name, which in this case, robs the scene of some of its poignancy); and "*Ōkini*" is an abbreviated 'thank-you' in the Kansai dialect, which Seita and Setsuko both speak.

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26. Hoffman, *Japanese Death Poems*, 36.
27. Mockett, *Where the Dead Pause*, 28-9.
28. Hoffman, *Japanese Death Poems*, 30.
29. Goldberg, "Transcending," 49.
30. In Japan, cremation is performed at a lower temperature than it is in the West (about 500 to 600 degrees Celsius) so that pieces of bone may be preserved along with ash. Mockett recalls the cremation of her grandmother, and the subsequent process of her family sifting through the ash and bones with the cremation specialist to identify the different bone fragments, and sort it all into different Urns. It is another death tradition that can be very cathartic to the Japanese, a feeling that tangible pieces of the deceased survive among the living. As with many of these traditions, Takahata subverts it for *Grave of the Fireflies*; putting Setsuko's bones in the Sakuma's drops can is a poor replacement for an actual urn, and the ritual brings Seita no catharsis. Mockett, *Where the Dead Pause*, 236, 239-40.
31. Hoffman, *Japanese Death Poems*, 33, 30.
32. Nosaka, "A Grave of Fireflies," 461.
33. Mockett, *Where the Dead Pause*, 159.
34. Hepburn, "Wonder," 142.

Interlude: *Places Full of Absence*

*When autumn winds blow
not one leaf remains
the way it was*

*Nan no mama
nokoru ha mo nashi
aki no kaze*

Togyu, 1749¹

The sensation of feeling anxious from stepping inside a classroom was a new one. I felt my heart beat faster, the breath in my lungs tighten, my head start to spin as though an invisible spirit had just started shaking it violently. I could not understand why I felt this way; this was a classroom I had entered dozens of times, without ever feeling uncomfortable. There was the old, chalk-stained blackboard on my left; there were the unkempt rows of too-small combination desk-chairs on my right, situated between the sickly white walls and atop the worn tile floors; there, on the far side of the room, was the pencil still stuck in the ceiling's battered drywall, no doubt the product of a bored student in the back row; and there, at the front, was the well-dressed Professor, his hands covered in chalk from scribbling the day's notes on the board.

It was all so familiar, but this sensation made me feel as though I had set foot on an alien world. I could find reasons to feel tense and worried about many things in life, but school and academic work mostly just made me bored or restless; I could understand the emotions of the

¹ Translated by Yoel Hoffman in *Japanese Death Poems: Written by Zen Monks and Haiku Poets on the Verge of Death* (North Clarendon: Tuttle Publishing, 1986), 327.

pencil-thrower in the back row more than I could pinpoint why my being was suddenly shot through with these pangs of nervous angst. Entering this room should not be so difficult; a classroom should not feel so unexpectedly daunting. The others had told me to take more than a week off between my father's passing and returning to campus, but I had ignored the advice. Their logic did not make sense. This was not supposed to be the hard part.

So I took my seat, gasped in a few deep breaths, and pushed those feelings down as far as they would go. But as the days went by, walking into that room grew progressively harder. The headache and quickened heartbeat gave way to a sensation of deepest discomfort, as though my skin was on fire and everything inside my body wanted to tear itself apart. In time, the feeling grew more acute; it became anger, and then resentment, towards everything and everyone in sight.

It did not only happen there. I started to feel it in our screening room, where I could barely register when images were being projected amidst the surrounding darkness. I felt it creep up on me in the cavernous lecture hall, where each word droned in one ear and out the other. I felt it most of all in my apartment, the first place I ever had on my own, one I had not been in for long but which I had quickly come to love. When I was there now, I wanted to break everything in sight.

For the longest time, I could not understand what I felt in those places or why. Later, the reasons started revealing themselves to me. These were the places I had been when I was not with my father, in the final months of his life; and when I was not with my father, I was thinking about my father, and worrying about my father, and planning how soon I could drive back home to visit and take care of him, which I had long considered my primary responsibility. In the

weeks leading up to his passing, I had been a specter in these places, haunting them, leaving a physical trace while the core of my being was elsewhere.

The shadow this specter cast was harsh. It entered the classroom each day unable to engage with the people or the discussion, its essence instead cast towards the father in the hospital back home. It drifted into that screening room slowly marking the minutes until it could exit the darkness and search for meaning in the light. It hovered in that lecture hall seething with quiet fury, upset to take this menial course when time could be spent with the dying parent. It lived in that apartment to find solace away from the hospital rooms and doctor's offices that otherwise occupied its time; instead, that apartment was where the specter emotionally dissolved. It was where the specter lay one night, a few days before the father slipped into the final phase of life, staring for hours at the last picture the family took together, sobbing until all feelings had been drained, like blood spilling forth from an open wound.

When I came back to school a few days after the funeral, the shadow that specter cast had not dissipated. These were places my father had never walked through, nor even laid eyes on, and yet his absence somehow lingered there. I felt haunted, not only by the loss, but by having to return to those places where another me had slowly been transformed by the looming shadow of death. The world had not physically changed after my father died, and yet reentering these places felt like stepping into another dimension, one where the gravity was dense with confusion and misery. I could not learn how to walk in this new world. Trying made me feel sick and angry, restless and unhealthy, spiteful towards people and places that I loved. I did not want to inhabit this world; I barely felt comfortable inhabiting myself.

And so, one day, I turned away and left. I filled out some paperwork, packed my bags, and moved back home. It was something I had wanted for a long while, back when my father

still lived; if I left school and returned home, I reasoned, I would no longer need to feel torn across divergent paths, between my father and my future. He was gone now, but in a way, it did not matter. I had learned that I would feel his absence no matter where I went. If I had to choose a place to let that absence envelop me, I would choose the one where I could most easily imagine his ghost roaming freely, where the shadows he had cast in life were still palpable after death. There, at least, I could imagine reaching out and touching him. When I did, the anger and the headaches and the nightmares did not seem so intense. After a time, I even began to find them pleasant, for they were the closest I could come to stepping back into my own dimension, back into the liminal space before the loss. Better there than here, I told myself.

Better there than here.



Chapter Two: Voluptuous Surrender

Getting lost in the memories of *Only Yesterday*

*Leaves never fall
in vain – from all around
bells tolling*

*Uso ni chiru
ha mo nashi yomo no
kane no koe*

Chori, 1778¹

Leave the door open for the unknown, the door into the dark. That's where the most important things come from, where you yourself came from, and where you will go ... The things we want are transformative, and we don't know or only think we know what is on the other side of that transformation. Love, wisdom, grace, inspiration – how do you go about finding these things that are in some ways about extending the boundaries of the self into unknown territory, about becoming someone else?²

Rebecca Solnit is a writer of seemingly boundless wisdom, and this passage, from the introduction to *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, one of her most moving and profound works, strikes a chord at the heart of the human condition. Loss is never an easy thing to understand, but when we experience it on the outside, as when we grieve for a loved one, there at least exists a series of social and cultural paradigms for processing that absence, a sense of communal

identification that assures us what we feel is, if nothing else, tangible and significant. But what if that loss happens on the inside? What if you yourself feel lost within the confines of your own existence, or feel as though you have lost the core of who you are, or who you want to be? What happens when grief isn't something you can point to, is not contained within the loss of a person or a place or a thing, but is instead a mourning for something ethereal? How do we go about filling a void when that void seems to emanate from the core of one's being?

To Solnit, the key to finding oneself is to embrace the unknown, rather than shying away from the mystery or pretending it does not exist. "That thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you is usually what you need to find," she writes, "and finding it is a matter of getting lost."³

*To lose yourself: a voluptuous surrender, lost in your arms, lost to the world, utterly immersed in what is present so that its surroundings fade away ... To be lost is to be fully present, and to be fully present is to be capable of being in uncertainty and mystery. And one does not get lost but loses oneself, with the implication that it is a conscious choice, a chosen surrender, a psychic state achievable through geography.*⁴

For Isao Takahata, 'loss' and 'being lost' are similarly intertwined. In the case of Taeko Okajima, the protagonist of his 1991 film *Only Yesterday*, the two sensations are experienced as a fluid stream of existence, a back-and-forth between feeling adrift – as though a part of her identity is missing, or was never fully developed – and being adrift. The film's original Japanese title is *Omoide Poroporo*, a phrase that is difficult to translate; *Omoide* means memory, but *Poroporo* is onomatopoeic, suggesting the sound or image of things falling to earth in large drops.⁵ Together, the words illustrate an image of memories pouring down, like rain, like something uncontrollable that consumes one's body and vision. In such a downpour, a person can either find something to hide under, like an umbrella or a canopy, or one can simply surrender, and let the rain wash over them. For this reason, the most important choice Taeko

makes comes at the very start of the film, in choosing not to hide from the cloudburst of memories that erupt inside herself, but to instead leave the door open and invite them in. What these memories are, what they mean, why they begin to drip and drop inside her at this particular moment, as she takes a summer vacation to the Japanese countryside – at the start, none of this is clear, to Taeko or the viewer. But then, neither is it evident why Taeko feels lost, deep down, despite her sunny demeanor and forthright sense of self. There is a missing piece within her being that Taeko grieves for, even if she does not yet know she is grieving. And only by leaving that internal door open, and allowing herself to get lost within the flood of memory and experience, will Taeko ultimately be found.

The experience of watching *Only Yesterday* can be a little like getting lost as well. Vacillating between Taeko's memories of her fifth-grade self in 1966 and her contemporary journey to a Yamagata farm 17 years later, the film weaves a lyrical relationship between past and present, one in which the connections and emotional logic run deep, but do not necessarily reveal themselves at first blush. Memories gently cascade against one another, piling up most forcefully at the start – it is a solid 40 minutes before Takahata gives us an extended scene set in the present – with a rambling, episodic quality that is much more about mood, atmosphere, and feeling than it is about plot or overt thematic musings. I remember watching the film for the first time, in a rare American theatrical exhibition,⁶ and feeling largely frustrated for much of the run-time; I marveled at Ghibli's expressive animation, enjoyed the nostalgic windows Takahata opens, and felt intrigued by the complex relationship between past and present, but also felt challenged and alienated by the quiet pace and extreme internalization of the material. In common parlance, I thought I 'just wasn't getting it,' right on up to the last few scenes.

And then Taeko Okajima, at the end of her summer trip to Yamagata, boards a train back to Tokyo, and is suddenly overwhelmed by the weight all of her internal and external wanderings have exerted on her. So was I. Just as Taeko is moved by reasons she cannot comprehend to leave her existing, unfulfilling life behind and go to live permanently in the country, finally embracing that lost part of herself she could never fully grasp, I felt as though I had been hit square in the heart by an intangible emotional force. The film has lived within me ever since. *Only Yesterday* is one of those rare and wondrous works that reveals so much more of itself the more one watches, as though one is spending time with another person, and getting to know them on increasingly meaningful levels through time and proximity.

In a sense, that is exactly the intent, for *Only Yesterday* is a sort of ‘internal’ character study, dictated not by conventional cinematic or narrative structure, but by the interior state of its protagonist. For instance, those first forty minutes are dominated by memories precisely because those memories dominate Taeko, as she is travelling by train out to Yamagata, and finds herself unable to think about anything else; for the next stretch of film, those memories dissipate entirely, as Taeko is absorbed by the new faces and natural wonder she encounters visiting this countryside location she loves so dearly. And when the memories return, their presence is experienced in the moment by Taeko, triggered both directly and indirectly by encounters in the present. The film is hardly shapeless, but neither is it rigorous or even consistent in structure; it offers a window into a person’s mind, but not in the psychoanalytic, dream-like style one would see in a film by, say, David Lynch. It bears more resemblance to a style of artistic memoir, like that favored by Rebecca Solnit, guided by the emotional ebbs and flows of its main character, perusing her past and lingering on her present in search of those intangible yet immutable truths that beat at the heart of a person, the ones that make us who we are even when we have great

difficultly understanding them. In this specific, internalized way, the film is filled with lessons for us all.

This complex structure is hardly one suggested by the source material, for the *manga*⁷ upon which *Only Yesterday* is based is a far simpler creation. Also named *Omoide Poroporo*, the manga, by Hotaru Okamoto and Yuko Tone, was originally published in 1987, and is a series of short episodes in the life of fifth-grade Taeko, set in 1966. Although it has never been translated into English, one not need read Japanese to thumb through the pages of the manga and recognize its immense charm, its keenly observational sense of time and place and character that would attract an artist like Takahata to the material. But there is no adult version of Taeko in the story, nor a journey to Yamagata, nor an internal hierarchy linking and arranging the various episodes. That Okamoto and Tone's sweetly nostalgic *Omoide Poroporo* became Isao Takahata's emotionally contemplative *Only Yesterday* is a fascinating notion. For Hayao Miyazaki, credited as 'General Producer' on the film, it was one that prompted bemused frustration:

The moment I ran across the story of *Only Yesterday* I knew instinctively that Paku-san was the only person who could properly turn it into a film. The original story had something wonderful about it, but I also knew that the nature of its composition would make it a very difficult project ...

The original story had highly abbreviated, manga-esque characters, so it occurred to me at the time that – even if Paku-san were to bring his typically complicated approach to the project – we still might be able to adhere to some sort of schedule. Of course, this supposition on my part would later be proved to be wildly off target, for a twenty-seven-year old adult protagonist (not in the original story) soon appeared, and began pontificating about farming problems in Japan and helping out with work in the field – and the film quickly started spiraling out of control.⁸

In his warmly exasperated way, Miyazaki strikes at the core of why Takahata's adaptation is so fascinating: There is no twenty-seven-year old protagonist in the manga, and yet adult Taeko is, quite literally, the heart of Takahata's film, the character through which the memories, drawn directly from episodes in the manga, are chosen and arranged, and whose emotional arc drives all

aspects of the narrative forward. She is a major creation through which the source material is filtered and experienced, and the decision to orient the story around her transforms the material utterly.

The Taeko that Takahata has created is a near-contemporary⁹ version of a character type that has a rich lineage in Japanese cinema: that of the female protagonist who resists socially defined gender roles in an effort to maintain her independence and identity. This character type could be most easily thought of as the ‘Ozu heroine,’ for while other directors, like Mikio Naruse and Kenji Mizoguchi, also explored similar gender divides – sometimes to more aggressive effect, as in the case of Mizoguchi – the films of Yasujiro Ozu, and particularly the characters he created with frequent leading lady Setsuko Hara, are the most obvious model for someone like Taeko. Hara’s characters in *Late Spring* (1949), *Early Summer* (1951), and *Tokyo Story* (1953) – all named Noriko, hence the films being collectively referred to as the ‘Noriko trilogy’ – are each independent, outwardly optimistic women, who work very hard, at home and at the office, to maintain their independence, even as, in the case of *Late Spring* and *Early Summer*, the plots revolve her family’s mission to see Noriko married before she grows ‘too old.’ It is a plot and character type Ozu would continually return to, even after Hara aged out of the archetype, in later films such as *Equinox Flower* (1958), *Late Autumn* (1960), and *An Autumn Afternoon* (1962), all color features which feature mild tectonic shifts of modernity; the action in *Equinox Flower*, for instance, revolves around whether daughter Setsuko (Ineko Arima) will marry a man she has fallen in love with, or a match of her father’s choosing.

The opening credits of *Only Yesterday* – presented against the sake paper that Ozu traditionally used for his own credits sequences – condition us to think of Ozu before Taeko is even seen. When she is first glimpsed, it is only after a series of interstitial, observational

opening shots that Ozu would no doubt approve of. The first image in the film, a slow pan up the side of a tall Tokyo office building, is quietly poetic; other towers and skyscrapers are reflected in the building's windows, their cold, steely, colorless character giving a sense of inescapable urbanization. Yet the image pans up all the same, until those windows become dominated by the reflections of a few wispy clouds against the bright blue sky, suggesting, perhaps, that there is something greater beyond this vast urban space. It is inaccessible to those inside the building, however, as the film cuts to a series of menial office tasks being performed by anonymous hands, all while phones ring and the bustle of office life crowds the soundscape.

Only then do we see Taeko, smiling warmly as she confers with her boss about her vacation plans, which he is confused by. "With ten days off, I figured you'd go abroad," he says, confirming that she is instead going to Yamagata.¹⁰ "Broke up with your boyfriend?" he carelessly assumes. Taeko is momentarily taken aback, but keeps the smile on all the same, and quickly brushes away the comment. "I just prefer the countryside," she explains. In that moment, Taeko looks and sounds an awful lot like Setsuko Hara, a woman conditioned to negotiating the social pressures of a patriarchal world, armed with an expertly concealing omnipresent grin, who has grown to have a pretty clear sense of who she is and what she likes, whether or not it is considered 'conventional.' In a later scene, Taeko speaks on the phone with her sister, and we learn that both the sister and their mother are pressuring Taeko to get married, and that Taeko has, apparently not for the first time, turned down a family-made match. Like Setsuko Hara, she is more outwardly bemused by this repetitive interaction than obviously annoyed.

The effect is such that, as with a traditional Ozu heroine, the fact that Taeko is struggling on the inside – that she feels lost and melancholy in ways she herself may not be fully aware of – may not be apparent at first glance. Takahata entirely elides the period between Taeko's

childhood and the moment at which we meet her as an adult, and we are only given these two fleeting glimpses of her normal day-to-day life in Tokyo – moments where she is seemingly in such positive control of her existence that ‘loss’ is hardly the first concept that comes to mind. Yet this is a film about loss, and about feeling lost, and this is a character who will eventually be consumed by both sensations, and end the film on a choice that rectifies that emotion.

Part of the film’s challenge, though, lies in identifying this undercurrent of absence, just as it is difficult for Taeko to do the same. What small hints are sprinkled throughout about Taeko’s dissatisfaction with her life in Tokyo are few and far between, and are only made apparent to us when they occur to Taeko. For instance, in her first conversation with Toshio, the farmer who picks her up at the train station and whom she quickly befriends, she finds herself unexpectedly downcast at hearing Toshio’s enthusiasm for farming. “I don’t live for my job,” Taeko muses, “but I don’t hate it either.” Suddenly, absence has become apparent by seeing fullness in someone else, a recurring theme in the film. Because ultimately, recognizing the source of the loss Taeko feels – and how it might, in the end, be filled – requires piecing together the underlying meaning behind the moods and feelings that drive her, whether they occur within the memories that pour down upon her, or even more significantly, in the extreme happiness she begins to feel upon arriving in Yamagata, and giving herself over to the natural wonder of the countryside, with all those sights and sensations she cannot access in her day-to-day city life. It is only by encountering those parts of herself that she has lost – or, in the case of the memories, left behind in a now-distant past – that allow Taeko to make sense of the loss she feels within herself; in Solnit’s terms, it is only by giving herself over to loss that the most important internal revelations can occur.

*We treat desire as a problem to be solved, address what desire is for and focus on that something and how to acquire it rather than on the nature and the sensation of desire, though often it is the distance between us and the object of desire that fills the space in between with the blue of longing.*¹¹

The blue of longing...it is a curious concept, a form of sublimity that Solnit views as key to experiencing loss, and by extension, to being human. It is something that we sense both outwardly and inwardly, that can be viewed in “the blue at the far edge of what can be seen,” as in a horizon, but also within ourselves, as in moments of longing and absence.¹² “Blue,” Solnit explains, “is the color of longing for the distances you never arrive in, for the blue world.”¹³

If a clear thematic commonality can be drawn between the first batch of memories Taeko experiences, on her way to Yamagata, it would be anchored by desire, and by the alienation or disappointment that can come when desire is left as a point upon the horizon. The first five ‘episodes’ set in 1966 – Taeko’s lonely summer vacation, her first experience with a pineapple, her memories of student council and being a picky eater at lunch, the young baseball player who has an innocent crush on her, and the week in which all the fifth graders first learn about menstruation – are each, in one way or another, about unrealized longing. None of them are particularly major moments in Taeko’s life – the menstruation story, for instance, is not about Taeko getting her first period, but the social anxiety accompanied by feeling different – and yet they are each enormously formative, in ways that only memory and hindsight can reveal. They are moments in which Taeko glimpses the ‘blue of distance and longing’ within herself, as a function of her own developing interior character, and is touched, perhaps unconsciously, by the enormity of such a vision.

Some of these visions are obvious. The summer break episode is filled with emptiness, both literal and figurative, as Taeko spends most of her break alone, all her friends having gone

on vacation, her days illustrated in long shots, with Taeko dwarfed by a frame composed of empty backgrounds and hazy watercolor details. It is as though the memory itself is fuzzy. In Atami, at the hot springs where Taeko's grandmother takes her for an impromptu vacation,¹⁴ the details are much clearer, the greens and blues and yellows and lilacs of the ornate communal baths seeming to glow with visual force. But the baths turn out to be too much of a good thing, and Taeko can access them only briefly before she passes out from the heat, and has to return home, and all that visual detail seems to slip away, once again, into a distant longing.

Other visions are more opaque in their meaning. The pineapple story, in which Taeko's father brings home a real pineapple for the first time,¹⁵ consists mainly of one long scene, at the family dinner table, that lasts for a long four minutes almost entirely without incident. We watch as Taeko, her sisters, and her mother gaze longingly at the pineapple, confused about how it should be consumed, and then later as it is finally carved, in excruciating detail, time seeming to slow down as though we are in a child's mind, waiting for the anticipation and excitement to be consummated (indeed, Taeko dances about the room with joy as the carving takes place). Each member of the family receives a slice, and Taeko gazes at all of them excitedly as they each take a bite. Nobody reacts. Taeko finally bites down, realizes the fruit is hard and bitter, and suddenly the silent room is flooded with dissatisfaction (and billowing grey smoke, as the father trades his pineapple for a cigarette). We can assume it is one of Taeko's first major experiences with disappointment, as she has no clear idea how to process the gap between what she thought this miraculous fruit would be, and the overripe discouragement it is in reality. She takes another bite, chewing slowly and thoughtfully. "*Oishii...*" she finally says softly, and takes her sister's unfinished slice. "Don't force yourself," her mother advises. "You'll get a stomachache," her father adds. "What a letdown," her sister sighs, stretching. But Taeko just continues eating,

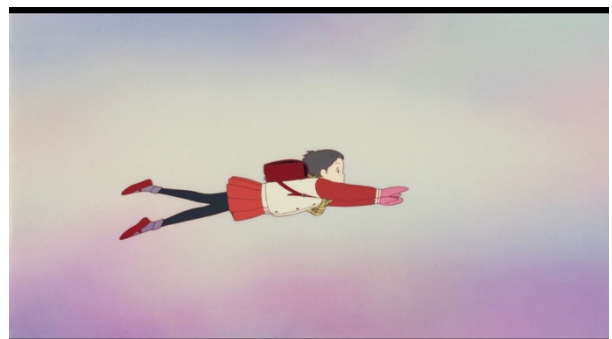
staring at the pineapple between bites as though it is a puzzle to be solved. In that strange, bitter yellow fruit, she is confronted again with the blue of distant longing.

There are moments of transcendence in Taeko's past as well. The episode in which Taeko reacts to learning of a shy classmate, Hirota, having a crush on her, culminates in an exquisite moment of joy, as the two come across each other on a suburban street as Taeko walks home after Hirota's baseball game. So much focus is paid, even at this early point, to the social systems and expectations that suppress Taeko's desire or fill her with anxiety; the period episode, for instance, focuses on Taeko's fears of being seen as 'different' or 'strange' by her peers, of feeling that sensation of lonely distance she already senses too much at home. One of the film's most quietly crushing moments comes early on, in the midst of the episode about Taeko trying to get around her own picky eating habits, when Taeko brings home both an unfinished lunch and words of pride at having her essay displayed on the wall and possibly entered into a contest. Instead of sharing in her daughter's excitement, Taeko's mother casually remarks that she would "rather you were a good eater than a good essay writer." Hearing those words spoken is like feeling a part of Taeko's essence being punctured before our eyes.

But when Taeko and Hirota meet on that isolated suburban street, the two are suddenly unburdened by the weight of all their mocking friends, by all the social anxiety, by all the expectation and judgment that suffocates desire and happiness. The scene is slow and visually dynamic, hazily lit by the blood orange sun setting off on the horizon, the distance between Hirota and Taeko starting as a vast empty expanse, and slowly shrinking as Taeko approaches his position hesitantly, once again expecting something bad or embarrassing to happen. Instead, Hirota musters up some courage, and tries talking to her; Taeko stops without looking at him, both their faces starting to blush uncontrollably, their bodies framed by the rows of hedges

behind them, lit in a soft pinkish-yellow by the light of the sunset. “Rainy day or cloudy or sunny day,” Hirota asks. “Which do you like?” Taeko finally looks at him, and he averts his gaze. “Cloudy,” she finally answers – and in one of those little expressive touches Takahata loves to sprinkle throughout his films, we see a rapid jump-cut to a baseball sinking forcefully into a glove. “Me too!” Hirota exclaims, and they both begin to smile. The distance between them remains, but it no longer looks so scary, or so colorless. For a moment, away from everything and everyone else, they simply get to be happy in enjoying one another’s company, rather than feeling ashamed or embarrassed for desiring it.

Hirota grins and runs away, throwing and catching a ball as he rushes down the street. Taeko blushes again, and runs in the opposite direction, down a sepia-tinted path that fades into nothingness. Yet she does not run down that path, but instead starts ascending into the sky, suddenly and effortlessly, as though rushing up an invisible staircase, elevated by the force of her own joy. She jumps, as though going into a dive, and begins swimming through the air, a big smile on her face, the sky behind her an abstract haze of blue and violet watercolors. In this moment, she has accessed some new, wonderful sensation within herself, reaching out and touching that blue of distance and longing, meeting and reveling in it as a friend.



“Maybe I remember those days because I am again going through a chrysalis stage,” the adult Taeko muses just before she arrives in Yamagata. “Something definitely changed when I started working. At work and at play we girls were livelier and more spirited than guys. It was like we’d finally found our wings. But looking back now, maybe we were just flexing them pointlessly. Perhaps the fifth grade me was tagging along with a message to reflect and rethink my life.”

What Taeko considers here is a thought that occurs to me too, watching these memories and thinking about how they interact with Taeko’s present-day self. Each of the memories contain, if nothing else, such strong emotions, moments of heightened feeling that leave an impact for the strength with which they were experienced; and in the present day, Taeko is once again feeling things very powerfully, from both the flood of memories and the experience of being in Yamagata. But what happened to her in between those two points, in the seventeen years that we never glimpse? Taeko has remained her own person, and not let others dictate who or what she should be, but has she actually allowed herself to feel and to go after the things she desires with the passion that makes a person whole? Has she allowed herself to ‘spread her wings’ like her fifth-grade self once did, on that day after the baseball game, or was she merely just ‘flexing them pointlessly,’ as she says, working spiritedly without necessarily letting herself long for something greater? “You freeze up in childhood,” Solnit contemplates in *The Faraway Nearby*, “you go numb, because you cannot change your circumstances and to recognize, name, and feel the emotions and their cruel causes would be unbearable, and so you wait.”¹⁶ But if you have suppressed desire, what is it you have left yourself to wait for?

Perhaps this is why the trip to Yamagata is so powerful for Taeko, and why, once she arrives there, the memories recede into the background for a stretch. If those memories present

images of Taeko feeling the ‘blue of distance’ within herself, Yamagata is a place where she can sense and be touched by it on the outside, in the moment, as an adult, connecting with something she has not, perhaps, connected with in a very long time. Doing so makes her feel whole – so much so that, upon arriving at the safflower field where she intends to work, she gets started right away, even though she has not slept for hours and the sun has yet to rise.

The safflower picking sequence is one of those moments where Takahata and his animators simply revel in the wonder of the natural world alongside their characters, wordlessly communicating a sense of joy and profundity, an awakening that shall become central to Taeko’s being. All the visual details of the scene seem to emanate the ‘blue of distance’ Solnit speaks of, both literally and figuratively. There is an endless enormity to this remote rural space, its comforting immensity sensed powerfully by both Taeko and the viewer. It is felt in the long blue mountain range and dark, endless forest that encircles the farm, and in the cloak of mist that slowly cascades across its surface. It is palpable in the seemingly infinite rows of safflower, those vivid orange petals resting atop long green stalks. Working within those fields, reaching out and touching the natural world, bordered by the trees and hills, enveloped in mist, with the sun gradually growing brighter and brighter above, this seemingly infinite and unattainable space gradually starts to feel like home. As if to suggest Taeko’s growing sense of communion, Takahata even includes a series of extreme close-up shots on the safflower plants themselves, on the dew falling from the petals and on the bees crawling across their surface; reminiscent of the work of Terrence Malick, whose works emphasize the vivacity of life across all different scales, these images remind us of just how much there is living and breathing all around Taeko.¹⁷

At the peak of sunrise, Taeko and the other farmers take a break to stare into the sky. Taeko’s adoptive grandmother¹⁸ bows her head against the blinding sun and clasps her hands in

silent prayer. Taeko, after a moment in which she looks utterly content and happy, is compelled to do the same. It is a deeply spiritual experience, and in many ways, a uniquely Japanese one.

As Yoel Hoffman explains:

Some Western scholars, perhaps with a trace of Christian of condescension, have called Japanese mysticism “natural,” distinguishing it from “spiritual” mysticism. And yet how wise and humane is the culture that does not contrive an otherworldly supreme being to rule this world, the only one we know. One might ask what there is to be gained from a “spiritual” sovereign who disturbs the peace of man with commands to act one way or another, promising in exchange an eternal world where scent, shape, and color never enter. Indeed, even today the Japanese share a deep identification with nature. This is not nature as understood by Western religions, the work of a creator who stands apart from his works, but nature bursting with vitality, appearing and disappearing in cycles of life and death, of summer and winter, of spring and fall. The Japanese aspire to a clarity of awareness, as of a mirror reflecting natural phenomena in its many forms. And anyone who has seen a Japanese stand silently for a good hour to view the blossoming cherries in spring and the reddening maples in fall, or to gaze at the full moon in the autumn sky, knows that this is no mere gesture of aesthetic appreciation, but an act of worship.¹⁹

This notion is central to why farming is viewed as such a positive force in *Only Yesterday*, as this immensely healing and fulfilling act that calls to Taeko from deep within herself. Extending Hoffman’s comparison of Western and Japanese ‘forms of worship,’ one might even say that morning spent picking safflower is like going to church, a similarly communal spiritual activity. As Marie Mutsuki Mockett sees it, this love of nature is foundational to Japan’s entire spiritual being:

The adoration of the flower is a quintessentially Japanese trait. A taxi driver in Kyōtō once said to me, “People who love flowers are kind people.” My mother, who was riding in the car with me, nodded vigorously; she understood this feeling implicitly. It’s an attitude pretty much every Japanese I have ever met will agree with, for the Japanese obsession with the beauty of nature, and the drive to cultivate it, has its roots in Shintō, Japan’s indigenous religion.²⁰

Interestingly, Isao Takahata was born in Ise, “the city that hosts the most sacred shrine of ...

Shintō,”²¹ and which is, as a result, a point of pilgrimage for tourists and native Japanese alike.

The essence of Shintō – that the world is full of *kami*, or spirits, imbued into all the natural things

we both can and cannot sense – flows throughout his work, perhaps nowhere more deeply than in *Only Yesterday*, where the power of the natural world beckons and heals and makes one whole.

Yet how different does this conception of nature sound, when all is said and done, from the Westerner Solnit's description of the blue of distance?

For many years, I have been moved by the blue at the far edge of what can be seen, that color of horizons, of remote mountain ranges, of anything far away. The color of that distance is the color of an emotion, the color of solitude and of desire, the color of there seen from here, the color of where you are not. And the color of where you can never go. For the blue is not in the place those miles away at the horizon, but in the atmospheric distance between you and the mountains.²²

She too describes something greater than us, something inhuman but immensely palpable, a force which calls to us, and fills us, and moves us, and motivates us. However one chooses to quantify it, the emotion Taeko feels upon arriving in Yamagata – that force which compels her to bow her head in prayer – is very real, and felt very powerfully, and it shall compel Taeko on towards a personal upheaval that can hardly be reduced to rational or scientific terms. There are forces beyond perception or understanding at work in *Only Yesterday*, and to Isao Takahata, they may be the ones that matter most.



In the first-season finale of the AMC television series *Mad Men*, 1960s advertising executive Don Draper puts together the perfect pitch for the soon-to-be-introduced Kodak Carousel slide projector, and he does so by poetically illustrating a sensation that, while broadly universal, is often quite difficult to define. “*Nostalgia*,” he says softly. “*It’s delicate, but potent.*” The lights go down, the Kodak projector whirs to life, and the smoke from several businessmen’s cigarettes wafts slowly across the room, illuminated by the bulb of the projector.

*...In Greek, nostalgia literally means the pain from an old wound. It’s a twinge in your heart, far more powerful than memory alone. This device isn’t a spaceship. It’s a time machine. Goes backwards, forewords. It takes us to a place where we ache to go again. It’s not called The Wheel. It’s called the Carousel. It lets us travel the way a child travels. Around and around, and back home again, to a place where we know we are loved.*²³

The sequence, and Draper’s definition of ‘nostalgia,’ has rightly become an iconic piece of American television history. When a junior ad executive leaves the room sobbing at the end of

the pitch, he is no doubt acting as an avatar for many members of the audience, struck in their core by the emotional truth with which Draper's words seem to resonate.

The thing is, Don's definition is ever so slightly off, and his conclusion – that nostalgia can bring us home, to a place “where we know we are loved” – is flawed. The word ‘nostalgia’ does come from Greek, but its component parts – *nóstos*, or homecoming, and *álgos*, or pain – do not necessarily suggest an old wound so much as they warn against the aches and discomfort that can accompany returning home after a long journey. Nostalgia is a complex sensation because while it draws us towards ‘home’ – to places of memory, to people and things that give us comfort, to that which is fundamental to our sense of community and of self – it also makes us ache when we look towards or arrive there. It is, always and eternally, a positive and negative sensation, one that draws us towards those parts of ourselves that feel honest and true, while also telling us not to regress towards a past that is, inevitably, lost.²⁴

Nostalgia is obviously a major theme in *Only Yesterday*, a film set in the recent past, which meditates on the nature of urban versus rural progress, and which looks back even further to the 1960s as its core narrative device. This is a film positively dripping with nostalgia, at all levels of its narrative, thematic, and aesthetic being. In a time when calling a work of art ‘nostalgic’ is often intended as a way of dismissing it as simple or naive, this is a notion that must be reckoned with, for the exploration of nostalgia in *Only Yesterday* is anything but underdeveloped.

Svetlana Boym, in her book *The Future of Nostalgia*, writes that nostalgia is a way “of giving shape and meaning to longing,”²⁵ and splits nostalgia into two broad categories that are tremendously helpful in understanding the divergent forces at work – and our divergent understandings of those forces – when we feel and talk about nostalgia:

Longing might be what we share as human beings, but that doesn't prevent us from telling very different stories of belonging and nonbelonging. In my view, two kinds of nostalgia characterize one's relationship to the past, to the imagined community, to home, to one's own self-perception: restorative and reflective ... Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance ... Restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time.²⁶

Further summarizing and extending Boym's arguments, one might say that while 'restorative' nostalgia reflects an uncritical desire to valorize and return to the past – whether this past is real or, more often than not, imagined – 'reflective' nostalgia is a way of moving oneself towards the future by learning from the past, or from anything that has been lost. As Boym explains, "*Re-flection* suggests new flexibility, not the reestablishment of stasis."²⁷ In this way, the kind of nostalgia *Only Yesterday* is built upon is fundamentally reflective, its vision of being lost as a path towards feeling found echoing Boym's conception of nostalgia as a potentially healing force.

Yet this is an aspect of *Only Yesterday* it may be easy to misinterpret, given how much time the film literally spends embroiled in memory, and how heavily the film and its characters valorize rural, 'old-fashioned' living as a purer form of existence. On the surface, this sounds 'restorative;' the key distinction lies in the nuance of detail. For as Boym defines it, "the past for the restorative nostalgic is a value for the present; the past is not a duration but a perfect snapshot." And this is not at all how I would describe Takahata's intent. The past, for Taeko, is not a snapshot, but fluid, the onomatopoeia of the title reflecting a past that is flowing and uncontrollable; nor is it a halcyon era that feels wholly, or even mostly, desirable to Taeko's present-day self. The appeal of the rural present encountered in Yamagata is not about fleeing into a crystalized space of bygone days, but about reconnecting, in true Shintō fashion, with the

ever-present wholeness of nature and community that modern urban society rigorously drills out of those living within its boundaries. The rural space that Takahata and company illustrate is not a relic of the past, but a formula for sustainable future living. If anything, the soul-crushing monotony of office-work – as glimpsed in the opening scene at Taeko’s workplace – or the overabundance of unhealthy consumer attitudes – seen with equal strength in both present and past, between the farmer’s daughter who wants a pair of Puma sneakers and Taeko’s memories of longing for an enamel purse – are elements of modernity that, in Takahata’s view, are stuck in patterns of the past; patterns that have caused misery and longing before, and shall cause misery and longing again.

In this way, the rediscovery of the rural in the context of the modern is a form of reflection, not one of restoration. Rather than gripping feverishly to that which has been lost, the characters find strength in Yamagata through acts of creation, by looking towards a future that is truly renewable, rather than just merely repeatable. It is crucial, therefore, that Takahata’s main voice for the virtue of farm life is Toshio, a young man of roughly the same age as Taeko, and who even came from a similar background (when we first meet him, we learn Toshio quit a corporate job in the city to come live and work in Yamagata). Through him, we hear of the trials and tribulations involved in farming – as Ghibli scholars Colin Odell and Michelle Le Blanc note, Toshio’s laments evoke a nostalgia “for a dwindling agricultural sector, an attempt to reconcile Japan’s desire for its countryside idyll with its desire for continued urban expansion”²⁸ – while also learning why such a life could appeal so strongly to a young person in modern society.

Toshio’s exaltation of organic farming, for instance, is a near-perfect example of living through reflective nostalgia. It is a new way of doing things, based on observations of farmers

from a pre-industrial past, but combined with modern knowledge to create a more effective and sustainable system. As Toshio notes when Taeko complains that “things haven’t changed in a hundred years,” “even ‘organic’ rice uses weed-killer ... there’s not enough labor to weed by hand.” This is not a kind of farming that ever literally existed in the past, but it is informed by the lessons of history, and therefore lays a path for the future.

Or, as Toshio puts it, as he and Taeko look out at the vast farmland from a spot on a hillside:

City people see the trees and rivers and are grateful for ‘nature.’ But what you see here is all made by man ... Every bit has its history, not just the fields and rice patties. Someone’s Great-Great Grandpa planted it, or cleared it, gathered firewood or picked mushrooms there ... Mankind battles nature and receives from it. They evolve together, and create this scenery ... Farmers can’t exist without nature. So they’ve always taken great care to give her a helping hand in return. A collaboration between man and nature: That’s the heart of country life.

This, too, is a philosophy of reflective nostalgia. In this vision of rural living, there is no such thing as absolute ‘purity,’ no ‘pre-lapsarian’ past towards which the restorative nostalgic could strive to return. Humans affect nature, always and inevitably, but nature also provides for and shapes human life. This vision is about finding a way to live with nature, without ignoring human influence or progress, rather than living against or in spite of nature, as those drab, colorless urban spaces glimpsed early in the film seem to do. One could also phrase this notion as striving to live *in* the moment, within the cyclical flow of human life and death, rather than trying to ignore the moment or to bend time to one’s will (both of which are acts of restorative nostalgia). “That’s why I feel so at home,” Taeko reflects on the car ride back from the fields after Toshio finishes his soliloquy. “I didn’t grow up here, but somehow always felt my soul was at home here. So that’s it...”

Home – as Taeko’s words suggest, it is a complex idea to consider, not so much a clear-cut state of geography as it is a sensation, a powerful sense of comfort felt when one’s external surroundings seem to work in harmony with what one feels on the inside. It is a sensation Seita tried chasing after so desperately in *Grave of the Fireflies*, trying to recreate the lost home for himself and his sister. Boym would tell us this is an act of folly, the destructive path of the restorative nostalgic; for the reflective nostalgic, homecoming is perpetually deferred, and the ‘home’ itself becomes something far more ethereal and fluid as time passes by.²⁹ She writes:

Reflective nostalgia does not pretend to rebuild the mythical place called home; it is ‘enamored of distance, not of the referent itself.’ This type of nostalgic narrative is ironic, inconclusive and fragmentary. Nostalgics of the second type are aware of the gap between identity and resemblance; the home is in ruins or, on the contrary, has been just renovated and gentrified beyond recognition. This defamiliarization and sense of distance drives them to tell their story, to narrate the relationship between past, present, and future. Through such longing these nostalgics discover that the past is not merely that which doesn’t exist anymore, but, to quote Henri Bergson, the past ‘might act and will act by inserting itself into a present sensation from which it borrows the vitality.’ The past is not made in the image of the present or seen as foreboding of some present disaster; rather, the past opens up a multitude of personalities, nonteleological possibilities of historic development. We don’t need a computer to get access to the virtualities of our imagination: reflective nostalgia has a capacity to awaken multiple planes of consciousness.³⁰

This is the thematic and aesthetic essence of *Only Yesterday* personified, for the film is, through its structure of memory and contrast, a story about experiencing home without going home, analyzing the past without attempting to reach out and touch it, and to find truth and comfort in the world and in one’s life without striving for the restoration of one’s former status quo. It is why, although at least half of the film is spent in Taeko’s past, Takahata clearly envisions and represents that past as a sort of alternate, interior realm. Like Boym’s description of ‘home,’ the world of Taeko’s memories is visually indistinct, with hazy edges and pale, simple backgrounds, much of the space in the frame often left entirely blank. The image can, at times, look half-

finished, as though large portions of the drawings were left incomplete, or employ such soft colors and brushstrokes it is as though the objects represented are barely present (the gentle use of watercolors, a substance that always seems to take on an unpredictable life of its own when committed to paper, only heightens this fluid effect). At other times, the image might be replete with the minutiae of particular details, such as when the pineapple is carefully sliced, every step of the process meticulously depicted. The visual character of the flashbacks seems to ebb and flow with Taeko herself, a product of her memory, the general ‘softness’ of the image always informing us of distance, the rising and falling sense of detail conveying what survives most strongly in her mind.

“Memory,” writes Solnit, “is a shifting, fading, partial thing, a net that doesn’t catch all the fish by any means and sometimes catches butterflies that don’t exist.”³¹ In the documentary *The Artist Who Made Totoro’s Forest*, the approach taken by Takahata and background artist Kazuo Oga is described as an attempt to capture just this sensation, the visual texture of the past meant to look “like nostalgic images stored deep in memory ... The simple lines and pale colors of distant memories. Unnecessary detail was to be omitted. Only the content of memory would be depicted. Anything not recalled clearly would not be depicted.” In so doing, Takahata and Oga created a world that is in visual decay, resplendent in imperfections, an imaginative, internal portrait of reality – which, to a writer like Solnit or Boym, reflects nostalgia at its truest. A memory might not be recalled for its literal narrative substance, but for the emotion conjured – which is why young Taeko can swim through a watercolor sky after her encounter with Hirota, or hear the songs of children’s television shows as the soundtrack to her past.³² This is not the past as it was literally experienced, nor one that could ever be recreated in the present; the value

of this fantastical world of memory lies not in Taeko's ability to live there, but in the internal compass its watery substance provides for understanding herself, her present, and her future.

The intangible texture of the past stands in stark contrast to how Takahata and company animate the present-day scenes, for the style favored, and techniques employed, makes *Only Yesterday* the absolute height of animated realism in the Studio Ghibli canon. Where the memories might leave large swaths of canvas blank, the present-day images are filled from corner to corner with color, texture, and an almost inconceivable amount of visual detail. It is not quite photorealistic, for that is simply not the style Ghibli (or Japanese animation in general) aims for, but one can freeze on nearly any frame in any of the present-day scenes and encounter such lush expanses of nature, such carefully observed renderings of trains and buildings and interior spaces, such dynamic and varied use of color (the sheer number of shades of green employed in illustrating the foliage in Yamagata is astounding), that the effect is in many ways overwhelming, as though there is almost too much visual data for the human eye to cleanly parse through.

Even more astonishing is the way in which characters are animated, especially in regards to facial features. Taeko, Toshio, and the other characters in the present-day scenes are animated with an immensely detailed sense of facial expressiveness, their prominent cheek lines and slight movements in the eyes and, especially, mouth giving a sense of three-dimensionality and nuanced movement that is frankly shocking for anyone used to watching Japanese animation. Takahata's approach bucks decades of trends, some of which he himself helped invent, to simplify and pare down when it comes to bodily features and human motion. Something as seemingly simple as the pre-recording of dialogue, which allows the animators to precisely synchronize line readings and lip movements, can be startling to see for those who are used to

how anime is typically done. The loose relationship between dialogue and facial features that usually exists in anime is replaced by something exact and nuanced, and the sheer range of overall motion with which Takahata imbues these figures – extra attention is especially paid to the hand gestures Toshio makes while speaking, a common detail in Japanese conversation that is often omitted in animation – is positively disarming in its realism.

All of this might, in theory, decrease our capacity for identification with these images, given the notion I have posited that hand-drawn animation mirrors how we process and experience the world *emotionally*, rather than *literally*, and can in this way feel more honest than live-action cinematography. This was certainly the perspective of Kazuo Oga, who felt he went overboard on the backgrounds in the film. “I think the backgrounds were simply too detailed,” he said. “This was a lesson I’ve never forgotten. I don’t think it was necessary to include that much detail. The backgrounds could have been simpler.”³³ And it is no coincidence that future works by Oga would favor simplicity, either through a simple reduction in overall scope and density of visual detail, or by expanding upon the ‘lighter’ visual style found in the film’s flashback scenes (which directly foreshadow the aesthetics of Takahata’s *My Neighbors the Yamadas* and *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*).

But like Takahata himself, who felt that the backgrounds were “well executed,” and that the “combination” between present and past “worked extremely well,”³⁴ I would have to respectfully disagree with Oga-san. If the present-day scenes of *Only Yesterday* existed on an island, as their own film divorced from any aesthetic contrast, it would indeed be a lovely but suffocating work. But that contrast does exist, and the interplay between extreme stylization and the intense sense of reality is so key to how one experiences the film.

Take the nuance of the character animation, for example. There is certainly an aspect to identification, when it comes to anime figures, that is heightened through simplification. If we consider the animated form in Metzian terms, in which the cinematic image in general, and the human face in particular, is a mirror upon which we project our own memories and experiences, then the less that exists on the mirror, the more room there is for the viewer to insert oneself into the character, and to thus ‘sink’ into the world of the film. This is why animation – not just in Japan, but in the earliest days of Walt Disney, on through the modern CGI era in America – generally favors simplified or stylized facial features (and is why animated films that attempt to be photorealistic in their character animation, such as Robert Zemeckis’ motion-capture experiments *The Polar Express* (2004) and *Beowulf* (2007), are met with complaints of entering the ‘creepy’ territory of the ‘uncanny valley’). And yet I think these are all ideas Takahata must have been very cognizant of when creating *Only Yesterday*, for the present-day scenes seem to very consciously subvert these principles. Rather than simplifying character motion, he enhances it, to a level at which we are recognizing many more nuances of human facial patterns than normal, and thus spending less time ‘projecting’ or ‘imagining.’ And rather than allowing ‘extra’ space within the backgrounds for the viewer to fill in, Takahata fills that space entirely, dominating the viewer, erecting artistic barriers against which our imaginations do not necessarily penetrate.

But Takahata does *not* do this for the other half of the film, the flashbacks, in which the aesthetic pendulum swings almost entirely the other way, simplifying the human form and populating the frame with absence. Given that *Only Yesterday* is, as I have argued, an ‘internalized character study,’ that contrast is the aesthetic crux upon which the film’s themes are constructed. We are presented with two visual planes – the real, or the present, and the internal,

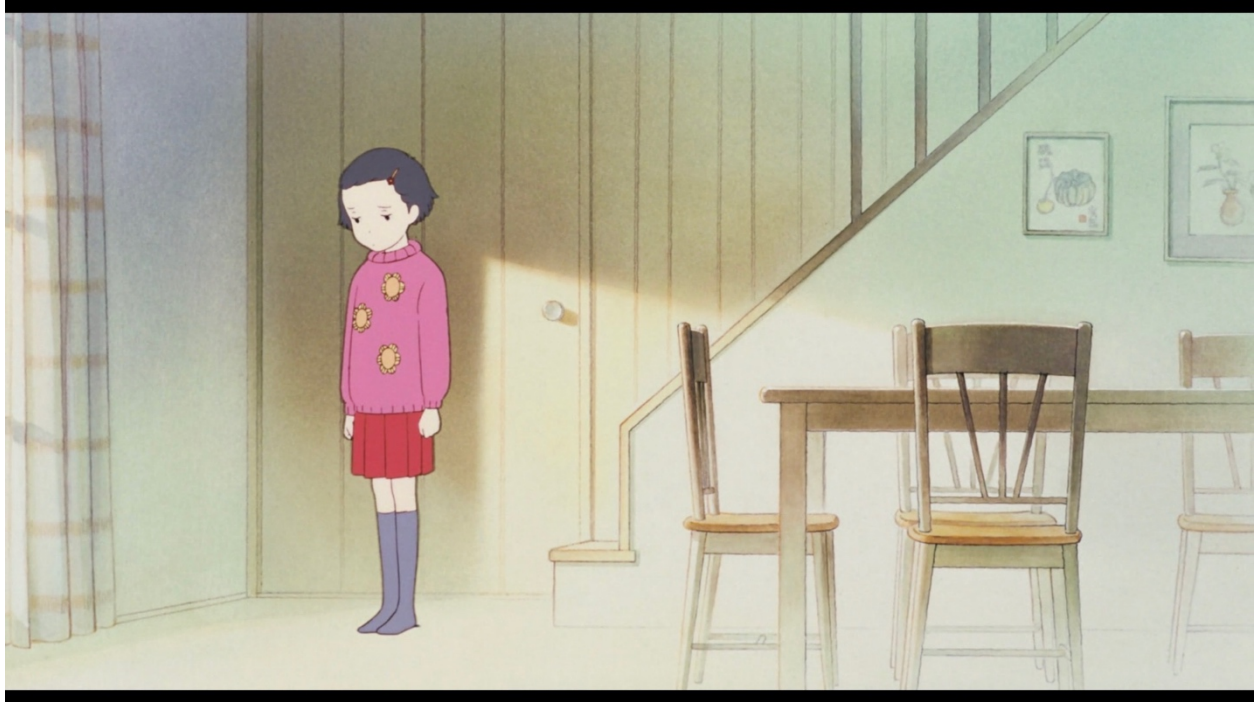
or the past – that we experience entirely differently. In Taeko’s memories, we are invited to remember right alongside her, to think about our own internal nostalgias and the way we experience and process them; whereas in the present, we are constantly made aware of the ‘concrete’ nature of this reality, of these characters as autonomous, individual beings.

This back-and-forth serves to make both planes more vivid, but more importantly, it also connects and blurs the lines between the two. One clearly informs the other, but in many ways, it is the hazy and indistinct internal plane that exerts greater influence, allowing us to sense the dynamic interior dimension at work in moments of heightened sensation – such as Taeko’s experience in the safflower field – and, eventually, allowing the realm of fantasy and memory to intrude directly upon reality, as when Taeko’s younger self, along with all her classmates, physically compel adult Taeko to disembark the train in the film’s finale. In this way, identification is paradoxically increased, because we are asked to see these characters in multiple lights: As the concrete, autonomous beings depicted in the present, and as the fluid, spiritual, internal beings they are on the inside. A contrast that exists in all of us, and which is, of course, a way of reflecting the human condition itself. The mirror still exists – it just so happens to exist as an idea, in between the lines, one that is sensed instead of seen. And in this case, that only makes the effect all the more powerful.

“The modern nostalgic realizes that ‘the goal of the odyssey is a rendez-vous with oneself,’” writes Boym.³⁵ Taeko Okajima is nothing if not a modern nostalgic, and as the days pass by in Yamagata, her internal wanderings grow increasingly focused on the subject of ‘self’ – and her habitual sensation of feeling out of place starts to reveal a deep-seated anxiety as to her own self-worth.

On a day trip to Zao, a nearby tourist spot in the mountains, Taeko voices this anxiety to Toshio through the only means she can: in the context of memory. She asks Toshio whether or not he could divide fractions in school, confessing that she could never do this herself. “It seems that people who could do it went on to have easy lives,” she explains, thinking of a girl she knew in elementary school who was good at fractions, and is now married with kids. “I was no good at it,” she laments. “Not even smart enough to know when to quit.”

Inside, she flashes back to a day when she received a bad grade on a math test. Young Taeko and her mother sit at the table together, in silence, heads bowed, a bright light from outside casting a soft glow on the golden-brown cabinets behind them. Taeko tries to come up with an excuse – that she had a headache from doing ‘blow paintings’ in art class – but the truth is that she simply does not understand fractions. As basic math, it’s a source of confusion that neither Taeko’s mother nor her older sister, Yaeko – incensed, in the haughty fashion of a teenager, at having to tutor her little sister – can understand. Both women are fairly traditional – ‘normal,’ one might say. Being constantly contrasted with them, always met with bewilderment at her thoughts and actions, makes Taeko feel abnormal. When Taeko’s mother finally snaps, and expresses as much – “That child’s not normal!” she exclaims at Yaeko, thinking her youngest daughter is out of earshot – the saddest part is that Taeko does not even look particularly surprised. She freezes, coming down the stairs, and keeps her back turned to the wall, her mother and Yaeko staring at her in surprise. Taeko remains more or less stoic, her eyes downcast in disappointment more than alarm or anger. The gentle blue light cast on the walls does not seem to come from anywhere in particular; perhaps, in this memory, it emanates from within Taeko herself.



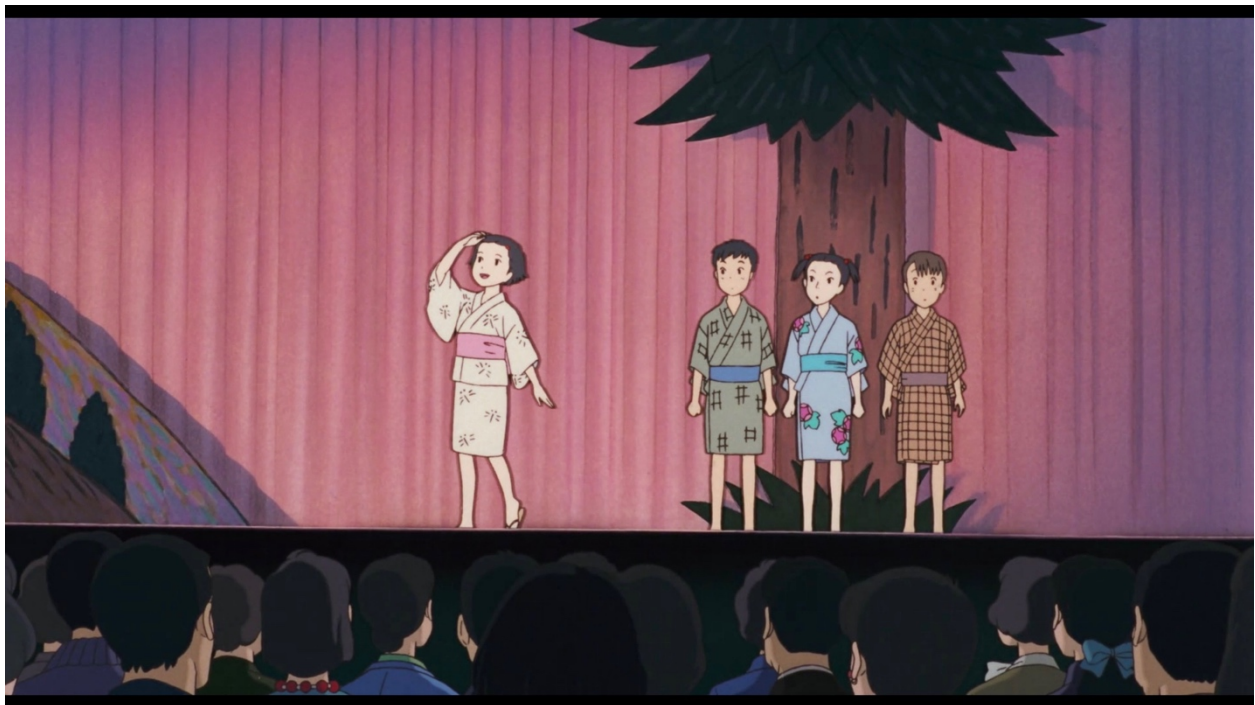
At this young age, Taeko has already demonstrated how different she is from those around her, how she feels things with greater intensity, and how she approaches common tasks, like fractions, from a unique vantage point. And already, she has learned to feel isolated, made to feel like part of her is defective, or perhaps even missing. The grand irony of the situation is that, when Taeko finally explains her train of thought, it makes a good deal more sense than any explanation her mother or sister can give. “What’s dividing a fraction by a fraction anyway?” she asks Yaeko, drawing out a circle on a piece of paper. She divides it into two-thirds, then those two-thirds into a quarter, which would equate, in total, to one-sixth – but that is not the ‘correct’ answer. Yaeko, the supposed ‘expert,’ is flabbergasted, and tries to steer the conversation back towards ‘formal’ math. But Taeko has a good point – when put into practical, real-world terms, the entire idea of ‘dividing a fraction’ seems utterly absurd. What does it even mean? From the viewer’s perspective, it does not seem like Taeko has anything wrong with her at all; if anything, she is thinking about the issue much more deeply than anyone else.³⁶

But the cold and inflexible world of math is, of course, hardly the place to leave one's personal imprint. Later that day, as Taeko, Toshio, and the teenage Naoko stand on a Yamagata hillside at sunset, Taeko sees some crows fly by, and remembers a time in her youth when she did find a way to express herself, as part of a school play. She only had a small part, with two brief lines, but she was determined to make something out of it, to take this opportunity for socially-sanctioned creativity and use it as a way to reclaim that sense of inner loss. At first, she tries adding an extra line, but is told to stick to the script. A good thing too, the adult Taeko notes, because it led to an important revelation: *"I realized that I could act even when there were no lines."* It feels like the thesis statement for the film itself.

In the memory, Taeko and three other children, all playing villagers in an old-fashioned folk setting, run out on stage. They stand in front of a cardboard cutout of a tree, and behind them, the curtains are lit in a soft pink glow, the edges of which fade into a vibrant lilac. It is one of the most vivid images in any of the flashbacks, perhaps indicating just how formative that stage proved for young Taeko. She steps forward towards her mark, dressed in a white kimono with a pink sash, and delivers her line. "Behold, the crows fly home," she says, putting her hand above her eyebrows, as though blocking out the sun, and pretending to follow the crows with her eyes, a contended, magnetic little smile growing across her face. Finally, after savoring the moment, she points into the air – "First one!" she exclaims. The other children follow, pointing towards the sky and racing through their lines mechanically. "Then two." "Then three." "Then four." The others all lower their arms, except for Taeko, who does so slowly, her mouth slightly agape, as though she is glimpsing something miraculous and beautiful. Her performance is so good, her face so convincingly enraptured, it transfixes both the on-screen and off-screen audience alike into believing there really are some lovely birds flying off into the sunset upon

that invisible horizon. Taeko lowers her hand to her chest, closes her mouth into a little smile, and waves goodbye to the crows. She takes a deep breath, in and out, and then nods to herself, turning to run back off-stage with the others. A gong clangs, and the stage lights dim to a rich dark blue, a yellow cardboard crescent moon descending from the ceiling.

It is a crucial moment in young Taeko's life, an experience that proves one can live by the script society determines and still be one's own person, still inject one's own thoughts and feelings into the world instead of succumbing to normality. It is a lesson the adult Taeko, as well as all of us watching the film itself, would do well to take note of.



The memory does not end there, though. Taeko recounts being praised, by other parents and even teachers, for her performance in the play, finally noticed for something she did right, rather than some perceived shortcoming. One day, while Taeko watches a children's puppet show on the television – *Hyokkori Hyotanjima*, or 'Popped-up Gourd Island'³⁷ – a college student, who needs a child for part in a community play, comes to ask Taeko's mother if she

could perform with them. Taeko's imagination immediately runs wild; she strikes a pose, her eyes starting to glow like she's in the spotlight, and she imagines herself in a fancy yellow dress, against another one of those indistinct watercolor hazes, as images of herself on magazine covers flash by, and she sees herself with the puppets from *Hyokkori Hyotanjima*. This is something she really, desperately wants, and that evening, Taeko, her sisters, her mother, and her grandmother all discuss it excitedly.

Finally, the conversation comes to a lull, and they all glance silently over at the father, at the head of the table, hidden behind his newspaper – the lone patriarch in this group of women. “Acting is out,” he says simply. “Show business people are no good.” Taeko's sisters try to object. “I said no,” he interrupts calmly, but sternly. “Dinner,” he says, turning to Taeko's mother. The following day, the college student returns, and Taeko's mother glumly turns him down; in the TV room, Taeko listens to the puppet on television sing a song called “Poor Boy,” while she stands stoically against a cabinet. “*Pooooooooo boooy, pooooooooo boooy...Don't you feel sorry for me?*” The room is bathed in that same sad, blue light from before, only stronger and more pervasive now. “*Pooooooooo boooy, pooooooooo boooy...Such a long way from home...*”

A few days later, Taeko is walking down a city street with her mother; it's twilight, and the mixture of sunset and dim street lamps cast the endless columns of shops in a striking mixture of blues and purples and pinks. Taeko tells her mother about Aoki, another girl in her class who wound up getting the part after Taeko was unable to take it; Taeko's mother tells her to never tell anyone in her class that she was offered the part first. She believes it is the polite thing to do, and to say, but to Taeko, it feels like the greatest rejection yet of her own identity and self-worth. In a long shot, Taeko hangs her head, dejected, and follows her mother at a distance, through a dark and downcast stretch of shops.

Then a song begins.

Breaking through the waves, Shooting through the clouds.

The tune is joyous, a chorus of young voices singing exuberantly, but Taeko's head continues to hang, as they pass down the rows of indiscriminate shops.

Where is it heading, Hyokkori Hyotanjima?

A quick insert shot, to a cartoon lighthouse with bright blue waves tumbling beneath it.

Where will it take us?

Taeko continues to walk, past the spinning colors of a Barber's pole, and after an insert shot of a friendly cartoon octopus, the shot changes to frame Taeko from a low-angle, framed against the twilit sky.

Something special waits for us, just over the horizon.

A colorful rainbow bursts into life above Taeko, and all of a sudden, she perks up and begins to sing along.

There'll be hard times, there'll be sad times, but we'll never lose heart.

She sings the words forcefully, her eyes and mouth open wide in determination, her walk transforming into a rhythmic march.

We hate to cry, so let's laugh instead!

She continues marching, following her mother down the street.

Let's go! Hyokkori Hyotanjima!

The lane is lit a dark, dreary blue, but in the distance, the light of the sun still touches the buildings, and they glow a hazy, friendly pink.

Hyokkori Hyotanjima! Hyokkori Hyotanjima!



Taeko marches on down towards that warmer horizon, unstoppably, singing and marching with all her might. And it is easy to imagine Taeko marching just like that, with a song in her heart, all the way to the point she has reached now, as an adult, sitting on the Yamagata mountaintop and relating this story to her new countryside family, having never let the world stop her from being herself, even when opportunity and hope seemed lost.

This extended flashback sequence – the final group of scenes set in Taeko’s childhood – is *Only Yesterday* in microcosm: A tale of Taeko finding her individuality, having it challenged, and then marching forward anyway, because the journey must go on. But the question remains whether, in all those years of marching, Taeko actually became her own person, found a path that satisfied or fulfilled her, or whether she just kept on marching without direction, until that act became, in and of itself, monotonous. This time, the question seems to weigh on Taeko herself, as a bout of melancholy sends her wandering through the countryside on a rainy, stormy night, in what is, effectively, the understated climax of the film.

It is a proposal from Toshio's grandmother that serves as the direct catalyst for Taeko's melancholy. On the night before Taeko is set to return home to Tokyo, the grandmother, recognizing how much Taeko loves life out in the countryside, suggests that she should marry Toshio, and live in Yamagata permanently. As the other family members debate the grandmother's sudden, overly forward offer, Taeko slumps into sadness, and finally gets up and runs out into the cold, dark night. This specific incident may have set her off, but there is more than just this moment compelling Taeko to wander in the dark; being confronted with the opportunity to turn Yamagata into something more than a fantasy space of vacation only reinforces what the memories have been telling her all along, that she has always felt out of place, has always been looking for a 'home' even when she technically had one as a child. In all these years, Taeko has never compromised herself, but neither has she really, truly learned who she is or who she wants to be. That absence she felt in childhood still exists inside of her; and here, in Yamagata, on that stormy night, it finally overwhelms her. "Suddenly my love of the country, and my play-farming, seemed so phony," she reflects sadly. "Declaring my love for country life based on a ten-day vacation now felt so embarrassing." Even now, and even though Taeko has proved so adept at allowing herself to get lost in the moment, to revel in the vast and the unexplainable, there remain internal barriers she has not been able to break down or move past – and one senses, watching her wander aimlessly in the night, that until she does, she will never truly be happy.

On her walk, Taeko winds up on a bridge. Lightning flashes across the night sky, and it begins to rain. A disembodied voice rings out – "*I ain't shaking hands with you.*" Taeko looks behind her, astonished, to see a filthy little boy, wearing ragged clothes and a mean expression, standing at the edge of the bridge. A small cacophony of children's voices, all confusing and out

of context, grows in volume, and suddenly, there is Taeko's young self, standing in the rain and arguing with some of her classmates. "I'll beat you up!" the boy yells angrily at adult Taeko, and skulks away, out into the darkness. Adult Taeko is visibly shaken – her memories have emerged, uncontrollably, into her present-day life. "*Abe-kun...*" she mutters.

Toshio pulls up to the bridge in his car, and Taeko signals for him to stop. He helps her get in, out of the pouring rain, and even tries to cheer her up; having been absent for the proposal from his grandmother, he is ignorant as to what has occurred. Finally, Taeko just tells him to drive anywhere. "I knew a boy named Abe," she tells him. "He came from another school. He sat next to me. He once said, 'I ain't shaking hands with you.'" She grows silent. Toshio realizes Taeko is in a dark place, and starts to drive on, up a hill and past some trees, the headlights cutting through the night. Finally, Taeko continues, in what must be the longest and most thematically loaded single stretch of dialogue in Isao Takahata's career:

His family was poor. He never had sports gear. Always picking his nose or wiping it on his sleeve, and if I complained or even dared frown at him, he'd threaten to hit me. I hated it. I longer for the end of term, so we could change seats. I hated holding hands in dance class, hated having to lend him my homework. The girls gossiped and called him names. But I wouldn't join in. I thought it was terrible to talk behind his back. But one day ... He was transferred in the middle of the term. The teacher made us all shake hands and say goodbye. A feeling of disgust swept the room. His hands were filthy. Walking around, shaking hands with us, he looked so nervous. Back at his own desk, only I was left. When I held out my hand he said, "I ain't shaking hands with you." "I ain't shaking hands with you." I hated him the most. He knew that. That's why he didn't shake my hand.

These words are delivered slowly, entirely within this liminal space, of the car, in the night, with rain pouring down outside, the only soundtrack the slow clicking of Toshio's windshield wipers. And though they do not address Taeko's struggle to find herself head on, these words say so much about who Taeko is, and who she has been, and who she wants to be. This is a story of Taeko being confronted with someone who cut right through her, who was able to see a part of

herself that she tried so hard to deny. In this case, it was an ugly part of herself, a part she would understandably want to hide from the world, but it still speaks to a larger personal trend – that, as strongly as Taeko tends to feel things, perhaps the strongest feelings she has are the ones she has continually denied herself from acting upon, as she was often taught to do in childhood.

Abe could see one of these pieces of Taeko that Taeko herself denied, and in that way, he became a mirror; when she looked into it, the reflection hurt, because the image proved that even that which we try so hard to bury cannot disappear entirely. And that speaks so strongly to what she is going through now, in the present day, in Yamagata – what she always gone through, perhaps. A process of feeling things and rejecting them, wanting things and denying them, being something and running away from it, even if she was not herself aware that she was running. Taeko Okajima is not a person who belongs in Tokyo, in an office, working a menial and unfulfilling job; and as she and Toshio start to break down this strange, sad story, and Taeko sees a fantasy of the two of them on a tractor, moving through a field on a farm on a warm summer's day, perhaps that realization finally hits her.

It was the job of Taeko's ten-year-old self – that interior image, of nostalgia and truth – to guide her towards this point as an adult, but Taeko will need one last metaphorical shove before the weight of all these wanderings and revelations can be actualized. In the film's electric closing sequence, Taeko says her goodbyes to Toshio and his family, and boards a train back to Tokyo. It is a bright and sunny day, the sky a cool baby blue, the foliage of Yamagata shining brighter than ever. From the train, Taeko waves goodbye, hanging her torso out the window as the train pulls away, until her surrogate family has disappeared from sight.

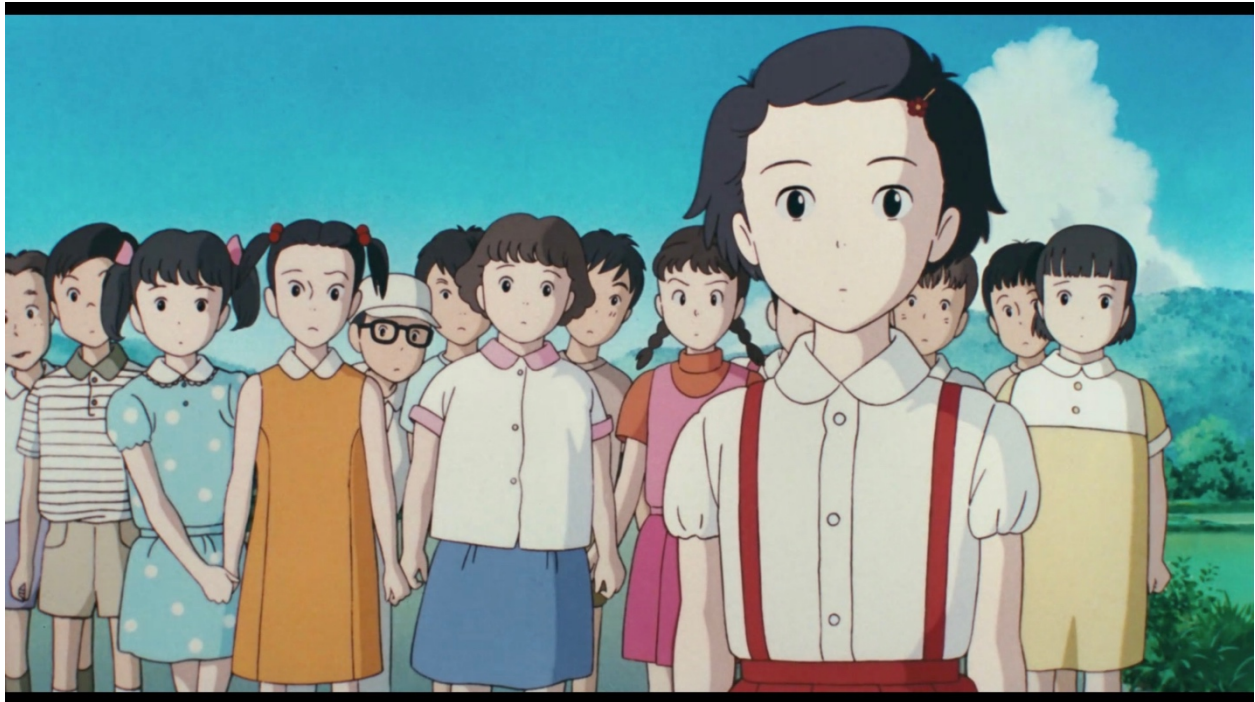
And then, Isao Takahata plays an absolutely wonderful joke on the audience (and, in a sense, on Taeko). As she gets up to go find her seat, an older man fanning his sweaty face across

from her, the credits begin to roll, and the final song begins to play, complete with the quiet, interstitial sorts of images one would expect from anime end credits: trees rushing by out the window; Taeko's stoic face framed again the rushing countryside; a butterfly fluttering through the compartment.

But this story cannot be over yet. That would just not be right. We know it. And Taeko, deep down, knows it too – hence the sudden emergence of her entire fifth grade class, from under the train seats, looking at her with playful mischief in their eyes. Young Taeko herself is the last to emerge, and she approaches her older self carefully, tugging at her arm, trying to get her attention. All of a sudden, Taeko leaps into action, her face lighting up in a sort of alarm, her body possessed by an unshakable urge. She grabs her bags and walks into the aisle, the children cheering and dancing around her, as she goes to stand at the door. As soon as the train comes to its first stop, Taeko disembarks, running across the platform to catch the other train, going the opposite way, and return to Yamagata. The children all run beside her, bouncing up and down in jubilation, as the song begins to swell, emotionally and triumphantly.

The train pierces through the countryside on its way back, the foliage and fields now speeding by in the opposite direction until it reaches the first station, and Taeko runs out to use a payphone, a look of pure joy on her face; the children, meanwhile, flag down a bus for her. As she rides on it in one direction, Toshio drives his car in the other, and when they cross paths, both vehicles stop. Taeko runs out of the bus, spotting Toshio standing by his car a little ways away. They both hesitate, politely nodding at one another – and then Toshio runs forward, and one of the children drops to the ground to trip him, and he stumbles, right into Taeko's arms. They awkwardly bow again, and then begin smiling, and talking, and drive away in Toshio's car, the children left behind, looking on. The camera comes to rest on young Taeko, her face stoic, as

she gazes towards her adult self – towards a future she has now moved fully into, and a place where these two selves may never meet again.



This is the moment the film, and all of Taeko's life, has been building to – a decision to finally, in simple terms, follow her heart, logic and reason and rationality be damned. It is, in many ways, a romantic scene, though the relationship between her and Toshio seems almost incidental. They no doubt seem like a good match, with similar interests and personalities, and if it one day blossoms into love and marriage, then that would certainly be nice. But Taeko is not returning to Yamagata for Toshio; she is returning there for herself, because it represents everything she is, and everything she wants to be, and she has allowed herself to stay away from there, away from her truest self, for far too long. It is why she has to run, why she cannot so much as return to Tokyo to pick up her things; to stay in this unfulfilling life one moment longer, when the existence she yearns for is so tangibly near, would be unthinkable. If this moment of personal fulfillment is in some ways represented by Toshio, then that is because he was

instrumental on her quest, serving as her entry and guide into this world, the companion and kindred spirit who demonstrated to her that this way of life could be more than just a fantasy. Taeko is not flinging herself into the arms of a man, here at the end of her journey; she is surrendering herself to the world, to the core of her own spirit, to the vastness of nature and the beauty of this place at which she feels home. It is, as Rebecca Solnit would say, a voluptuous surrender.

Solnit would also, I think, contribute this piece of wisdom to any discussion of the final scene:

*The young live absolutely in the present, but a present of drama and recklessness, of acting on urges and running with the pack. They bring the fearlessness of children to acts with adult consequences, and when something goes wrong they experience the shame or the pain as an eternal present too. Adulthood is made up of a prudent anticipation and a philosophical memory that make you navigate more slowly and steadily. But fear of making mistakes can itself become a huge mistake, one that prevents you from living, for life is risky and anything less is already loss.*³⁸

Marie Mutsuki Mockett, for her part, would likely offer this recollection, of a lesson learned from a Zen priest, Maruko-sensei, in talking about death, and about looking back at life.

As a priest, Maruko had seen many people die, and he had seen many families just after a loved one had passed away. The very worst thing was when someone forgot to say “thank you” before dying. If only the dead could see the pain they left behind when they died selfishly. He often counseled the living on this inherited pain and tried to get them to put it into context.

*In Japanese: わたしが、わたしになるためにじんせいのしっぱいもひつようでした.*³⁹ “In order to become myself, my mistakes and hardships were also necessary.” This was an essential way to view life. It was only by keeping this in mind at all times that one could live in the present. The practice of Zen, he said, was about looking forward and living in this way.⁴⁰

Pema Chödrön, the Buddhist teacher and scholar, would likely see Taeko’s final action as a sensation of *bodhichitta*, the state of having a “completely open heart and mind” that is also “as vulnerable and tender as an open wound.”⁴¹ And if so, this analogy might come to mind:

All too frequently we relate like timid birds who don't dare leave the nest. Here we sit in a nest that's getting pretty smelly and that hasn't served its function for a long time. No one is arriving to feed us. No one is protecting us and keeping us warm. And yet we keep hoping mother bird will arrive.

We could do ourselves the ultimate favor and finally get out of that nest. That this takes courage is obvious. That we could use some helpful hints is also clear. We may doubt that we're up to being a warrior-in-training. But we can ask ourselves this question: "Do I prefer to grow up and relate to life directly, or do I choose to live and die in fear?"⁴²

But I think Isao Takahata himself put it best, in the lyrics he wrote for the song that plays atop this final sequence. The piece is based on the American song "The Rose," written by Amanda McBroom and first recorded in 1979 by Bette Midler for the film of the same name. But to view the song that plays in *Only Yesterday* as a mere translation – as the film's subtitles do, providing only McBroom's lyrics – would be to do it a disservice, for although the tune sung by Miyako Harumi is the same one sung by Midler, the lyrics were rewritten in Japanese by Takahata, and he personalized them a great deal, tightening the language and making small but crucial adjustments that subtly alter the power and meaning of the piece. His song is called "*Ai wa hana, kimi wa sono tane*" (Love is a flower, you are the seed), and in the end, it conveys everything *Only Yesterday* has to say about getting lost, being found, and taking the chances that turn an absence into a presence, and make life worth living:

*Washing away tenderness,
love, it's a river.
Cutting the soul to pieces,
love, it's a knife.
An incessant thirst,
love is, they say, but
love is a flower, the flower of life;
you are the seed.*

*Afraid of being discouraged,
your heart never dances.
Afraid of waking up,
your dream never takes chances.
Hating to be taken away
your heart won't give.
Afraid of dying,
you cannot live.*

*Long night, all alone;
long road, all alone.
Love doesn't come
when you think it will;
please remember, though
it's buried under the snow in winter,
in spring, with the sun's love,
the seed blossoms into a flower.*

*yasashisa o oshinagasu
ai sore wa kawa
tamashii o kirisaku
ai sore wa 'naifu'
tomedonai kawaki ga
ai da to iu keredo
ai wa hana inochi no hana
kimi wa sono tane*

*kujikeru no o osorete
odoranai kimi no kokoro
sameru no o osorete
'chansu' nogasu kimi no yume
ubawareru no ga iyasa ni
ataenai kokoro
shinu no o osorete
ikiru koto ga dekinai*

*nagai yoru tada hitori
tōi michi tada hitori
ai nante kiyashinai
sō omō toki ni wa
omoidashite goran fuyu
yuki ni umorete-ite mo
tane wa haru ohi-sama no
ai de hana hiraku⁴³*

Endnotes

1. Translated by Yoel Hoffman in *Japanese Death Poems: Written by Zen Monks and Haiku Poets on the Verge of Death* (North Clarendon: Tuttle Publishing, 1986), 155.

2. Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Being Lost* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2006), 5.

3. Ibid., 6.

4. Ibid.

5. This is a quintessentially Japanese way of expressing something, an animistic way of looking at the world that has its root in Shintō. As Marie Mutsuki Mockett explains:

The world is alive. If you listen to Japanese, it is full of onomatopoeia. A fire does not just burn; it burns *kachi kachi*. Ice is not crunchy; it is *kori kori*. Glue is not just sticky; it is *beto beto*. As my three-year-old son works his way through Japanese children's books, he is learning a predictable array of cultural manners and customs, but he is also learning more than this. Everything has a face and a sound. Each of the Japanese letters he learns has eyes and a mouth. In the book titled *Ii Kimochi*, which I roughly translate as *Ah That Feels Nice*, by the Japanese children's author Gomi Tar, the shade of a building has a face; in the summer, when it is hot, one is grateful for how good the shade feels and one can thank the shade as one thanks a person.

Marie Mutsuki Mockett, *Where the Dead Pause, and the Japanese Say Goodbye: A Journey* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015), 63.

6. *Only Yesterday* has, in comparison with Studio Ghibli's other features, had an odd and limited history of availability. A major hit in Japan – it was the top-grossing Japanese film on the country's domestic market in its year of release (see the Motion Picture Producers Association of Japan for stats - <http://www.eiren.org/toukei/1991.html>) – it has perennially gone unreleased in the United States, and though it did eventually receive a DVD release in the United Kingdom, the film has never been dubbed into English. I actually saw the film on a new 35mm print, struck by Ghibli in Japan for a series of revival screenings of their work that toured the United States, before the film had even been released to Blu-Ray in its native country. It is not hard to understand why Disney, the worldwide distributor for Ghibli's films, has never bothered to release the film in the United States, for it is such a distinctly Japanese work, and so different from what Americans generally expect from animation, that it would be very difficult to market under the Disney banner. Changing licensing deals for Ghibli's films in the United States, however, have finally opened a window for *Only Yesterday* to receive a North American release. Independent distributor GKids – which hosted that revival Ghibli film series that toured in 2011 and 2012 – has begun

sublicensing recent Ghibli films that Disney has not known was to do with, including *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*, *From Up on Poppy Hill* (2011; Dir. Goro Miyazaki), and *When Marnie Was There* (2014; Dir. Hiromasa Yonabayashi), dubbing them into English in partnership with Ghibli's international division, and distributing them theatrically and on home video via Universal Pictures. Having carved a successful niche with these films, GKids announced in August of 2015 that they have acquired the rights to *Only Yesterday*, and shall be dubbing it and releasing it theatrically and on home video in 2016, which shall be the film's 25th anniversary. It is most definitely a case of better late than never, and will now leave *Ocean Waves* (1993; Dir. Tomomi Mochizuki) as the only Studio Ghibli film to never receive distribution in the United States. Carolyn Giardina, "GKIDS acquires Studio Ghibli's Animated 'Only Yesterday,'" *The Hollywood Reporter*, August 24, 2015, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/behind-screen/gkids-acquires-studio-ghiblis-animated-817099>.

7. Manga, or Japanese comics, are a foundational bedrock of Japanese popular culture, vastly more popular in the country's mainstream than comic books currently are in the United States. Almost always drawn in black-and-white, and frequently published in weekly or monthly anthologies like *Weekly Shonen Jump* or *Animage*, manga is, in many ways, the foundation for Japan's entire animation industry, as the vast majority of animated television shows, and many anime films, are based upon serialized manga. Hayao Miyazaki, for instance, has frequently returned to manga in between films, from the inconsistent 12-year serialization of *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1982-1994), to the shorter runs of *Hikōtei Jidai* and *Kaze Tachinu*, respectively published in Model Graphix in 1989 and 2009, which were later adapted into the films *Porco Rosso* (1992) and *The Wind Rises* (2013).

8. Hayao Miyazaki, "Descendent of a Giant Sloth," in *Starting Point: 1979 – 1996*, trans. Beth Cary and Frederik L. Schodt (San Francisco: Viz Media, 2009), 202-3.

9. While *Only Yesterday* was released in 1991, the 'present-day' scenes are set in 1982; likely apropos of the intent to keep the memories rooted in the 1960s, without aging adult Taeko out of her twenties, the slight remove from the present also allows some of the film's social and cultural conversations regarding farming and agriculture to be framed with a certain amount of hindsight and distance.

10. All dialogue from *Only Yesterday* is quoted from the English-language subtitle track on the 2012 "Studio Ghibli ga ippai (Collection)" Japanese Blu-Ray release, translator uncredited. Minor adjustments have been made here and there, and the original Japanese has been substituted for the Blu-Ray's translations in a few key spots.

11. Solnit, *A Field Guide*, 30.

12. Ibid., 29.

14. Ibid., 30.

14. Communal baths and hot springs are a major part of Japanese culture, even to this day. As Marie Mutsuki

Mockett explains:

Japan's location right on the Pacific fault makes it prone to earthquakes, but this seismic activity also means that the country is awash with hot springs, which the Japanese call *onsen*. These hot springs are said to have great healing powers. In Japan, whole hospitals are set up alongside *onsen*, so patients can bathe daily as part of their therapy. A Japanese bath expert may even mix the waters of different hot springs so the bath contains a precise balance of minerals. The Japanese consider themselves *onsen* connoisseurs, and whole conversations can revolve around the very best bath one has ever experienced.

Mockett, *Where the Dead Pause*, 49

15. Though Japan was in the midst of its major economic boom in the 1960s, eating a real pineapple – a fruit not indigenous to Japan, and therefore requiring importation – would still have been a highly rare occurrence for a typical Japanese family of the period. The Yen to Dollar ratio during the decade, as a point of reference, was 360:1, making an imported item like a pineapple a prohibitively expensive item for most.

16. Rebecca Solnit, *The Faraway Nearby* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2013), 25.

17. The safflowers are, in fact, the reason Takahata and company chose Yamagata as the setting for the film, as explained by producer Toshio Suzuki in the documentary *The Artist Who Made Totoro's Forest*. “[Background artist Kazuo Oga] is actually a native of Akita. So Takahata wanted to use Akita as the setting. But to drive the story, we needed to find a special local product. Something distinctive that would work for animation. We did a lot of research and discovered Yamagata's safflowers. Akita didn't have anything to rival that. So Takahata set the story in Yamagata.”

18. The ‘family tree’ of Taeko relations in Yamagata, and her relationship to them, is a little confusing to gather at first. They are, essentially, Taeko's in-laws, as Toshio's brother (who lives in Tokyo) married Taeko's sister; when Taeko is on the phone with her sister, early in the film, she mentions how exciting it is to finally have relatives out in the country, and this is why – her city-oriented sister married into the family, but Taeko winds up being the beneficiary of the familial connection.

19. Hoffman, *Japanese Death Poems*, 38-9.

20. Mockett, *Where the Dead Pause*, 61-2.

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21. Colin Odell and Michelle Le Blanc, *Studio Ghibli: The Films of Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata*, 2nd ed., (Harpender: Oldcastle Books, 2015), Kindle Locations 85-86.
22. Solnit, *A Field Guide*, 29-30.
23. Matthew Weiner and Robin Veith, "The Wheel," *Mad Men*, season 1, episode 13, directed by Matthew Weiner, aired October 18, 2007 (Burbank, CA; Lionsgate Home Video, 2008), Blu-Ray.
24. As Don Draper himself comes to realize, when he ventures home shortly after the pitch meeting, hoping to make amends with the wife and children whose pictures he had running through the projector during the meeting, and finds they have already departed on a family vacation without him. When one puts all their hope in nostalgia, there is no such thing as 'going home' again.
25. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 41. Given the topic of this study, it is probably relevant to note that Svetlana Boym passed away on August 5th, 2015, during the writing of this thesis. A prolific writer, of plays and novels and philosophy alike, in addition to an artist who worked in multiple fields, and a Professor who taught in multiple subjects, hers was a remarkable mind. Boym passed away at the age of 56 "after a year-long struggle with cancer." "In Memoriam: Professor Svetlana Boym," *Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, Harvard University*, August 6, 2015, <http://slavic.fas.harvard.edu/news/memoriam-professor-svetlana-boym>.
26. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 41.
27. Ibid., 49.
28. Odell and Le Blanc, *Studio Ghibli*, Kindle Locations 1132-1133.
29. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 49.
30. Ibid., 50.
31. Solnit, *The Faraway Nearby*, 12.
32. Those scenes are discussed in detail a little later, but the general idea – that popular culture can become a soundtrack to one's memories – is actually an idea Boym writes about as well. A major component of reflective nostalgia is "cultural memory," the common signifiers of a community or culture informing an individual's sense of memory and nostalgia. The television show Taeko watches, *Hyokkori Hyotanajima*, would be a prime candidate to exist on the canvas of reflective nostalgia.

33. Stated in *The Artist Who Made Totoro's Forest*.

34. Ibid.

35. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 50.

36. Taeko's fractions story even inspires Toshio to consider his own philosophy on farming, and to extend her story of feeling different to the entire struggle between the rural and the urban. "We farmers give up too easily," he proselytizes. "We just yield to the flow and follow what they do in the cities. Let's rethink the real meaning of prosperity. Return to the old ways of farming!" Taeko is impressed and taken aback – but Toshio laughs and notes that he is just quoting his friend. Still, the principle – that just because something is popular, does not mean it is right, for the individual or the community – is at the heart of what *Only Yesterday* is about.

37. This show was entirely real, and aired in Japan from 1964 to 1969 on NHK (*Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai*, or *Japan Broadcasting Corporation*), which is Japan's national public broadcasting organization (analogous to the BBC or PBS). The program was extremely popular, and would be a major cultural touchstone to a person of Taeko's age.

38. Solnit, *A Field Guide*, 108-9.

39. In *romaji*: Watashi ga, watshi ni naru tameni jinsei no shippai mo hitsuyou deshita.

40. Mockett, *Where the Dead Pause*, 109.

41. Pema Chödrön, *The Places That Scare You* (Boston: Shambhala, 2005), 4.

42. Ibid., 8-9.

43. Translated by Theresa Martin, for the Studio Ghibli wiki at nausicaa.net. Accessed October 16, 2015.

http://www.nausicaa.net/w/images/2/23/Opp_lyrics_ending_jis.txt

Interlude: *Words of Farewell*

*Though I tarry on the road
my master took, above us glows
one moon*

*Shi ni shibashi
okurete mo michi no
tsuki onaji*

Isaibo, 1780¹

On the morning my father passed, my mother shook me awake just a little after the sun had started to rise. He had already been gone for days, in mind and in spirit, and I had gone to sleep thinking his body may have finally parted in the night. It had not happened yet, but my mother whispered gently that it was about to, and asked if I wanted to be there for the end.

When I entered his bedroom, transformed by the hospice care into a largely unrecognizable medical space, my father's breathing was slow and haggard, strained as though a part of him were trying to escape. My younger brother was sitting on his right-hand side, and my mother went to take a seat next to him. I sat on the left, and gripped my father's hand in mine. It was a surprisingly peaceful morning. The sky outside was clear, and the rising sun bathed the Rocky Mountains in a beautiful carpet of light. Were my father's eyes still open, he would have enjoyed the sight.

¹ Translated by Yoel Hoffman in *Japanese Death Poems: Written by Zen Monks and Haiku Poets on the Verge of Death* (North Clarendon: Tuttle Publishing, 1986), 197-8.

How long it took before his breathing stopped completely, and his body settled into that nebulous state we call death, I do not know. We each took turns speaking to him, soft reassurances that we hoped might reach him, were any part of him still awake and able to hear it. His favorite Bible was there, resting beside his bed; a Lutheran pastor, my father owned countless Bibles, but this was the one he had used many years ago in the Seminary. My mother had, only a year or two before, had it restored, as the binding had long since deteriorated. Now, as his breathing and heartbeat slowed once again, I gripped it in my hands, flipping through the well-trodden pages, glimpsing all the many notes he had left throughout the text, until I fell on the page I knew I needed to read from. My father's favorite Psalm was 121, 'A Song of Ascents.' We had all read it many times in the past few days. Now, I read it aloud, not for myself, but for him, just in case he could still hear it.

*I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?*

*My help comes from the Lord,
who made heaven and earth.*

*He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.*

*He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.*

*The Lord is your keeper;
the Lord is your shade at your right hand.*

*The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.*

*The Lord will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.*

*The Lord will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and forevermore.*

“I love you,” I whispered after finishing the Psalm, and kissed his hand. These were the final words I spoke to my father in life.

It was the best goodbye I could muster in the moment. Our actual goodbye, the most meaningful one, had come several nights earlier, on my father’s last evening of lucidity, before his mind and faculties departed so suddenly. I had sat at his bedside while he explained, in the plain and simple terms he always favored, that he had chosen to let go, and exit the world as peacefully as he could. It was something I already knew was coming, a truth I thought I had already internalized, but hearing the words come from his lips was overwhelming. I wept openly, hugging my father tightly, the pain I had been feeling during the many months we had spent together, preparing for this moment, bursting forth without control.

Yet somehow, in that moment, my father knew exactly what to say to calm me down. He patted me on the back, and in the raspy and weak voice he had developed in recent weeks, made an unexpected request. “Tell me about your life,” he said to me. “Tell me about your favorite moments of your life.”

And so I did, as coherently as I could. We spoke of family vacations, and of Christmas memories, and of fishing on Big Pine Lake. We spoke of the life we had shared in up to now. My father did not say much; these memories must have been alight inside of him for a long time. But it calmed me down, and more importantly, it made the toll of the following days, and of the following years, easier. Up until the end, my father put others before himself; in this case, whether he knew it or not, he spoke the words that saved my life, even when his was long since forfeit.

Earlier that year, on our final trip to Big Pine Lake, my father and I had made the first leg of the journey, from Colorado to Minnesota, on our own, just like we had the first time we went together, ten years prior. He told me many stories on that trip, and even took me for the first time to the seminary where he had studied, where he had written all those notes in that beloved Bible, and where, he confessed, he wished he might have stayed, the virtue of hindsight making him long for the life not lived as an academic.

He also told me the story of the day his own father had died, long before I was born. Walter Lack passed away at 59 from an aggressive form of colon cancer, but in my father's story, he was lucid right until the end. On the weekend Walter's life ended, he asked my father to bring all his leftover work to the hospital, and to help get all his affairs in order before the end. He too was a Lutheran pastor. My father did as requested, and brought the work Walter needed to complete to the hospital. Together, over the course of the weekend, they worked their way through it, and when they were done, Walter leaned back in bed, and made a final request of my father. "Please go and get your mother," he said. "It's time." And so my father did. A few hours later, Walter Lack passed.

I could sense that my father was equal parts haunted and inspired by the story of Walter's passing, impressed and intimidated by the dignity and formality with which Walter faced his departure. My father spent so much of his life trying to live in Walter's image, spending years in seminary, devoting large swaths of his life to the church, continuing family traditions created for Thanksgiving and for Christmas, and returning to Big Pine Lake every year, as he had done with Walter. That they both died at 59, of sudden and aggressive cancer, was a parallel that seemed preordained. I remember riding in the car with my father, on the week of his 58th birthday, as he reflected that Walter only made it one year further in age. And I know, that when his own time

came in another year, my father tried his best to live up to Walter's image of dying, just as he had always tried to honor Walter's image of living.

I wonder, with a sort of calm trepidation, if this pattern shall continue. My children shall never know their grandfather, just as I never knew mine; but I suspect they shall know him through me, as I grew to know Walter through David. And I know that when my own time comes, whether at 59 or a different age, I shall be dying in the image of a man I knew in my youth. It is the only way I will know how. In a sense, the story has already been written.



Chapter Three: *Memory of Life*

Inhabiting the transient plane in *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*

*How leisurely the cherry
blossoms bloom this year, unhurried
by their doom*

*Yururi saku
kotoshi no hana no
kakugo kana*

Kin'u, 1817¹

The primary promotional image for *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*, used on posters, books, DVD covers, and more throughout the film's Japanese and international release, depicts the eponymous heroine smiling in wonderment, her head arced towards the sky and her hands outstretched before her, as if receiving some sort of blessing. That blessing comes in the form of cherry blossom – or *sakura* – petals, which fall slowly around her, their light pink hue beautifully complementing the Princess' fine pink robe, which billows down from her arms and is decorated with simple illustrations of flowers in gentle red brushstrokes. One of the *sakura* petals drifts inches above her outstretched hands, and that joyous tension, the portrait of a moment just before

Kaguya-hime² shall feel the petal make contact with her flesh, makes the image not only eye-catching, but entrancing.

The sequence from which this image is drawn in the film itself is no less mesmerizing, and immerses the viewer in a sort of profound spiritual experience. Kaguya-hime, having spent months sequestered in the new mansion her father has built for her, finally has an opportunity to venture back out into the world, and requests she be taken to see the *sakura* blossom. On the journey, which takes her away from the capital and back out into the countryside from which she was born, the bold and breathtaking colors of the natural world – the kinds a stuffy royal estate cannot provide – are reintroduced to her in force. In one shot, her oxen-pulled carriage pierces through a landscape replete with yellows and pinks and all manner of greens, with rice paddy fields, endless expanses of flowers, and distant forested mountains that blur into lilac, the watercolor strokes used to illustrate them spilling out across the shaky pencil boundaries that mark their physical being to meld with the light blue tone of the sky above.

As Kaguya-hime and her companions travel further along the country path, those mountains and hills come closer and closer into focus, and the number of cherry blossom trees upon them seem to cause gentle explosions of pink and white, bursting powerfully amidst the greens and purples. Finally, Kaguya-hime spots a particularly intoxicating sight, and stops the carriage to run frantically up the nearest hill, following the trail to an enormous *sakura* tree so thickly covered in blossoms that the bark of the trunk beneath is barely visible. These blossoms are in the late stages of life, either ready to fall or starting to fall, and in addition to the general tones of white and pink, their tips are tinted with a soft, striking orange.

Kaguya-hime rushes up towards it, her pink and red robes billowing all about her, as the little petals drift down from above. She takes a brief moment to pause – “How wonderful!”³ – and her face bursts into unrestrained happiness. She runs under the trees branches, where the green earth is blanketed in small patches of fallen petals, and opens her arms wide, spinning in slow circles beneath the tree as petals rain softly upon her. Laughing, gesturing her arms up towards the tree and back into a wide, open arc, it is though she has lost control of her body, and simply become a part of the natural dance performed by those wafting petals. With their orange-red tips and clustered patches of vibrant color, the tree’s blossom-covered branches look like an extension of Kaguya-hime’s flower-adorned robe, and the more she frolics, the more her visual being seems to meld with that of the tree’s. In some shots, as Kaguya-hime spins faster and faster, her inky black hair tossing about in harmony with all the other dark, sketchy pencil lines used to evoke the tree and petals and Kaguya-hime herself, it is difficult to distinguish where the Princess ends and the *sakura* tree begins.



The moment is a visceral, infectiously celebratory illustration of what Yoel Hoffman means when he writes that viewing the cherry blossoms is, for the Japanese, “an act of worship,”⁴ or what Marie Mutsuki Mockett stresses when she bemusedly remarks: “How the Japanese love their trees, the cherry tree in particular.”⁵ Any casual student of Japanese culture will be familiar with the nation’s love for the *sakura*, for there are many thousands of the trees throughout Japan, planted everywhere from roadsides to the front steps of office buildings, and citizens both young and old anticipate and rejoice at their blossoming with a universal fervor that is largely without analogue in the West (football, however popular, carries no element of existential wonder). Families and groups get together to gaze upon the cherry blossoms at all hours of the day and night, and there are all sorts of festivals and parties thrown in the trees’ honor, a set of customs known as *hanami* (literally “flower viewing”).⁶

The country’s love for cherry blossoms may seem obsessive, but the fanaticism is not without merit. When a *sakura* blooms, it lives only for a short time, its beauty peaking in just two weeks, and its petals falling to earth shortly thereafter.⁷ There is only a brief period in which the blossoms can be celebrated; even the most devoted *sakura* aficionados, who follow the wave of cherry trees as they blossom across Japan, from the island of Kyūshū to the south in January, all the way to northern Hokkaido in May, only have a few months to obsess.⁸ The life of the *sakura* is startlingly brief, and yet within that time, year after year, it affects so many, bringing the joy and hope of springtime to an entire nation.

Most importantly, the *sakura* serves as one of nature’s great metaphors, a lesson in transience we are taught year in and year out. As Homaro Cantu succinctly puts it, “the cherry blossom represents the fragility and the beauty of life. It’s a reminder that life is almost overwhelmingly beautiful but that it is also tragically short.”⁹ Like any meaningful form of

worship, gazing upon the *sakura* connects a person to something larger, to a sense of the ebb and flow of life – to the knowledge that beauty only comes from that which is fleeting, and that life only matters because there is death.

Little wonder, then, that Isao Takahata would choose the *sakura* as a central image in *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*, for in the being of the cherry tree is written the central philosophical conflict upon which the film is built. Takahata has denied that *Kaguya* was made with the intention of serving as his ‘final’ film, and scoffed at the notion of expressly retiring from filmmaking in the way Hayao Miyazaki did after the release of *The Wind Rises* the same year.¹⁰ Yet the film nevertheless feels like a work of powerful culmination, the result of a filmmaker rich in wisdom and in age (Takahata was 78 at the time of the film’s release), who has explored loss and transience in many varied forms, gazing out upon life and forward towards death, and attempting to find whatever core of meaning may be identifiable in the cycle of impermanence human beings face. When I saw the film for the first time, I wrote that it struck me as “an ambitious attempt to explore life, death, and everything in between, to probe at certain underlying mysteries about the human experience and draw conclusions about what it means to be alive on this earth.”¹¹ It was the most coherent sentence I could muster about a film whose thematic density and ambition is perhaps unparalleled in the realm of commercial animation, a simple story told with such insight and passion that its lessons seem to reorient the perspective and priorities of the viewer each time it is watched. Only time can ultimately determine whether or not *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* is to be the final work from Isao Takahata, but if it is, it shall be an unspeakably poetic end to one of contemporary world cinema’s finest careers. Few filmmakers have traced emotions as all-encompassing as loss with the sensitivity of Takahata;

fewer still have come as close as he does here to answering the greatest existential questions we, as human beings, can reasonably ask.

The film is based on Japan's oldest work of prose fiction, *Taketori Monogatari* (*The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*), originally written in the early Heian era (9th-10th century),¹² and which has been transformed and simplified over time as a work of verbal fairy tale and folklore.

Takahata's film follows the same general narrative arc found in most tellings of the story – the discovery of the little princess in the bamboo grove, the courtship by the five royal suitors, the encounter with the emperor, and the return to the moon from which Kaguya-hime descended – and yet in many ways, the film feels less like a traditional 'adaptation' than it does an interrogation and expansion of the story's cultural and thematic roots. As Takahata himself explains:

My intent was to take up the challenge of reviving in our time The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter, written at the end of the 9th century, a story familiar to all Japanese from children to adults. The original has the appeal of containing aspects that are enigmatic or amusing which are contradictory. But the tale is impossible to comprehend and the feelings of The Princess Kaguya, the main character, are totally unfathomable. My aspiration was to recreate the story into one that is understandable and to turn it into a film that allows us to identify with The Princess Kaguya's feelings without changing the surface plot line and episodes of the original story.¹³

Returning to the original prose version of the tale, Takahata's observations are immediately apparent. Kaguya-hime may be the central figure in the story, the cause and motivator of all the narrative action, but her perspective is kept mysterious and distant. The arc of the eponymous bamboo cutter is more directly foregrounded, and the lessons learned by the other male characters – the five royal suitors and the emperor – form the majority of the story's substance. It is, in essence, a narrative about ordinary humans encountering a celestial being, and the effect that encounter with the divine has on each of them. The key turn, for Isao Takahata, is to move

the story in the other direction, telling it from the inside out as an exploration of Kaguya-hime's thoughts and feelings as she is brought to, and eventually taken away from, the planet earth, in a symbolic arc of birth and death. In so doing, he not only reconfigures the story's perspective and themes – telling it through a lens that is inherently feminist, and inherently critical of 'traditional' male-oriented power structures – but opens up the latent complexities of the original text for a broader, more directly relatable spectrum of existential meditation.

It is, for this reason, a powerfully thought-provoking work, for both the audience and those who worked on the picture. In August of 2011, at the first cast read-through of the script (like *Only Yesterday*, voices were pre-dubbed for *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*), veteran actor Takeo Chii, who voices the bamboo cutter, found himself struggling with the complexities of the story. As depicted in the documentary *Isao Takahata and his Tale of the Princess Kaguya*, Chii, after several attempts to find the right tone and delivery for his character, asked Takahata to explain his thoughts on the philosophical complexities of the story:

Chii: *Reading this story at my age, I wonder. Why, after she's come here, does she suddenly go back to the moon? Is this some kind of a warning against the kind of base desires we harbor here on earth?*

Takahata: *Oh dear!* (Laughs)

Chii: *Does it affirm the earth, or put the earth down?*

Takahata: *Well...the intention is that life on earth is good. The earth is good, and she's come all the way here and then she has to go back. It affirms the earth, but kind of in a reverse way. She comes to the earth, but she doesn't appreciate it, and she has to leave. She regrets that bitterly.*¹⁴

Takahata is speaking succinctly and spontaneously, but he nevertheless captures the essence of what his film identifies and alters in the original story. As the scholar Naoto Kojima argues, *Taketori Monogatari* is built on an opposition between the lunar and human worlds, the

former described by Kaguya-hime as a place free of age or worries, and from which she is banished to the transient plane of earth for committing an unknown sin.¹⁵ The one major element from the original story that Takahata elides is the ending, in which, after Kaguya-hime has returned to the moon, the emperor, still smitten with her, finds an elixir of immortality she left behind as a keepsake. He chooses not to use it, however, and orders an ambassador to burn the elixir atop Mount Fuji, creating an everlasting plume of smoke that reaches towards the heavens. In true folkloric fashion, this closing image uses a sight from the natural world – smoke on Mount Fuji – and transforms it into a symbol of the story’s themes, the heaven-bound smoke serving as a reminder of our mortality, and of the distance between our world and the immortal plane. In this way, Kaguya-hime is aligned with the smoke, a symbol of a dimension human beings cannot access, the tension between our world and hers lending the story its power and intrigue.

Read traditionally, Chii’s analysis – that Kaguya-hime must leave earth because of the ‘base desires’ harbored here – has merit, and one understands his point of confusion with Takahata’s altered perspective. For in Takahata’s film, the primary tension lies not between two planes of existence – the lunar and the earthly – but between spaces human beings themselves create, and through the everyday choices we make – either personally as a result of social and cultural structures – to shut out or ignore the wonders of the natural world around us. In Takahata’s vision, Kaguya-hime is not so much a being torn between two dimensions as she is one caught between two earthly identities: The ‘natural’ one she discovers in her childhood home in the country, where her friends give her the nickname *Takenoko* (‘bamboo shoot’), and the ‘royal’ one that is thrust upon her in the capital, where she is elevated and bowed to and called *Hime-sama* (an honorific way of addressing a Princess).¹⁶

The film's entire first half-hour, largely an invention of Takahata's, is a testament to this shift in perspective. Where traditional versions of the story introduce Kaguya-hime as 'royal' or 'divine,' vaunting her 'magical' status from the very beginning, Takahata is careful to let us know her as a relatively normal little girl first. Sanuki no Miyatsuko may find her in the bamboo stalk clothed in heavenly garb, but she quickly transforms into a naked infant, gifted, in Takahata's view, with recognizable emotions like hunger, sadness, and joy. She rolls and crawls on the ground, curious and excitable; she laughs and smiles, but also cries and moans. And like all children, she harbors an excitement for the unknown, an enthusiasm for discovery that is bolstered by the natural surroundings of her remote rural home.

The young Kaguya-hime – or, should we say, *Takenoko* – is defined by her connection to the natural world, symbolically linked from the start with the natural cycles observed in the countryside. When we first see her clothed, as a baby, rolling on the ground and smiling inside her adoptive parents' home, Takahata cuts outdoors, to images of flowers coming into bloom, bursting with the beauty of new life on a warm spring day. And as she grows, that connection becomes increasingly conscious. She plays in the hills and valleys of the country with her friends, and is always seeking out new sights and sensations, singing with her fellow children this celebratory song of life:

*Round, round, go round
Waterwheel, go round
Go round, and call Mr. Sun
Go round, and call Mr. Sun
Birds, bugs, beasts
Grass, trees, flowers
Bring spring and summer, fall and winter
Bring spring and summer, fall and winter*

*maware maware maware yo
mizuguruma maware
mawatte ohi-san yonde koi
mawatte ohi-san yonde koi
tori, mushi, kemono
kusa, ki, hana
haru natsu aki fuyu tsurete koi
haru natsu aki fuyu tsurete koi*

Takenoko knows this song instinctually, even though it has never been taught to her, and as she and her friends march through the hills singing it together, over rivers and amidst the fruit and foliage and trees, she even continues into another verse her friends do not know.

*Go round, come round, come round
Come round, O distant time
Come round, call back my heart
Come round, call back my heart
Birds, bugs, beasts
Grass, trees, flowers
Teach me how to feel
If I hear that you pine for me
I will return to you*

*Maware megure megure yo
haru kana toki yo
megutte kokoro o yobikaese
megutte kokoro o yobikaese
tori, mushi, kemono
kusa, ki, hana
hito no nasake o hagukumite
matsukoshi kika wa
ima kaeri komu*

As Takenoko sings this, she walks slowly at the head of the group, as if in a sort of trance, until she stops at the edge of the hill, looking out into a vast valley below, and on towards the turquoise mountains that fade into the white edges of the animated canvas. Her voice, untrained but hauntingly beautiful, sings these words as though they come from some place deep inside her, or from some place deep within the earth from which she draws their substance. And when the final line has been sung, her eyes well up with tears; as one begins to run down her face, she realizes she does not know why she feels this way.



What Takenoko senses, in that moment, is an experience of purest wonder – for the natural world, for the life she has been given, for all that she has sensed and shall one day sense living on this mortal plane. It is the kind of wonder R.W. Hepburn, an expert thinker on the subject, would approve of as constituting the most secure and honest sense of rapture one may feel. He writes:

The finally secure object of wonder is the *totality* of laws and entities, the world as a whole. Explanation runs *towards* the totality, but there absolutely ends ... ‘Aesthetically,’ Wittgenstein wrote, ‘the miracle (*das Wunder*) is that the world exists. That what exists does exist.’ We can give no reason for the world’s being rather than not being. We can meaningfully ask why it exists, but we have no resources for answering the question.

Wonder is generated from this sense of absolute contingency; its object the sheer existence of a world. I shall call it ‘existential wonder.’ All reasons fall away: wondering is not a prelude to fuller knowledge, though the generalized interrogative attitude may persist.¹⁷

A story like *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* is of course predicated in basic forms of wonder, for its starting point is the heavenly delivery of a divine child within a bamboo stalk. The film’s narration even tells us, when Sanuki no Miyatsuko first sees the shining bamboo stalk, that he drew closer to it “in wonder.”¹⁸ But Takahata, like Hepburn, is less interested in fantastical forms of wonder – surprise at ‘magical’ experiences that have no possible explanation – than in the wonder felt in everyday scenarios, the kind of stupor and astonishment that can overtake us even when the object of our wonder is something we can readily explain. The beauty

of the natural world, after all, is not outside the boundaries of scientific understanding. From the hill where Takenoko sings, nothing glimpsed is an impossibility; the trees thrive from rich soil and photosynthesis, the mountains exist from eons of shifting tectonic plates, and their dynamic color is granted by the interplay of light and distance. But understanding, in Hepburn's view, need not necessarily be an impediment to wonder. The amazement one might feel standing in Takenoko's position, looking out at such a lovely landscape, may come, as Hepburn describes it, from the existence of such a sight striking us "as a gift, undeserved," something greater and richer than we can fathom getting to be a part of.¹⁹ Or, as he suggests above, it may come from the totality of all these things – from the trees, grass, and flowers, the birds and bugs and beasts and everything else listed in Takenoko's song. Wonder is dynamic that way; fluid, even. It is sensed in totality, but also in the minutiae. As Hepburn explains:

Suppose I accept that the world as a whole is the 'finally secure' object of wonder. I may reflect that it need not be judged the *sole* appropriate object. For what is that totality but the constituents that compose it? To direct wonder at the universe must be in practice to direct it at the parts – any or all of them. If the world's existence is the basic wonder-generating fact, there is no good reason after all why that existential wonder would seem threatened by the network of causal relationships among the world's constituents.²⁰

This is a very Eastern way of looking at things, not dissimilar to the Shinto-inspired experiences Taeko Okajima has in *Only Yesterday*, where working on a farm, surrounded by endless plants and animals, becomes a powerfully spiritual experience. So too is it reminiscent of Seita and Setsuko, escaping from the horror of their war-torn lives in *Grave of the Fireflies*, taking comfort and courage in their secluded lakeside cave and the many plants, animals, and insects – fireflies especially – that live there. These experiences blur conventional lines of 'wonder' and 'spirituality,' and when Takahata evokes one, he is also calling forth the other, drawing our

attention to the overwhelming power that can be drawn from the world in which we live – from the simple act of being human, and living on this earth.

This is why the shift in perspective from the original story is so key to the substance of *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*. In the folk tale, the wonder comes from ordinary humans encountering an impossible being; in Takahata's rendering, wonder is experienced *by* an impossible being, who feels it by coming into contact with the everyday sights we perhaps take for granted. To Takahata, she is not a gift to this world so much as this world is a gift unto her, as it is unto all of us fortunate enough to live and die on this planet.

Thus, when Takahata's film moves into the more familiar territory of the original folk tale – when the bamboo cutter begins finding gold and silks in the forest, and constructs an elaborate mansion for his daughter, and elevates her to the status of 'Princess' – the narrative takes on an air of tragedy. Where Takenoko felt so much joy simply living amidst nature, experiencing friendship and play and other pure joys of human life, Kaguya-hime's vaunted existence in the capital offers no such room for wonder. Her father means well, conditioned as he is by the world's social structure to think that gold, fine clothes, and an extravagant house equate to a better, happier life. But although his many gifts please Kaguya-hime at first – she is overjoyed, for instance, upon first discovering the rainbow-like assortment of silks laid out for her – these are not what Hepburn would call 'secure' objects of wonder. "Wonder," he writes, "does not see its objects possessively; they remain 'other' and unmastered."²¹ Objects of human creation, imbued with arbitrary significance, are not 'wonderful.' And as the days and months go by, and Kaguya-hime's life becomes bound by those fine silks and that extravagant home, wonder is gradually drained from her life; along with it go the film's vibrant colors, replaced by the interior palette of browns and greys. Kaguya-hime lives as a Princess, and is instructed in the

ways of living like a Princess, but for Takahata, the core question is obvious: Is the life of a Princess any life at all?

Think of how different a connotation the word ‘Princess’ might carry in American culture were American children shown *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* at a young age, rather than Disney’s *Cinderella* (1950) or *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). Our media teaches us – young girls especially – that the life of royalty is a glamorous and desirable way to live, an escape from unhappiness in which all is provided for, and against which there are no greater aspirations. But is there any logic, intuitive or otherwise, to thinking this way? I imagine a child, watching *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*, would be enraptured by those early scenes in the countryside, would identify strongly with all the children laughing and playing in the hills and forests, and would feel instinctively saddened the moment Kaguya-hime enters her palace, and is shut off from that space of play and joy. They would come to think of this royal life, as Kaguya-hime does, as something limiting, a world of strict rules and predetermined customs, in which the individual ceases to be a person, and instead becomes an object, there to be viewed, celebrated, and critiqued only by others. They would finish the film desiring not to dress up as a Princess, or dream for a Prince or Fairy Godmother to come sweep them away, but to leave the television room and go play outdoors, perhaps with their friends, to revel in all that has been granted to them as an ordinary human being. And those children would, I think it is safe to say, be lucky for the experience.²²

Kaguya-hime, however, has no such recourse. In this world of ritual and nobility, the closest she can come to feeling the wonder that once gave her life meaning lies in the little garden her mother has started, at the furthest edge of the mountain, where crouching in the dirt, and uncovering a small number of bugs crawling beneath a rock, prompts a small, wistful smile.

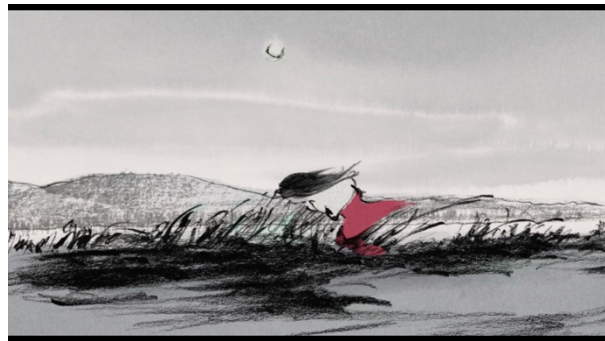
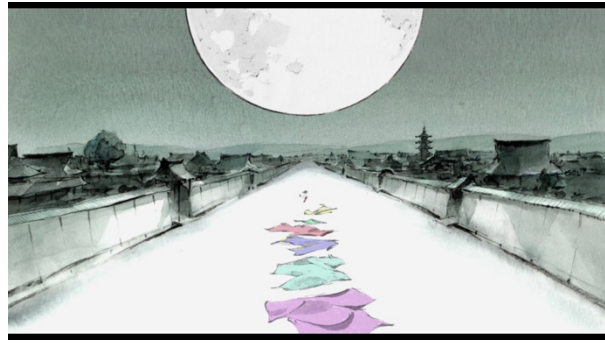
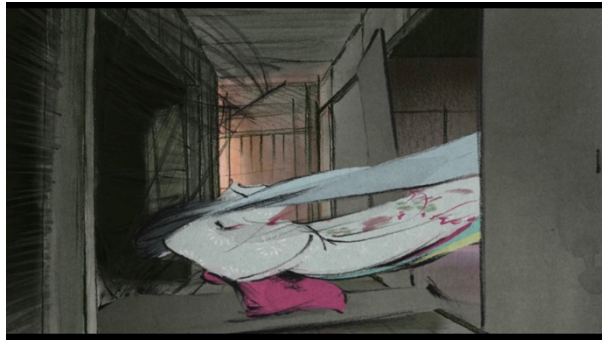
“*Tori, mushi, kemono,*” she sings softly, crouching in the earth, but framed by the restrictive brown walls of the estate. “*Kusa, ki, hana...*” Her mother steps out into the garden, and Kaguya-hime asks if she can use the garden to plant things she likes – to reclaim, in some small way, that which she has lost moving away from the countryside. “Why, of course you can,” her mother replies, smiling warmly. Kaguya-hime embraces her, and Takahata lingers on their hug, zooming in slowly until their quiet, contented faces fill the screen.

Wonder – and the emotions through which we experience it, like love – can exist anywhere, as Takahata’s films – *Grave of the Fireflies* in particular – have taught us. But for Kaguya-hime, neither that little garden nor her mother’s warm embrace is quite enough, and when the day of her coming-of-age banquet arrives, the weight of just how much she has lost, shedding *Takenoko* and becoming *Kaguya-hime*, bears down on her with full force. For three days and nights, she sits behind a veil in silence, while noblemen from far and wide eat and drink and celebrate around her. They do not even celebrate *for* her, it seems, but for the *idea* of her, for the promise of the beautiful Princess who supposedly sits behind that prison-like curtain. And when she hears, listening in on the men’s conversation, that they doubt whether or not she is even a ‘real’ Princess – that this identity which has been thrust upon her, and which has robbed her of so much of herself, may be false – this constricted life becomes too much to bear.

A single, ominous piano note rings out on the soundtrack. As it echoes away, Kaguya-hime’s astonished face seems as though it is about to shake apart, the rough, thick pencil-lines of her jaw, mouth, eyebrows, and hair dancing in fright and astonishment. All of a sudden, her face breaks into anguish, and her hands smash the small tea-tray she holds into pieces. She rises, and in a series of quick, violent cuts breaks through the walls of the mansion, as the film’s already sketch-bound visual style breaks further and further into abstraction. The dark graphite texture of

the walls and of Kaguya-hime's hair are drawn fiercely, angrily even, as though one can feel the animator's hand slashing viciously upon the canvas, the boundaries of the architecture and of Kaguya-hime's flowing robes shaking and pulsating so rapidly it looks as though the entire image might burst into pieces at any moment.

We have been aesthetically plunged into the depths of Kaguya-hime's heart; as she feels the world crumble around her, the image, already so very tactile and fragile, starts to break at every seam. She runs, as hard and as fast as she can, shedding one colorful robe after another, dozens of them in an endless line, as she rushes out from the estate and through the dark, hazy capital, towards a moon which looms so large in the green-grey sky it looks as though it is about to crash to earth. Her face determined, furious even, she runs like a specter in the night, through fields and past a lake, the image disintegrating further and further until the only color left is the red of Kaguya-hime's dress, the world around her a dark and terrifying assortment of thick black lines and half-complete graphite smudges. Eventually, the music drops out as well – and all that is left is the Princess, rushing through a blurry sketch that looks only a little like a forest, her rapid footsteps the only soundtrack, the repetitive running in this abstract space growing increasingly haunting with each passing second.



This is not the first instance of running as a motif in Takahata's work, though it is certainly the most visually striking. Just as Seita runs when he hears of Japan's surrender and his father's likely death, or as Taeko runs from the train and back towards Yamagata, Kaguya-hime runs when her emotions overwhelm her, her entire being possessed by feelings so strong they cannot be denied, but so complex they remain incomprehensible. All these characters can do, in these moments of heightened, formative emotional awakening, is to flee, their bodies working on instinct, their minds moving towards states of nothingness as powerful feelings envelop them. All who have lost have likely experienced something similar, whether the running be literal or figurative. The flight in *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* is gripping not only because it is aesthetically radical, but because in watching the world fall apart before our eyes, the representation of the experience feels painfully, powerfully honest.

Kaguya-hime eventually arrives at an intuitive destination, back in the fields and hills of her original countryside home. The film's visuals have reformed into their standard self, but nothing is quite recognizable. Kaguya-hime is ragged, her clothes frayed and torn, her hair wild and unkempt. The countryside is cold and desolate, a sea of dark, sad blues utterly devoid of life. A new family, impoverished and mistrustful, lives in her childhood home. And from a bitter old man, she learns all her friends have gone, abandoning their homes after the soil grew barren. Like Seita and Taeko before her, Kaguya-hime learns that once a home is lost, it can never truly be reclaimed. She walks away, slowly and sadly, while snow falls thickly around her, blanketing the landscape in white.



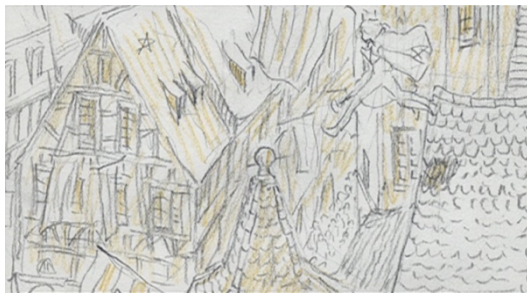
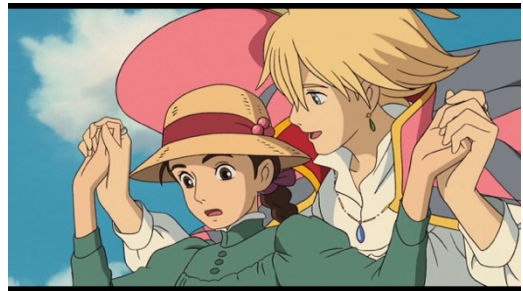
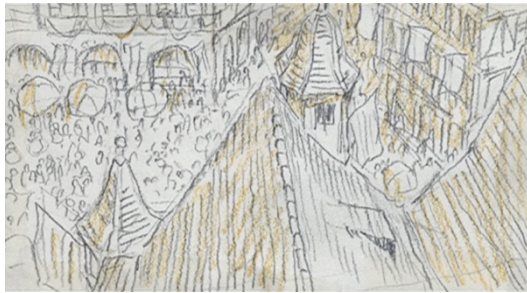
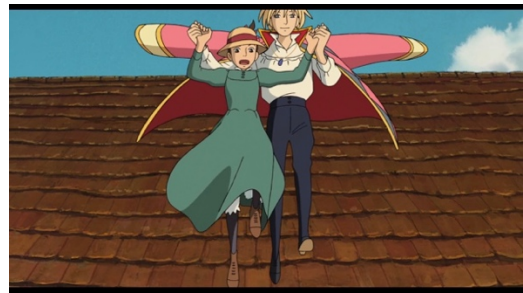
The experience turns out to be ‘only’ a dream, as she awakens back behind that restrictive curtain in the mansion, but that these emotions were sensed and felt – whether from deep in her subconscious or from some higher form of cosmic intuition – makes the sequence every bit as crushing as reality. A horrible sense of resignation settles in, as Kaguya-hime finally gives in to

this ‘royal’ life, and allows her eyebrows to be plucked, her face painted, and her demeanor sobered. She devotes herself entirely to her studies, and becomes the somber, stoic ‘Princess’ all expect her to be.

One day, her father brings an assortment of gifts from nobles and suitors throughout the land. The most notable is a little bird, flying about in a small green cage. The Princess glances at it stoically, and walks outside, into a bleak and colorless night, the cage in her arms. And in the grand tradition of similar metaphors, she opens the door of the cage, lets the bird perch on her finger, raises her arm, and allows it to fly away, upwards and off into the distant, empty horizon.

One of my favorite Studio Ghibli traditions is the company’s meticulous archiving of the original hand-drawn storyboards used in the production of each animated feature. Drawn by Hayao Miyazaki himself for his own films, and by lead animators on those directed by Isao Takahata, the storyboards – or *e-cont*, ‘Picture Continuity,’ in Japanese – these images are entrancing works of art in their own right. Drawn primarily with pencil, tone and shading suggested by a simple interplay of standard graphite and light brown color (though Miyazaki’s latter storyboards are illustrated, rather magnificently, with watercolors), the storyboards lay out the entire picture, shot by shot and movement by movement. Although much of what shall constitute the overall experience of the film has yet to exist – color, motion, music, dialogue, etc. – there is a raw passion behind these images, behind the sketchy pencil lines and hasty, improvisational shading, that is oddly transfixing. The Studio has gone to great lengths to preserve and disseminate the images; for instance, DVD and Blu-ray releases of their films present an alternate ‘storyboard’ version of the film, the finished soundtrack playing over a complete procession of the storyboards.

But I like the published book versions of the storyboards even more. Bound in handsome softcover editions, complete with a thick, illustrated dust jacket and an outer cardboard sleeve to house the volume, these books present the storyboards as they were originally created, on industry-standard draft sheets of five frames per page, with the illustrator's hand-written notes preserved in the margins. The greatest appeal of these storyboards, after all, is to come in closer contact with the raw creativity of the artist. Being able to hold them in one's hand, to touch the images and peruse them at one's leisure, is a remarkable gift. I have several of these volumes on a bookshelf near my desk, and on occasion, I will take one down and leaf through it, revisiting favorite sequences and minor moments alike, studying the sketches and gleaning inspiration from them. I have little doubt that Hayao Miyazaki, or distinguished animators like him, would probably laugh at this – those images are not finished! For him, they represent just one foundational step in the long and multifaceted process that is animation, and there are reasons why those pencil lines and sketchy shadings get erased and replaced with more 'formal' ink and paint in the 'finished' cels. But as an outsider looking in, one who does not draw but finds so much to be inspired by in the passion and effort behind those tactile lines, I flip through those books and find myself in wonder – the kind of wonder Hepburn would describe as astonishing at “the achievement of what ... is of high aesthetic value, perhaps at the complex formal integration of a symphonic movement, or at its vivifying initially unpromising materials.”²³



Storyboard comparison – Howl's Moving Castle (2004; Dir. Hayao Miyazaki)
Storyboards drawn by Hayao Miyazaki

Isao Takahata feels much the same way. “Maybe it’s because I don’t draw,” he ponders in the documentary *Isao Takahata and his Tale of the Princess Kaguya*. “When you’re drawing fast, there’s passion. With a carefully finished drawing, that passion gets lost. I think that’s a shame.” Having spent half a century in the animation industry, observing and overseeing every part of the process while also existing outside of it, Takahata is a director uniquely suited towards making such observations – and even more uniquely able, given his success and position within a prominent independent studio, to actualize those thoughts in cinematic form.

Takahata’s first attempt to completely break down the visual codes of industrial animation was his 1999 film *My Neighbors the Yamadas*, an adaptation of a popular Japanese comic strip. In order to properly honor the simple aesthetic qualities of the comic – and, in Takahata’s words, to get away from the restrictive properties of cel animation, which he felt “tired” of²⁴ – the film was visually radical, an extreme extension of the flashback sequences from *Only Yesterday*, with a great deal of empty space in the background, half-finished drawings or simple splashes of watercolor suggesting an image rather than literally evoking it. Characters, meanwhile, are drawn with rough pencil lines and animated like living sketches, the amount of color in their faces and clothing varying from shot to shot, their physical relation to the setting – or to reality itself – fungible and ever-changing. A warm and comedic ode to the contemporary Japanese family, *My Neighbors the Yamadas* is a breathtaking work, but it is also an aesthetically transitional one, created mostly with digital technology that offers a pleasing illusion of tactility, but does not go quite as far as one imagines Takahata desired. The film clearly presages the distinctive style of *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*, but it lacks the obviously hand-crafted, textured sensibility of its successor.²⁵



Images from My Neighbors the Yamadas (1999; Dir. Isao Takahata)

The problem is that creating a work that so utterly breaks the paradigms of industrial animation, within the very industry that is meticulously built to support a specific mode of production, is difficult, expensive, and dangerous. As Studio Ghibli producers Toshio Suzuki and Yoshiaki Nishimura explain:

Suzuki: Ghibli doesn't have the system to make the kind of movies Mr. Takahata wants to make.

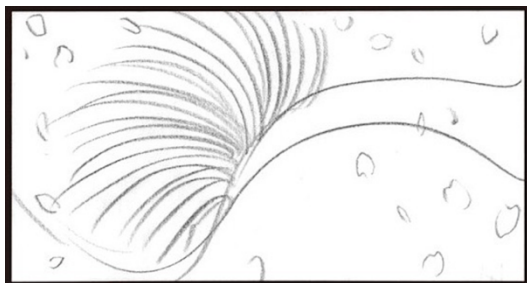
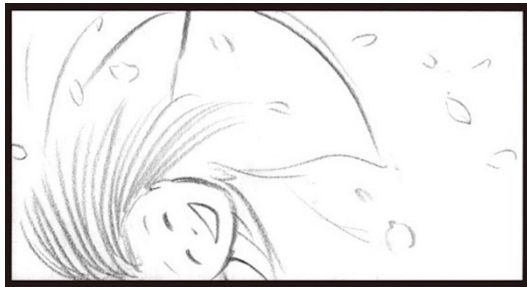
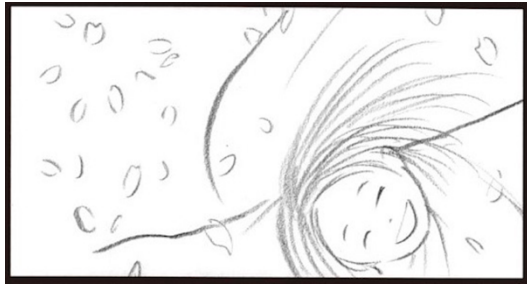
Nishimura: Cel animation has always been the foundation of Studio Ghibli. There are backgrounds, with characters placed against them. The system is set up for that.

Suzuki: If you want to break that, you need to set up a new system. The hard-and-fast qualities of Ghibli are of no use to him.

Nishimura: So when he set out to make Yamadas, some people simply had nothing to do ... The place fell apart. Then when it came time to make Spirited Away, Mr. Miyazaki saw how everyone was completely out of kilter. I'm told he swore they'd never make another film like that at Ghibli.²⁶

And for a very long time, they didn't – *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* came out a full fourteen years after *My Neighbors the Yamadas*, a long career gap for Takahata that was due in large part to his insistence on never again working within traditional cel animation. "If I didn't get a chance to do another one, I really didn't care," Takahata says of *Yamadas*, and the chance to try something new. "But if I ever did another one, it was definitely not going to be cel animation."²⁷ And when production finally began, it did not take place at Studio Ghibli itself, but

at an entirely new facility, several blocks away, where 80 freelance artists were hired to work on the project.²⁸ Many of them were challenged by Takahata's stated intent to keep the rough pencil sketches and unfinished lines of storyboards not just alive in the final product, but as the beating heart of the image. There exists in *Kaguya* a much closer relationship between the original storyboards – drawn by Takahata's longtime collaborator Osamu Tanabe – and the final key animation and completed images than is typical in Japanese animation. The lines of Tanabe's drawings were traced over lightly, and the 'clean-up' stage – a major part of the traditional production flow, in which pencil lines are erased and mistakes are fixed – was elided entirely. As animator Shigeru Kimishima explains, "we're supposed to leave the the stray lines and the rough lines and animate them."²⁹ Doing so was different and difficult for the experienced animation staff, and since many of the favored techniques were new or unpredictable – such as erratic, uncontrollable watercolors in place of more traditional, easy-to-work-with poster colors – production was largely driven by trial-and-error, leading to an unusually long production time and one of the largest budgets in the history of Japanese animation.³⁰



Storyboard comparison – The Tale of the Princess Kaguya (2013; Dir. Isao Takahata)
Storyboards drawn by Osamu Tanabe

This is perhaps the greatest example of why Isao Takahata is such a unique filmmaker, and why I prefer the analogy of a ‘conductor’ in considering his work rather than the old standby of the ‘auteur.’ No matter how many challenges were present in the film’s production, *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* is ultimately an aesthetically unified and powerful work, one that utilizes and highlights the individual creativity of so many different artists³¹ under one stylistic and thematic umbrella. A style that Takahata explains below, in his typically animated fashion, laughing and smiling enthusiastically the whole way through:

“Sketch-style” means it’s not a ‘finished’ picture. It’s just jotted down. It’s like we catch the sense of this girl right now, jot it down and there she is. Maybe with longer hair. (Laughs) But that’s what it’s like. That kind of picture. But that style is important. Fast pencil, interrupted lines, and areas the paint doesn’t reach. Incompleteness. Not all done up nicely, but catching that moment.³²

To capture the moment, with spontaneity and passion – this is why the visual style of *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* resonates so powerfully. There is such an immense sense of *texture* to every frame in the film, to those unrefined pencil lines that outline the characters and their surroundings, to the watercolors that flow dynamically through the backgrounds, to the underlying canvas whose tangible qualities are readily visible in all that empty space. Animation, in Japanese or Western form, is often so consumed with creating a complete ‘illusion,’ of either a literal reality or an internal reality, that we often wind up missing out on that complete sense of tactile palpability that is, in theory, the main attraction to the hand-crafted form. Or, put another way, it is something we do not know we were missing until we are confronted by it, as we are in *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*. Even subpar hand-drawn animation contains some of those qualities for enhanced identification I have spoken of, for the ways in which animation always mirrors the human processes of perception and memory. Yet *Kaguya*, in the ways it further abstracts and obfuscates beyond any conventional notions of what commercial animation should

look like, arguably achieves an even higher plane of emotional connection and identification, that texture giving the viewer so much to grasp onto, those empty or suggested spaces giving us so much room to imagine and project.

But while Takahata's definition of 'sketch-style' is undoubtedly new and radical within the realm of industrial animation, it harkens back to a very old visual tradition in Japanese culture, one which is so characteristic of Japanese ways of thinking that it seems somewhat surprising it took a major anime director this long to fully utilize it. Known as *wabi sabi*, the term represents one of those ideas that is both broadly complex and achingly identifiable. As Marie Mockett explains:

The simplest definition of *wabi sabi* is that it is a kind of beauty whose highest form is expressed through imperfection. The venerable art historian Miyeko Murase instructed her students to consider that a full moon glowing brightly in the sky is undeniably beautiful. But how much more beautiful is the moon when it is partially obscured by a bit of cloud? A geometrically symmetrical tea bowl is a lovely thing to drink from, but how cold and precise it looks beside an earthen tea bowl whose surface is slightly marred.³³

This notion of *wabi sabi* not only helps explain why the film may enact such power over the viewer – in those incomplete spaces and imperfect lines, it aims at inherent sensibility within our hearts and minds – but further elucidates the core theme of the film. As Takahata told Takeo Chii, the ultimate purpose of *Kaguya* was to affirm life on earth, with the suggestion that this includes all our worldly flaws and imperfections – that, to borrow Hepburn's terminology, life produces wonder because of its totality, and all its varied component parts, rather than in spite of it. Thus, just as with *wabi sabi* – a “beauty whose highest form is expressed through imperfection” – the aesthetic character of *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* is in and of itself an affirmation of life on earth, finding wonder within that which is rough and unfinished. And in this way, the film's visuals put us directly into the perspective of Kaguya-hime herself, allowing

us to rediscover the imperfect beauty of the lives we lead just as she is introduced to the wondrous ups and downs of transient human existence.

Mockett also draws a connection between the philosophy of *wabi sabi* and the Japanese love for cherry blossoms, writing:

The Japanese love the beauty of cherry blossoms in the spring. However, say the aesthetes, how much more beautiful are the cherry trees when they are just past their peak, and petals begin to drip-drop onto the ground.³⁴

I am reminded forcibly of Kaguya-hime, dancing and spinning beneath the colossal *sakura* tree, its petals falling like snow about her, the tips of the branches tinted red in decay. It is significant not only that Kaguya-hime celebrates this moment of freedom amidst a natural symbol of transience, but that she does so at a moment in the tree's life when it is not 'perfect,' nor in the prime of its existence. Instead, both she and the viewer draw the most visual and spiritual pleasure gazing upon a *sakura* tree that is dying, that is in the final stages of its life – that through decay comes the greatest experience of appreciation. In that moment, life on earth is indeed affirmed, for something so beautiful could never exist in the lunar plane of immortality.

Yet one of the central arguments in *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* is that however true this notion might be when one encounters it with a full and open heart, it is an unfortunate symptom of humanity that we allow ourselves to forget the value of transience, or to take for granted the wonder around us at times we need it most. Indeed, although the dance beneath the *sakura* tree is so magical and intoxicating it seems as though it may never end – a sensation felt by both Kaguya-hime and the viewer – it does inevitably come to a close, when the Princess' frolicking is interrupted by a baby who accidentally crawls into her path. Kaguya-hime does not mind, of course, but the baby's mother immediately pulls the infant away, and falls prostrate in a bow of apology. In that moment, Kaguya-hime is reminded of the life she does not live, and of

the elevated status which causes her to feel removed from all of this, the laypeople and the *sakura* tree alike. As she gazes out at the family walking away from her, the last cherry petals that fall slowly around her look as sad and lonely as she does.

Kaguya-hime has, after all, only taken this venture out to the countryside following her encounter with the five royal suitors. Lady Sagami, the noble woman who trains Kaguya-hime in the ways of being a fine lady, has stressed to her over and over again how a good marriage is the only path to ‘happiness’ for a Princess – or, in the original Japanese, the only way to achieve *shiawase*. A dictionary will tell us that *shiawase* does indeed literally translate to ‘happiness,’ but I once had a Japanese teacher who told me the word is not quite so easily reducible. When we invoke the word ‘happy’ in English, he explained to me, we usually do so casually, to suggest all manner of minor things that might bring us temporary cheer or contentment. But *shiawase*, in contrast, is used to illustrate a longer-term state of joy, a happiness that is not only great and fulfilling, but also sustainable, perhaps over whole periods of our lives. *Shiawase* is something we all search for – something that sounds a great deal like living in a state of secure and lasting wonder, and which Kaguya-hime surely fears she will not be able to find living as a Princess, whatever Lady Sagami tells her to the contrary.

This conflict, between the manufactured wonder of royalty and the ‘true’ wonder of nature, comes to the forefront in the encounter with the five suitors, as Kaguya-hime instructs them to find the five mythical treasures of which they speak – the jeweled branch of Horai, the Buddha’s stone begging bowl, the Chinese robe of fire-rat fur, the swallow’s cowry shell, and the gem from the dragon’s neck – perhaps in an effort to determine whether true, transcendent wonder can exist within this life of royalty. Interestingly, Takahata adjusts the story here so that although in the original prose narrative Kaguya-hime assigns the suitors these items for

mysterious reasons, in the film she requests each of the suitors to find the treasure they themselves compare her to while spinning their long, poetic tapestries of hyperbole. In this way, their objectification of the Princess – a person they have never seen, and whom they value for her assumed physical beauty – leads directly to each of their individual downfalls, a narrative turn that is both inherently folkloric – a person’s individual hubris and faults shining back upon them – and undeniably feminist, an instance of a woman reversing the social power dynamic to reveal the underlying flaws in the existing patriarchal structure.

Not coincidentally, it is Prince Ishitsukuri, the suitor who abandons his quest for mythical treasure in favor of presenting Kaguya-hime with seemingly purer words and more meaningful sentiments, who comes the closest to capturing the Princess’ heart. He presents her with a small black cylinder, inside of which rests a modest pink flower in a small bed of soil – and which looks to her, and to us, more majestic than any of the other promised treasures. As Kaguya-hime sits behind a green wooden curtain, her many-colored robes wafting out from her body atop the mat on which she sits, Prince Ishitsukuri tells of his many travels, and of sitting weary by the roadside.

“Suddenly my eye fell upon a wildflower there at my feet,” he explains. “Ah! My feelings for you bloomed unknown, I thought, just like that flower. Suddenly the realization dawned that what I wanted to give you and you wanted to receive was not some unattainable treasure, but that flower.” As he speaks, the camera zooms in closer and closer on Kaguya-hime, facing the wall, her face stoic, the words resonating powerfully all the same. *“I have always loved plants,”* the Prince continues. *“I am entranced by the nameless flowers that grow by the roadside. And I always wish I could live as one of those flowers of the field.”* Kaguya-hime, staring at the little flower the Prince has gifted her, picks it up, holding it to her chest. Her violet eyes waver for a

moment, and then break with a slow stream of tears. *“Princess, come with me to some place that is not this one,”* Ishitsukuri continues, unknowingly offering Kaguya-hime that which she has long wanted most. *“Let us leave the capital and its formalities for a rich green land of flowers, birds, and leaping fish. Somewhere not here.”* Kaguya-hime’s face shakes, her mouth open in surprise and anticipation, the rough pencil lines of her face and hair wavering uncertainly. *“We will laugh, sing, and sleep to our hearts’ content. Morning to night, the seasons missing our needs, let us spin a beautiful tale.”* As the Prince’s soliloquy reaches its climax, Kaguya-hime’s mother walks slowly into the room, and puts a hand on her daughter’s shoulder, calming the Princess’ shaking body; she wears a look of sad recognition on her face, as though she already knows what platitudes these words truly are. *“Come with me to somewhere that is not here!”*

The Prince bursts through the curtain, and into Kaguya-hime’s chamber – only to find an old woman, made up to look ugly and intimidating. Ishitsukuri, in his vanity, flees in terror – and in another chamber, Kaguya-hime weeps. The revelation that this man’s promise of a life full of wonder is as much a fib as that counterfeit jeweled branch or false fire-rat fur hurts more than any of the other men’s lies. Hearing someone give voice to the deepest feelings within her heart, but only as a means of fanciful manipulation, sends the Princess even further down a path of melancholy. In her mother’s little garden, which she has spent the past three years transforming into a miniature model of her childhood countryside home, Kaguya-hime rages. Bathed in the blue of twilight, the earth cast in soft, sad tones, she takes a sickle and cuts through the foliage, her body spinning in violent, tormented arcs that once again blur the Princess against her environment. “This garden! It’s a fake!” she shouts as she smashes all the model houses she has built. “All of it! Fake! And so am I!” Being a Princess, living in this estate, longing for the

wonder outside her doors but feeling unable to access it – the pressure makes Kaguya-hime feel as though her life is meaningless.

It is shortly after this that the Princess has her encounter with the Emperor – transformed here from the noble, desirable suitor he is in the original story into a disturbing sexual predator, his unsolicited embrace of Kaguya-hime as harrowing a moment as anything in *Grave of the Fireflies* – and inadvertently calls upon her lunar home to reclaim her. The symbolism is not difficult to grasp, even in the West where we do not so closely associate the moon with imagery of death.³⁵ Her circumstances having grown so hopeless, her figurative distance from the natural wonders of earth having grown so cavernous, Kaguya-hime invites the symbolic death into her life. She suddenly recalls where she came from, and where she must go back to, and tearfully tells her heartbroken earthly parents of her inevitable departure on the fifteenth of August. And the underlying question becomes, in Takahata's version of the story, whether or not we all invite such a symbolic death into our own lives, whenever we reach a point where we neglect – by choice or by circumstance – that which is most meaningful and important in our world. If we take the transient plane for granted, or find ourselves unable to appreciate its gifts, does death inevitably come sooner than we think? Framed in either the fantastical sense of this folktale – a woman who is destiny-bound to be taken back to her eternal lunar home – or in the cosmic sense in which human lives exist – in which our deaths always come rapidly, no matter when or how they occur – the suggestion is haunting and unshakable.

But for both the Princess Kaguya and the filmmaking career of Isao Takahata, that inevitable confrontation with death can only lead to one final question, the scope of which determines all: Are we defeated by transience, loss, and grief, when those inescapable forces

come to call for us, or is there a greater force at work in this experience? Are we truly destroyed by death, or are we, in fact, renewed?

Among the many key players in the story of Studio Ghibli, few are more remarkable than Joe Hisaishi, the composer whose longtime partnership with Hayao Miyazaki has produced some of the most moving and iconic relationships between image and sound in not only the history of feature animation, but in all of contemporary world cinema. His mastery of motivic development and composition – that is, the employment of small, evolving musical phrases imbued with thematic identity – is virtually unparalleled, and in addition to his dynamic sense of orchestration – in which those themes are passed and transformed between various orchestral voices – allows his music to contribute so strongly to the emotions, themes, and character arcs of every film he touches. The scores he writes are so filled with meaning and character that they are often as powerful away from the film as they are when experienced in unison, and it is possible I have turned to his music in times of emotional need more frequently than I have the films for which they were written.³⁶

And although Hisaishi is rightfully associated with Miyazaki more than any other filmmaker, having collaborated on all but Miyazaki's very first feature, the composer also crosses paths with Isao Takahata in two crucial moments. The first is the production of *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), Miyazaki's second film and first original project, for which Takahata, a connoisseur of music and expert in modern art, recommended the then relatively-unknown Hisaishi to score the film, thus enabling a creative relationship that would in many ways come to define the tone and character of Studio Ghibli.

The second is *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*, for which Takahata and Hisaishi collaborated directly for the very first time, in a relationship that drove both artists to places they had never before ventured. Whole essays as long as this one could be devoted to the score Hisaishi created, for while I refrain from using this word in describing films, I have no qualms in assigning it to art outside my field: Joe Hisaishi's score for *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* is a masterpiece, a breathtakingly gentle work that, in the deceptively simple tapestry of motifs and moods it weaves, also traces an arc of life and death and everything in between. Like the film it accompanies, it suggests so much with what looks like so little, and only grows increasingly powerful the longer it lingers.

The key moment of emotional culmination, for both film and score – and a moment in which one cannot possibly be discussed without the other – comes when Kaguya-hime, her time on earth almost at its end, ventures back to her countryside home, at the same moment her childhood companion Sutemaru, now grown with a family of his own, returns from his decade-long pilgrimage. They run into each other, in the same valley where Sutemaru once saved the young Takenoko from a wild mother boar, and amidst the dense foliage and distant mountains – all of it brighter and more bursting with vitality than it has been since they were children – they share an initially tense exchange. Sutemaru wonders how she can be so happy in this place, how a Princess from the capital could regard such a remote rural area as home. For Kaguya-hime, the question is not even a question; these trees and flowers and mountains are all she ever wanted. “With you, Sutemaru,” she says, “I could have been *shiawase*.” Sutemaru protests – to live like a farmer, poor and starving and struggling. He doubts she could do it. She takes a sickle and begins to cut at the grass and roots herself, joyous at the opportunity to do so. “As long as you can

answer back by being alive,” she explains of her determination. “I’m sure I would have been *shiawase*.”

On the soundtrack, a single string note drifts into being, and the slow, ethereal wind motif that represents the lunar world, all that is unexplainable or beyond our grasp, plays softly over the scene. Kaguya-hime’s eyes well with tears, knowing that the *shiawase* she longs for is lost, never to be experienced, because her life on earth is almost at its end. Sutemaru cannot accept it – he grips her by the shoulders, trying to convince her it’s not too late. He offers to run away with her, and unlike Prince Ishitsukuri, he means every word of it. “I can’t run away now,” she says, crying softly. “Sure you can! If they find us, I’ll protect you!” Sutemaru protests, his hands shaking helplessly before his chest. “They’ve already found me,” Kaguya-hime replies ominously, glancing up at the moon, her face hopeless and defeated. Sutemaru glances up too, confused, but then looks back at her, because in this moment, it is not the lunar plane that matters to him, but the earthly one. “So you’ve been found! So what? Who cares? I want us to run away!”

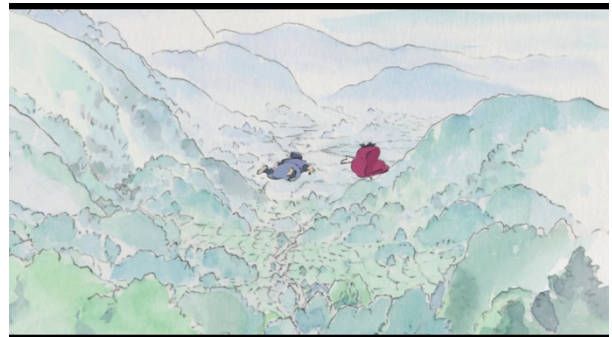
His force of will inspires her – her eyes widen, their deep lilac pupils shining brightly, the paint within them seeming to twinkle in the light, her face erupting in a grin. As she does so, Hisaishi transitions, that long quiet string note becoming louder, fuller, purer – and as she tumbles away in the grass, tripping in the field like she did as a little girl, the motif of Takenoko’s playful childhood in the country plays once again, simple and joyous, just as she was long ago. “I’ll run, too!” she insists to Sutemaru when he tries to pick her up. “As fast as I can!” She frolics in the field, flipping her body in clumsy, blissful patterns, shedding her multi-colored royal garb until she is herself again – until she is Takenoko once more, the girl for whom this gentle, celebratory music was written. She and Sutemaru fall in the grass together, laughing,

purely and fully, the ecstasy of this release moving them to a state beyond happiness, and perhaps into the realm of *shiwase*.

Sutemaru and Takenoko rise, and begin to run, faster and faster, through the grass and into the trees, the branches and roots powerless to stop them. Hisaishi swells the score again, the orchestra moving into a gradual crescendo as Sutemaru and Takenoko rush up a tall rocky point, and tumble up and up into the sky itself, consumed by the blue textured watercolor. Hisaishi's score transitions further, into a symphonic, full-orchestra arrangement of the childhood motif, the theme evolving to encompass all the musical voices, just as the joy that fills Kaguya-hime now spreads throughout her entire being. She opens her arms wide, gesturing towards the sun that fills her vision in the sky beyond. "O heaven and earth!" she cries. "Take me in!" The music, a familiar motif transformed utterly, expresses completely how the joy she once accessed in this space as a child has suddenly becoming an actualized part of her adult body and soul, allowing her to soar effortlessly, like young Taeko once did when she flew blissfully through that interior realm of memory.

Takenoko turns, as though backfloating, and opens her arms now to Sutemaru, who embraces her tightly. They begin to fall, and Hisaishi holds a long, single string note as they do, until the pair reach the ground and rise again, soaring low over the yellow and purple flowers of the field, off over the lake and beyond into the forest, which they soar above alongside a flock of birds, the music soaring alongside them in its greatest, most enthusiastic crescendo yet. Achingly honest in its emotional expression, that music accompanies them as they continue to fly, over fields of wheat in the farmland, up and on through a rainy, downcast patch of earth, and then back into the sunlight, on further still into those distant mountains and over the forests that cover them, further and further until they arrive at the sea. And through it all, they fly in three-

dimensions through a space we have previously only seen in two, the simple watercolor sketches and backgrounds transformed, fluidly and seamlessly, into a tactile and living plane of movement.



As they cross the sea, night finally falls. The pair pass by the moon, looming large and grey and ominous in the sky, and Hisaishi's music transitions abruptly, the orchestra dropping out and the music return to that lone rapidly vibrato string voice that summons forth the mysterious motif of the unknowable lunar world. Kaguya-hime shies away from it, embracing Sutemaru tightly as they float towards its orbit.

"Please! Let me stay a little longer! Just a little longer, to feel the joy of living in this place!" she cries, her eyes clenched shut, her head turned away from the moon.

"What do you mean? I'm holding you!" Sutemaru replies, desperate, clenching her tightly and panicking.

“Hold me tighter!” Kaguya-hime exclaims, holding onto him just as frantically. “Don’t let me go!”

And together, Sutemaru and Takenoko experience the one absolutely universal moment all human beings shall face, as either player in the scene: The person frantically trying to hold on to this life, to this world and the loved ones who inhabit it, and the person gripping them tightly, desperate and determined to never ever let them go. But Kaguya-hime slips through Sutemaru’s hands, as the dead always do through ours, and is pulled down in a seemingly endless arc, against an endless expanse of distant blue, until her limp body is consumed in the ocean. Hisaishi’s string continues to vibrate, calling out towards eternity, the note going forever unresolved as it ceases when Sutemaru wakes up in the valley. Takenoko is gone, and he is alone in the field. It was all seemingly a dream – except that its significance and impact was as real as can be. From the hillside, his child calls to him, and he sees his daughter holding his wife’s hand, both waving to him. Dazed, Sutemaru musters a smile; embracing the child fondly, he no longer looks so shaken. He has this daughter, and he has this wife, and one senses he will treasure them always.

This sequence is everything – effectively the climax and summary of Isao Takahata’s filmmaking career. It takes us from birth – Kaguya-hime’s gesture towards the sun, that life-granting force – all the way on to death – the moon, that mysterious grey expanse – and in between paints a vivid, beautiful picture of the joy it is to live. Hisaishi’s music, drawing what becomes for the viewer a subconscious connection between the innocent pleasures of childhood and the fully realized bliss an adult might experience in a moment of transcendence, fills us with the overwhelming sensation of being alive and feeling blessed to simply *experience*, to live in this world and wonder for its and our existence. Yet in the way the sequence arcs itself, starting

with transient melancholy and ending with the despair of *owakare* – that great parting Marie Mockett writes of – Takahata and his collaborators remind us that for Kaguya-hime, as for all of us, that existential joy only exists because it is fleeting. It is only felt so powerfully, in this particular moment, because she knows it shall soon be over. And although this is true, and although it is a rather beautiful thought when pondered in a larger cosmic sense, that does not make it hurt any less when the time comes to say goodbye.

This is the fundamental human dilemma Sigmund Freud ponders in one of his very wisest pieces of writing, “On Transience,” composed after the end of the first World War in 1916. In it, Freud recalls a day he spent alongside a taciturn friend and a famous poet, the latter of whom could not find enjoyment in the beautiful summer day the trio enjoyed, so beset was he by a belief that the transience of things robs them of their worth. Freud writes:

I could not see my way to dispute the transience of all things, nor could I insist upon an exception in favour of what is beautiful and perfect. But I did dispute the pessimistic poet’s view that the transience of what is beautiful involves any loss in its worth.

On the contrary, an increase! Transience value is scarcity value in time. Limitation in the possibility of an enjoyment raises the value of the enjoyment. It was incomprehensible, I declared, that the thought of the transience of beauty should interfere with our joy in it. As regards the beauty of Nature, each time it is destroyed by winter it comes again next year, so that in relation to the length of our lives it can in fact be regarded as eternal. The beauty of the human form and face vanish for ever in the course of our own lives, but their evanescence only lends them a fresh charm. A flower that blossoms only for a single night does not seem to us on that account less lovely. Nor can I understand any better why the beauty and perfection of a work of art or of an intellectual achievement should lose its worth because of its temporal limitation. A time may indeed come when the pictures and statues which we admire to-day will crumble to dust, or a race of men may follow us who no longer understand the works of our poets and thinkers, or a geological epoch may even arrive when all animate life upon earth ceases; but since the value of all this beauty and perfection is determined only by its significance for our own emotional lives, it has no need to survive us and is therefore independent of absolute duration.³⁷

Truer words have never been spoken, and I would venture no finer, clearer explanation for the value of our transient plane exists in text. Yet like Takahata, Freud recognizes that, no matter

how beautiful transience may appear to us when viewed from a certain perspective, that does not stop us from feeling melancholy towards loss, or feeling hopeless when the possibility of death and decay lies before us. “My failure led me to infer that some powerful emotional factor was at work which was disturbing their judgment,”³⁸ Freud writes of his inability to convince his friends of his point-of-view. He concludes that “what spoilt their enjoyment of beauty must have been a revolt in their minds against mourning,”³⁹ and continues on to analyze what mourning is, and how it appears, from a psychoanalytic perspective, to be a completely irrational reaction. We can analyze the psychological functions of grief, even study the patterns in the mind that lead to and from it – and yet, when all is said and done, “why it is that this detachment of libido from its objects should be such a painful process is a mystery to us and we have not hitherto been able to frame any hypothesis to account for it.”⁴⁰ Grief targets us in ways so vast and unknowable that even a thinker as wise as Freud has no method by which to explain its presence. It is the flipside to wonder, a mysterious but natural reaction which hounds us even when we are fully aware of the beauty of our lives and of our world. One cannot, it seems, be separated from the other.

In this inexplicable gap lies the whole of human experience. Our lives have meaning because they are fleeting. We feel, and we smile, and we love, and we wonder because our lives and our world is impermanent, and none of the many gifts we are granted as human beings would be accessible without the specter of death and decay. And yet, so too do we grieve because we are transient, because that which we feel is eternally fleeting, and those smiles we wear must inevitably fade, and those whom we love are always destined to depart from us, and that wonder we sense will invariably turn into sadness and fear. The distance between these two halves of the human heart, between the two ends of the spectrum that comprise human experience, is a chasm we cannot explain, cannot rationalize, cannot control or command. But

that is also the distance in which we live, every day, every one of us. The meaning of human experience does not lie in explaining this distance, or finding a way to master it; it lies simply in living within that distance, as best we can, accepting the force it exerts over our lives and giving ourselves to it, to the ebbing and flowing of our heart's unsteady tide.

This is the conclusion Isao Takahata arrives at, in the final movement of *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*, as the celestial beings make their way to earth from the moon, and effortlessly pluck Kaguya-hime from this transient plane to clothe her in the garb of eternity. The night is grey and dark, and there is no overarching sense of happiness or of sadness; no emotions go resolved, for when we live and die on this earth, there is no such thing as perfect joy or endless grief. Only the journey we take between them.

In this way, the most important character in the film may just be the one whose title gives the original folktale its name: Sanuki no Miyatsuko, the bamboo cutter, the father whose love for his celestial daughter brings her life both pain and pleasure, and who is ultimately the one left behind when the film's action ceases. In the role, Takeo Chii gives one of the single most remarkable and powerful vocal performances ever heard in an animated feature. Early in the film, when the country children dub his daughter *Takenoko*, he tries to reclaim her identity, calling out *Hime-sama* as she crawls between himself and the children, unsure of which direction to go. "*Hime, oide!*" he chants, clapping his hands as he does so, trying to out-voice the many children chanting "*Takenoko!*" Over and over he calls: "*Hime, oide! Hime, oide! Hime, oide!*" He cries and he cries, and he claps and he claps, his voice growing increasingly desperate and ragged and passionate, his body slouching and sweating from the exertion, until finally she crawls to his side. He lifts the baby girl in his arms, weeping freely, his voice turning from words

into a pure emotional howl. Every time I see this sequence, I am broken, for never have I seen a father's love for his child portrayed so nakedly on film.



Though a later moment, on the other edge of the film, comes incredibly close. On the night Kaguya-hime confesses to her earthly parents that she is being called back to the moon, and will be taken from them on the fifteenth of August, Sanuki no Miyatsuko breaks down, overwhelmed with grief and fear and resolve, and the monologue he delivers, voiced so beautifully by Chii, is as devastating as they come:

Do you think I'd let you go? From the day I took you out of that bamboo stalk, I've loved you as if you were my own child. When I held you, changed you, set you on your feet, I was as happy as if I were in heaven. It's not too late! You're still here! Here in my arms! We'll drive them away! No matter how many come for you!

What Takeo Chii lends to the film, in moments like these, and what Takahata enables by portraying this character as a conflicted father, first and foremost, is to create perhaps the purest mirror unto the audience. Many of Kaguya-hime's experiences are universal, but when all is said

and done, none of us are celestial beings. All of us, at one point or another, shall stand in the shoes of the bamboo cutter, confronted both with the overwhelming love we feel for another person – with the overpowering sense of blessing that we are allowed to exist in their presence – and with the crushing, unacceptable truth that this person shall be taken from our arms. Of all the film’s characters, Sanuki no Miyatsuko is perhaps the one most deeply embroiled in that distance between the two emotional extremes of transience, and it is this quality that makes him the most human. That Takeo Chii passed away during the production of the film, at the old but still-too-fleeting age of 70, is a piece of tragic poetry.⁴¹

When the film ends, fading out from a final, elegiac image of the baby Kaguya projected in the moon, the credits roll over a black canvas, and atop them plays a slow, tender song, “*Inochi no Kioku*” (*Memory of Life*). Singer-songwriter Kazumi Nikaido was hand-picked by Takahata, and in November of 2012, when they first met to discuss the writing of the piece, they shared the following exchange:

Takahata: *It won’t be a film that conveys its emotion directly. It’ll end without a clear resolution. People will still be wondering exactly what’s going on.*

Nikaido: *So it’s not a remedy for helplessness, but an acceptance. It’s not resolved, but it’s reality. I like taking away that sort of impression.*

Takahata: *I thought you might! I’m glad. With nothing resolved, in that sort of “unsettled” situation, we want something soothing. The kind of song that soothes, that leaves you feeling calm.*⁴²

When the time came to record the song, a pregnant Nikaido was only a month away from giving birth. The finished piece, written from the perspective of a parent to a child, could just as well be sung by Sanuki no Miyatsuko; or by Kaguya-hime herself, to the people she has left behind. Or by any of us, or to any of us, from or to any person we have loved, or will love. Like the film it closes, these words seem to echo out across the whole of human experience:

*The joy I felt when I touched you
Went deep, deep down
And seeped into
Every nook and cranny of this body*

*Even if I'm far away
And no longer understand anything
Even when the time comes
For this life to end*

*Everything of now
Is everything of the past
We'll meet again I'm sure
In some nostalgic place*

*The warmth you gave me
Deep, deep down
Comes to me now, complete
From a time long past*

*Steadily in my heart
The flames of passion give light
And softly soothe my pain
Down to the depths of my grief*

*Everything now
Is hope for the future
I'll remember, I'm sure
In some nostalgic place*

*Everything of now
Is everything of the past
We'll meet again I'm sure
In some nostalgic place*

*Everything now
Is hope for the future
I'll remember, I'm sure
When I remember this life*

*Anata ni fureta yorokobi ga
Fukaku, fukaku
Kono karada no hashibashi ni
Shimikonde yuku*

*Zutto tōku
Nani mo wakaranaku natte mo
Tatoe kono inochi ga
Owaru toki ga kite mo*

*Ima no subete wa
Kako no subete
Kanarazu mata aeru
Natsukashii basho de*

*Anata ga kureta nukumori ga
Fukaku, fukaku
Ima haruka na toki wo koe
Michi watatteku*

*Jitto kokoro ni
Tomosu jounetsu no honō mo
Sotto kizu wo sasuru
Kanashimi no fuchi ni mo*

*Ima no subete wa
Mirai no kibou
Kanarazu oboeteru
Natsukashii basho de*

*Ima no subete wa
Kako no subete
Kanarazu mata aeru
Natsukashii basho de*

*Ima no subete wa
Mirai no kibou
Kanarazu oboeteru
Inochi no kioku de*

Endnotes

1. Translated by Yoel Hoffman in *Japanese Death Poems: Written by Zen Monks and Haiku Poets on the Verge of Death* (North Clarendon: Tuttle Publishing, 1986), 226.
2. *Hime* (pronounced *he-may*) is the Japanese honorific used to address Princesses and young women of noble birth; thus, the eponymous character's 'proper' name, as heard throughout the film's dialogue, is Kaguya-hime, and is how she shall be addressed throughout this chapter.
3. All dialogue from *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* is quoted from the English-language subtitle track on the 2014 "Studio Ghibli ga ippai (Collection)" Japanese Blu-Ray release, translated by Ian MacDougall and Rieko Izutsu-Vajirasarn. Minor adjustments have been made here and there, and the original Japanese has been substituted for the Blu-Ray's translations in a few key spots.
4. Hoffman, *Japanese Death Poems*, 39.
5. Marie Mutsuki Mockett, *Where the Dead Pause, and the Japanese Say Goodbye: A Journey* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015), 59.
6. Erina Takeda, "Significance of *Sakura*: Cherry Blossom Traditions in Japan," *Smithsonian Institution: Smithsonian Folklife Festival Blog*, April 9, 2014, <http://www.festival.si.edu/blog/2014/significance-of-sakura-cherry-blossom-traditions-in-japan/>.
7. Ibid.
8. Mockett, *Where the Dead Pause*, 61.
9. Homaro Cantu, "The Significance of the Cherry Blossom: From Beloved Tree to Cultural Icon," *The Huffington Post*, August 30, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/homaro-cantu/the-significance-of-the-c_1_b_3832895.html.
10. There is a fascinating scene, in *Isao Takahata and His Tale of the Princess Kaguya*, in which we witness Takahata, at the studio, watching Hayao Miyazaki announce his retirement live on Japanese television on September 6th, 2013. On the television broadcast, Miyazaki says: "I invited Mr. Takahata to join me today, but he looked at me like I was crazy and said no. I doubt he'll ever quit." Takahata laughs. "That wasn't the point!" he exclaims at the TV. "Announcing it to the press is what's weird. Why would a director tell the press he's retiring?"

Takahata has further elaborated on his position regarding 'retirement' in an interview with the LA Times, stating: "I don't want to say that I want to retire or that I have retired. I still have films that I might want to make, but

there's a reality of whether I can make them or not at my age. I'm very fortunate to work with very talented people, and I certainly don't plan on retiring and don't want to say that I am retired." So for the time being, it is probably best to consider Takahata an 'active' filmmaker, and to not read too deeply into *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* looking for farewell statements (though resisting this is inevitably difficult). Mark Olsen, "Isao Takahata of Studio Ghibli Surfaces with 'Princess Kaguya,'" *Los Angeles Times*, October 21, 2014, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-isao-takahata-princess-kuguya-20141021-story.html>.

11. Jonathan Lack, "Review: 'The Tale of Princess Kaguya' is a challenging, euphoric achievement for Isao Takahata and Studio Ghibli," *Fade to Lack*, December 4, 2014, <http://www.jonathanlack.com/2014/12/review-tale-of-princess-kaguya-is.html>.

12. Naoko Kojima, "Reading the *Tale of the Bamboo Cutter* in Picture Scrolls," in *The Chester Beatty Library: The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter Picture-scrolls*, ed. Chester Beatty Library (Tōkyō : Bensei Shuppan, 2008), xxiii.

13. Quoted in Bill Desowitz, "Immersed in Movies: The Oscar-Nominated Animation Directors Tell Their Secrets," *Indiewire*, February 9, 2015, <http://blogs.indiewire.com/animationscoop/immersed-in-movies-the-oscar-nominated-animation-directors-tell-their-secrets-20150209>.

14. *Isao Takahata and his Tale of the Princess Kaguya*, directed by Akira Miki and Hidekazu Sato (2014; Koganei, Tokyo: Universal Home Entertainment, 2015), DVD.

15. Kojima, "Reading the *Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*..." xxiv-xxv.

16. It is important to note that Takahata introduces Kaguya-hime's given name slightly differently than in the original story. In the prose narrative, Lord Akita gives the girl the name 'Nayotake no Kaguya-hime,' or 'Shining Princess of the Supple Bamboo.' The text does not elaborate on it, but in the film, Lord Akita is explicitly shown to glimpse both side of Kaguya-hime – the girl at play and the young woman at court – and explains how the name he gives her is meant to evoke both the earthly and the divine. "The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter," translated by Donald Keene, in *The Chester Beatty Library: The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter Picture-scrolls*, ed. Chester Beatty Library (Tōkyō : Bensei Shuppan, 2008), i.

17. R.W. Hepburn, "Wonder," in *'Wonder' and Other Essays* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984), 140.

18. Though this translation is contestable. The word the subtitles translate as 'wonder' – *ayashii* – is more accurately aligned with curiosity, the suspicious, or the mysterious. The adjective more commonly used to describe a sense of

‘wonder’ would be *fushigi*, and I have seen other subtitle tracks for the film that describe the bamboo cutter approaching the stalk in “curiosity,” rather than wonder.

19. Hepburn, “Wonder,” 135.

20. Ibid., 140.

21. Ibid., 134.

22. Takahata is no stranger to subverting Western and transnational cultural codes, of course; that the refutation of the ‘Disney ideal’ found in *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* mirrors the rejection of Disney-esque narrative, thematic, and stylistic codes found in *The Great Adventure of Horus, Prince of the Sun* – made 45 years prior, at the start of his film career – only reinforces the sense that *Kaguya* feels like a ‘farewell’ feature, whether Takahata intended it that way or not.

23. Hepburn, “Wonder,” 147.

24. *Isao Takahata and his Tale...*,

25. *My Neighbors the Yamadas* presages *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* beyond just its aesthetics – in an early sequence, which fantastically depicts the Yamadas marrying, starting their family, and learning to brave the storms of life together, the father finds their daughter, Nonoko, by slicing through stalks of bamboo in a forest, and uncovering her within one of them.

26. *Isao Takahata and his Tale...*,

27. Ibid.

28. A brain-drain of top talent so immense that it reportedly left Studio Ghibli itself understaffed during the simultaneous production of Miyazaki’s *The Wind Rises*, as Miyazaki had trouble expanding his staff given how many top animators were working on *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*. Hiroyuki Ota, “Insight: Hayao Miyazaki to retire, his real reason for leaving anime,” *The Asahi Shimbun*, September 27, 2013, http://ajw.asahi.com/article/cool_japan/movies/AJ201309270012.

29. *Isao Takahata and his Tale...*

30. The officially reported production budget of *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* is 5 billion yen, or roughly \$50 million. While no official report exists, to my knowledge, ranking the respective budgets of anime feature films, this would at the very least be significantly higher than any other officially reported Studio Ghibli production budget –

the next closest would be *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea* (2008; Dir. Hayao Miyazaki), at ¥3.4 billion or \$34 million. And Ghibli films, as a general rule, are already more expensive than those produced by other entities. All of this should give a good idea of just how many resources went into making the film, and given that there have been reports that the official production budgets for both *The Wind Rises* and *Kaguya* were far beneath the actual production costs (as reported by Hiroyuki Ota in the article cited in Endnote 27), it is possible *Kaguya* cost even more than we know. While *The Wind Rises* was a major financial success, grossing \$136.5 million on a reported budget of \$30 million, *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* has only grossed \$24.2 million worldwide, which would likely make it Ghibli's greatest financial loss to date. While the internal workings of the studio at present are largely unknown – no features are currently in production, and Toshio Suzuki has said the company is taking time to assess its future – it has been speculated that the possible financial losses incurred by Miyazaki and Takahata's respective final features may have caused a blow even the venerable Ghibli needs time to recover from. Mark Schilling, "Hayao Miyazaki May Return, Says Studio Ghibli's Toshio Suzuki," *Variety*, August 7, 2014, <http://variety.com/2014/film/news/hayao-miyazaki-may-return-says-studio-ghiblis-toshio-suzuki-1201277530/>.

31. Including Kazuo Oga, who illustrated the gorgeous watercolor backgrounds for the film, finally realizing the artistic vision he and Takahata had been chasing ever since *Only Yesterday*, when Oga felt he included 'too much detail' in the backgrounds. Interestingly, Oga thought this might result in less work, but quickly realized he was mistaken. "I thought I'd put too much detail into *Only Yesterday* and started to think I'd like to do something a bit lighter. Mr. Takahata's idea was to animate rough sketches, lightly colored, with lots of white space. I thought there wouldn't be much painting, so it would be easy, but I was wrong," he explains in *Isao Takahata and his Tale of the Princess Kaguya*. The specific difficulty came in the heavy reliance on watercolors, which are unpredictable; they look different dry than wet, and cannot be erased or changed once the paint settles. This, combined with the general 'trial and error' production process of the film, meant many more backgrounds had to be drawn and re-drawn than were actually used.

32. *Isao Takahata and his Tale...*

33. Mockett, *Where the Dead Pause*, 263.

34. *Ibid.*

35. In my examination of the *Jisei*, or Japanese death poem, I have found that, among the common images associated with death in Japanese poetry – cherry blossoms, distant shores, the land of the West – the moon is probably the most recurring of all, appearing in countless *jisei* from various haiku writers. Here are but a few examples:

*I cleansed the mirror
Of my heart – now it reflects
The moon* (Renseki, 1789)

*In this delusive world
I viewed the moon
Two years too long* (Saikaku, 1693)

*Rain clouds clear away:
Above the lotus shine
The perfect moon* (Seishu, 1817)

It is said that the poet Shisui, meanwhile, when asked by his followers to write a death poem before his passing in 1769, “grasped his brush, painted a circle, cast the brush aside, and died.” The circle, a core symbol in Zen Buddhism, where it simultaneously represents the void and the essence of all things, looks not coincidentally like a full moon. Hoffman, *Japanese Death Poems*, 261, 274, 280, 295.

36. Much of the material and language in this paragraph is adapted from notes given by Thomas Lack, a talented composer and student of music who has likely studied the works of Joe Hisaishi in greater depth than I have probed at the films of Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata. His help throughout this section was invaluable.

37. Sigmund Freud, “On Transience,” in *Character and Culture* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), 149.

38. *Ibid.*, 149.

39. *Ibid.*, 150.

40. *Ibid.*

41. Although dialogue was pre-recorded for *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*, rewrites during the final year of production meant that some of the bamboo cutter’s lines were ultimately recorded by Yuji Miyake. While some footage exists of Chii recording his dialogue – we know, for instance, that he recorded the “*Hime, oide*” scene because of this – there is no record detailing exactly which lines Miyake filled in for, and Chii is the only actor credited in the part in the film itself. Therefore, it is possible some of the lines I attribute to Chii were recorded by Miyake; vocally, the difference is not clear. And either way, what matters is that Chii clearly set the tone and spirit

for the character, and that, due to the pre-recording process, his work heavily influenced both the realization of his individual character and of the film as a whole.

42. *Isao Takahata and his Tale...*



Epilogue: *Sakura*

Applying the lessons of loss – and learning to live like the *tanuki*

*Of such a time as this
the proverb speaks:
this, too, shall pass*

*Kono toki no
sewa o oshie no
mujō kana*

Shiei, 1715¹

A vivid blue sky shines above the Tama Hills, its surface blanketed in friendly, billowing clouds. For the *tanuki* of *Pom Poko*, their majestic illusion of the unsullied home has come to an end, and as the camera pans down, it comes to rest on a single small temple, its thatched straw roof covered in moss. The temple is surrounded by construction equipment, framed by carved out earth and distant expanses of housing and buildings. An excavator gouges its way through the roof of the little temple, as two *tanuki* look upon it sadly from behind some stones. “So we lost

¹ Translated by Yoel Hoffman in *Japanese Death Poems: Written by Zen Monks and Haiku Poets on the Verge of Death* (North Clarendon: Tuttle Publishing, 1986), 288-9.

our battle,” reflects Shokichi from an undetermined time in the future, when his voice has grown old and wise. “And development just goes on, as if we never existed. Humans quickly forget how things used to be.”

A mildly melancholy piano piece begins to play, as the temple collapses in an eruption of dust. Takahata cuts to a scene of condominiums on Manpukuji Hill, where children frolic amidst a mostly urban space. In that suburb and others, little patches of nature remain, the roads bordered by big green trees, the construction equipment moving on to carve out little spaces for parks and greenery. The humans try to keep nature alive where they can. “But for us, it was too late,” Shokichi reflects. “We’d lost our home.”

And yet, as that piano piece continues, mournful but not defeated, a sense permeates that life goes on. Those buildings are erected, and those parks are crafted, and the world continues marching forward. The *tanuki* have lost nearly everything they loved, but the world does not stop to give them unlimited time for grief. As with all beings who live in this transient plane, the *tanuki* must choose whether to let that loss destroy them, or to try finding a way to continue living in this irrevocably changed world. Some go over the mountain to Machida, though it is overcrowded and many die on the journey; some use their powers of transformation to turn into humans, and live as best they can amidst the hustle and bustle of modern urban life; and others still remain as they are, living in those little parks and roadside patches of grass, crossing the roads discretely by night to forage food from trash. Though Shokichi has chosen to live life as a human, he respects the courage and tenacity of those *tanuki* most, reflecting:

“No matter how tough things get, tanuki are survivors. They bear things without complaint and live happily and freely. They have children with a carefree spirit, and then they die.”

It would be easy to interpret this statement – or, indeed, *Pom Poko* as a whole – as a metaphor for humanity, but doing so would, I think, be misguided. I think Shokichi's last words are exactly what they are: An ode to the *tanuki*, to these unique creatures of Japanese folklore and everyday life, as it is to all wildlife who survive and flourish around us, finding a way to continue living even in a space that is no longer made for them. The words are a quiet urging to respect the *tanuki*, but also, perhaps, to learn from them. For while there are many things that connect us as humans to the natural world, there is no link greater than loss. Animals experience death and grief as well, and the *tanuki* that loses its home is just as hurt by that absence as the displaced human. But Shokichi is right – the *tanuki* live on, no matter what the world throws at them, and they flourish and procreate and survive with an indomitable spirit that is nothing less than admirable.

Perhaps, when all is said and done, this is the only way to live. Isao Takahata has spent so much of his career chronicling loss, in various forms, and yet he has found few symbols for living a transient life as potent as that of the *tanuki*. The films primarily explored in this study were produced between 1988 and 2013, a period that began with Takahata already in his mid-fifties, and that continued on through to old age. One senses, tracing the arc that flows between these works, a filmmaker pondering the issues of death and loss from a standpoint of wisdom and experience; and yet the greatest value in this artistic journey may be in those questions that remain unanswered, in those grey areas that can never be colored, in those fundamental mysteries that no amount of age or insight can truly, permanently solve.

Grave of the Fireflies is the most difficult circumstance to explore, and the experience that lingers most hauntingly. There is no hope for those affected by the worst of human aggression, and the innocence lost by these children raised in a time of war can never be

reclaimed. Seita and Setsuko are particularly unlucky, losing their home, their hope, and their lives in turn. For Takahata, what makes the story so painful is the weight of all these siblings had to live for – of those natural spaces from which they draw comfort and wonder, of the intense and inspiring love each shares for the other, and of the innocent and gracious spirit Setsuko in particular maintains until the end. What they lose is great, and what the world loses as a result of their absence is in some ways even greater. That their spirits linger, in that eerie red space between this world and death, overlooking modern society in a long eternal vigil, is more than just a symbol; it is a reminder, unspoken but powerful, of what humanity loses – and of the ghosts that forever haunt us – when we lose sight of that which matters most.

Of course, finding what is important and fulfilling is one of the eternal challenges of life on earth. For Taeko Okajima in *Only Yesterday*, loss does not come in the form of death or suffering, but as a complex internal force, one which compels in her an awareness of the distance between who she is and who she wants to be, and in which she has spent so much of her life inhabiting. It is easy, in the rigid structures and deeply ingrained codes of modern society, to feel paradoxically lost. Yet when we lose sight of ourselves, or find ourselves feeling adrift without knowing why, it is often best to let that loss envelop and inhabit us, to guide and instruct us, to learn from those absences that hurt most, and to act in such a way that we might eventually feel present, both within the world and within ourselves. By being lost, and by making the decision to let life guide her on instinct and passion, Taeko Okajima is miraculously found. As much darkness as loss can instill, in a film like *Grave of the Fireflies*, it can also be a powerful force of guidance and healing.

No project in Takahata's career was as ambitious, complex, or costly as *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*, but then, none asked questions quite so vast. For in reorienting a famous

folktale to trace a symbolic arc from birth to death, Takahata sets these dual identities of loss against each other, and asks whether or not it is possible to reconcile them. Kaguya-hime experiences both the kindness and the cruelty of humanity during her short life, as she is also immersed in the splendor of nature and the pain of transience. When she dances under the *sakura* tree, or flies with Sute-maru over the fields and valleys of her countryside home, she experiences loss in much the same way Taeko does, as a force that fills her and teaches her, which gives her life meaning precisely because its objects are fleeting. Yet when she feels her existence being wasted behind the walls of her royal mansion, or when she senses fear and grief upon being called back to her eternal lunar home, she encounters the sort of hopeless, aching loss felt by Seita and Setsuko, and the mourning that permeates her is undefeatable. To live on this earth is to feel both sides of loss, to be motivated and dispirited by it in turn.

Negotiating this space is what it means to be human – and it is, ultimately, the furthest Takahata can take his exploration of transience. To live is not to overcome loss, but neither does living require we succumb to the suffering loss brings. Loss is all around us. Loss is what we experience, and what we shall become; in a sense, it forms the core of who we are.

To acknowledge and accept this complexity is no small feat of wisdom; there is something tremendously comforting about seeing the emotional highs and lows of human existence conceived of in one vast, interwoven tapestry. And yet, despite these great questions and endless complexities, in the simplicity of the *tanuki*, we see hope. For they live upon the same transient plane as us, within that same space between grief and transcendence. Takahata's ode to them is among his wisest observations. That they can live like this, can bear the burdens of the world so purely and unceasingly, seems nothing short of miraculous. And if they can do it, then so, perhaps, can we.

In the final scene of *Pom Poko*, Shokichi, walking home wearily one night after years of living as a human, sees a *tanuki* scamper across the road, through a hole in a big stone wall. Several more *tanuki* follow. Curious, he goes after them, crawling under the gap, through some foliage, and back out into a big grassy clearing, where a large group of surviving *tanuki* are having a raucous party. Seeing them all dance and sing together, Shokichi's face breaks in an enormous smile, and he begins to run towards the *tanuki*, desperately and freely and joyously, throwing aside his briefcase and shedding his human clothes to transform back into his true self, as consumed in this moment of physical release as Seita or Taeko or Kaguya-hime were when they ran.

The difference here lies in the sense of pure, infectious bliss – that beyond all the loss, past all the pain and difficulty that comes with absence and change, there remains hope. In friends old and new, in spaces familiar or discovered, or in the simple act of being alive, loss does not have to be the end, and what may seem like an end can one day turn into a jubilant new chapter. As Shokichi runs, transforming back into a *tanuki* and leaping into the arms of an old friend, it is hard to resist the smile that grows on one's face. The spirit of the *tanuki*, all of them clapping and dancing and grinning from ear to ear as they welcome Shokichi to their gathering, is inspiring to such a degree that it feels healing. And the euphoric final song that plays over this little gathering, a chorus of happy voices and clapping hands singing and celebrating together, is positively restorative. Titled "*Itsudemo dareka ga...*" (*Always, someone will be...*), it is a song about loss that urges us to feel hope. That one can exist in the presence of the other, and can be felt by these *tanuki* as strongly as it can be by us, is a comforting truth. For all our accomplishments as humans, all our trials and tribulations and introspection and insight, these *tanuki* may well be far wiser than we.

Their song goes like this:²

*I'm sure there's always someone by your side
Please try to remember their wonderful name
On nights when you've closed your heart and
cannot see a thing
I'm sure, I'm sure there is someone by your side*

*Even if you are distantly departed from the
town you were born
Please don't forget how the wind feels there
I'm sure there's always someone by your side
That's right, and I'm sure you're always by theirs*

*On a rainy morning, what will you do?
When you wake from your dreams,
are you really alone after all?*

*I'm sure you're always by someone's side
Please try to remember their wonderful name*

*If you're hurt in a struggle and cannot see the light
Please listen closely, and you'll hear a song
Your tears and pain will one day fade
That's right, I'm sure they're waiting for your smile*

*On nights when the wind howls, I want to be
with someone
I want to be with you, who I saw in my dream*

*I'm sure you're always by someone's side
Please try to remember their wonderful name*

*Itsudemo dareka ga kitto soba ni iru
Omoi dashite okure suteki na sono na wo
Kokoro ga fusaide nanimo mienai yoru
Kitto kitto dareka ga itsumo soba ni iru*

*Umareta machi wo tooku hanaretemo
Wasurenaide okure ano machi no kaze wo
Itsudemo dareka ga kitto soba ni iru
Sou sa kitto omae ga itsumo soba ni iru*

*Ame no furu asa ittai dousuru
Yume kara sametara yappari hitori kai ?*

*Itsudemo omae ga kitto soba ni iru
Omoi dashite okure suteki na sono na wo*

*Arasoi ni kizutsuite hikari ga mienai nara
Mimi wo sumashitekure uta ga kikoeru yo
Namida mo itami mo itsuka kieteyuku
Sou sa kitto omae no hohoemi ga hoshii*

*Kaze no fuku yoru dareka ni aitai
Yume ni mita no sa omae ni aitai*

*Itsudemo omae ga kitto soba ni iru
Omoi dashite okure suteki na sono na wo*

² Written and performed by Shang Shang Typhoon. Translation courtesy *Nautiljon*, presented here with minor corrections and alterations. "Paroles: Shang Shang TYPHOON – Itsudemo dareka ga," *Nautiljon*, Accessed Nov. 4, 2015, <http://www.nautiljon.com/paroles/shang+shang+typhoon/itsudemo+dareka+ga.html>.

Postlude: *The Last Sortie*

*Child of the way,
I leave at last –
a willow on the other shore*

*Tsui ni yuku
kishi no yanagi ya
nori no chigo*

Benseki, 1728¹

When I close my eyes, I can see the lake stretched out before me. It is nearing sunset, and the water shimmers gently as the light begins to fade, the temperature breaking into a breezy, comfortable cool. At the shoreline, the water laps softly against the earth, and at the nearest dock, it rocks the red and white boat, moving it back and forth almost imperceptibly. I am standing in that boat, in the rear, near the driver's seat; I have a hand outstretched, to help my father steady himself as he enters the vessel. My brother stands behind him, carrying some of our gear, waiting to board.

This is the last day of our last trip; in the morning, we will pack our car and start the journey home. Yet it is only the second time my father has clambered into the boat this week, because the first time he did so, several days earlier, his skin, beset by melanoma, was too weak to withstand the sun. Even with a hat and coat and sunblock, the heat bearing down upon the lake was too intense; it was as though he had been irradiated, and the sores and pain the day's voyage

¹ Translated by Yoel Hoffman in *Japanese Death Poems: Written by Zen Monks and Haiku Poets on the Verge of Death* (North Clarendon: Tuttle Publishing, 1986), 144.

cost him made further daytime excursions out of the question. So for the rest of the week, we fished, and he stayed behind, appreciating the beauty of the lake from the safety of our cabin.

But now, the sun is setting, on both this day and my father's time at Big Pine Lake. The heat is not so intense, and neither is it dark enough for the mosquitos to swarm us. There is time now for a final venture upon the lake, just the three of us, and my father seems serenely grateful for the opportunity. We want him to appreciate it as much as he can, so I will drive the boat, although I have only recently started to do so; that had always been my father's role. Now, he sits in my usual spot, on the front end of the boat, and waves cheerfully at my mother, as she takes a picture of the three of us from the shoreline. My brother, sitting in the middle, undoes the ropes that tie us to the dock, and I start the engine as we drift into the bay. In a moment, we are off, speeding through the water, feeling the boat rocked up and down by the gentle waves beneath us, as we head out towards the setting sun.

My father is quiet, staring stoically ahead, calmly drinking in all these familiar sights. We ask him where he wants to go, and he suggests 'First Street,' our name for a favorite trolling line on a nearby island. I head there; as we approach it, so many favorite haunts come into focus. There is 'Shore Lunch Island,' a small round body of forested land near the entrance to a weedy straight, where we traditionally spend a day every year cooking on a fire pit amidst the trees. Those wavy green weeds nearby seem to stretch on forever, an impenetrable stretch of lake that, when cast near, is a good place to lure out Northern Pikes. 'First Street,' and the island that forms it, bisects all this, a sturdy stretch of densely packed trees that seems to anchor this entire corner of the lake. There is where my father taught us to troll back and forth, up and down the island and across the open water towards Shore Lunch Island, fishing for Walleyes and the occasional, unruly Pike.

Tonight, when we get there, we allow him to fish; my brother and I do not bother to do so ourselves. My father gets his rod and spinning reel ready, baiting a worm on the end of his hook, and as the sun fades from blue to orange, I drive the boat up and down First Street, my father trolling his line through the water, quietly playing a few possible bites, but never catching anything. The evening is too calm to expect anything right away; in any case, that is hardly the point. The three of us speak a little bit, and tell a joke or two, but for the most part we are silent, simply enjoying one another's company as my father fishes and the sun sinks low above us.

Eventually, he brings his line back in for the last time, as the air starts to grow cold. There is not much time left, and so we decide to take a final lap around the lake, speeding up through that weedy straight by Shore Lunch Island, and out into another part of the lake, one that is labyrinthine in its enormity and complexity. There are many favorite spots here, but even after a decade upon the lake, I cannot recall on my own how to get to all of them. It does not matter. My father has no particular destination in mind. I just drive the boat around, past the island where we once spent a hot July day picking blueberries, near the large rocky outcropping where my brother and I once got our lines stuck in the stone, by the nondescript expanse of open water where we learned to use a bobber, and past the oft-rewarding trolling line my father dubbed 'Eggshell Rock.'

As we make our loop, the sun seems to set slowly for us, the sky afire with its soft orange glow as long as we need the light. All the while, my father sits in the front, his head held high, a serene expression upon his face, his thoughts inscrutable. He looks happy. He looks content. And before either of us expects it, he tells us he has had enough, and that it is probably time to start heading back. He takes a cigarette out of his pocket and lights it, a familiar sight in this boat, as it is one of the only places I have ever seen him do so. The smell, too, is well known to me; that

contrast, between the natural scent of the water and the pines, and the strong odor of the burning cheap tobacco, used to make me uncomfortable when I was a child. As my father takes a drag of the cigarette this time, I find myself already missing the smell. The smoke wafts its way into nostalgia, and I will long for it from this day hence.

I direct the boat back towards shore, my father sitting in the front and smoking, the last rays of the sun lighting a small twinkle in his large, thick glasses. When we pull back into the dock, it is dark, and as my father makes his way out of the boat, my brother and I both feel hesitant, burdened by some sense of great, climactic purpose. But my father does not look back. He takes a deep breath as he glances out at the lake, then drops his cigarette in the water, climbing back onto the dock and walking away towards our cabin. His time here is done, and he is the only living figure amongst us seeming not to dwell on it.

Seasons pass. Night turns into day, and summer into fall, and fall into winter; the pines frost and the lake freezes solid, and the fish swim low in the water to stay alive, while the loons head south and the bears venture deep into the forest to hibernate. Winter eventually thaws, and life returns, and spring gives way to another hot summer, and a new host of fishermen cast their lines into the water, returning to land each night under another procession of long, slow sunsets. Years go by, and the cycle recurs, steady and unfaltering, in fathomless expanses of time that erode us each in turn. Only the lake remains constant. Its water rises and falls, summer to summer, and new cabins and docks and power lines are erected and torn down upon its shores, but the lake remains, and the pines stand tall, and the weeds grow wild, and the loon's cry echoes out into infinity, reverberating across the years as this secluded body of water spins through the ether in its steady cosmic pattern.

I open my eyes. It is daybreak, and a chill has wafted into the cabin. I rise slowly, my joints aching from the prior day's exertion, and blink a long, wandering dream from out of my eyes. I see my children sleeping soundly in the opposite bed, their mother lying with them, her arm wrapped loosely around the younger. She stirs, hearing me get up, and smiles at me; I smile back, softly. The weight of the dream still lingers.

I walk outside, into the cold morning air. The sun has only just begun to rise, its gentle pink glow bursting over that familiar horizon, above all the islands and pines, illuminating a few stray birds flying high over the trees. The water is calm, and the sky is mostly clear; it will be a comfortable day, though not necessarily the best for fishing. A long time ago, on a day like this, my father would have risen early, and gotten in the boat himself while we slept in the cabin, eager to get some fishing in before the sun beat too hard upon the water, and the fish all swam deep and grew sleepy. I wander down to the dock, and climb alone into the boat, though unlike him, I don't mean to fish. They were never what brought me here in the first place.

Starting the engine, I take the boat out of the bay, and speed out across the lake, no particular destination in mind. Whether I am running from or towards the dream, I cannot tell. I head where I have always gone when I have no clearer place in mind, to First Street. As I loosen my grip on the engine, and slow the boat in the process, I spot the majestic bald eagle perched in his or her giant nest in one of those tall pines along the island. He or she, or more likely an ancestor, has been in that nest as long as I can remember. On the first year I was here with my little brother, my father caught a Perch, an annoying little fish we always throw back rather than keeping. This one died on the line, however, so my father, spotting the bald eagle in that nest, gave the dead Perch a toss out from the boat. Immediately, the eagle sprang to action, spreading its daunting long wings and soaring low towards us, skimming the water and picking up the

perch in its talons before flying back up towards the nest. My brother and I had never seen anything like it.

On that day long ago when we scattered my father's ashes in a line along First Street, the eagle was there to watch. When I first felt the ashes slipping through my fingers, the bird was sitting in its nest; by the end, it was flying overhead, in slow and comforting circles. As I draw nearer now, my boat being rocked by the little waves the engine had created, the eagle does the same, flying out from its perch and soaring in circles above me, the sun continuing to rise behind it. A smile flickers across my face, and then a tear falls from my eye – taking a deep breath, I tear my gaze away from the eagle, and look down into the dark, softly rippling water. I trace my hand across its surface, the lake cool to the touch, and wonder what became of my father's ashes – whether a part of him still lives, mingled with the water or soil or weeds.

Finally, I glance back up into the sky. The eagle is gone, neither flying in those circles nor sitting in its nest. I turn to start the engine up again, thinking I should return to shore, before catching something in the corner of my eye. I turn to look ahead, and there is the eagle, soaring low over the water, its talons nearly skimming the surface like it did when I was a child. It is flying towards me, closer than I have ever seen it come. Before I can react, the eagle gracefully lands on the front edge of the boat, its wingspan longer than the width of the vessel. My breath catches in my throat as the eagle pulls in its wings, stares at me, and then slowly lowers its head in what looks like some sort of bow.

I only realize that tears have begun streaming from my eyes when their heat seeps into my cheeks, warming them in the cold morning air. Once they start, they do not stop, even when the eagle lifts its head again and smoothly leaps from the boat, unfurling its wings and soaring back into the air, off towards the horizon of the brilliant rising sun. The tears feel good. As they

stream down my face, obscuring my vision before the eagle flies out sight, they assure me of the one thing I know I feel in this moment, the one feeling I have sought to recapture on this lake since my days of youth: That in this space of wonder and of loss, I am whole.

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Isao Takahata Annotated Filmography

In this annotated filmography is listed each of Isao Takahata's feature films, with notes on titles, translation, production company, and the names and positions of collaborators mentioned throughout this study. Television series are not listed, as a complete catalogue of his television animation work in this form would be untenably long and complex.

The Great Adventure of Horus, Prince of the Sun (1968)

Japanese Title: 太陽の王子 ホルスの大冒険 (*Taiyō no Ōji: Horusu no Daibōken*)

Translation: *Prince of the Sun: The Great Adventure of Horus*

Also known as: *The Little Norse Prince, Little Norse Prince Valiant, Horus, Prince of the Sun*

Production: *Tōei Dōga*

Notable Collaborators: *Hayao Miyazaki (scene design, key animation), Yasuo Otsuka (animation director), Yoichi Kotabe (key animation)*

Panda! Go, Panda! (1972)

Japanese Title: パンダ・コパンダ (*Panda Kopanda*)

Translation: *Panda, Baby Panda*

Production: *Tokyo Movie Shinsha - A Productions*

Notable Collaborators: *Hayao Miyazaki (writer, scene design, key animation), Yasuo Otsuka (animation director, character design), Yoichi Kotabe (animation director)*

Panda! Go, Panda! Rainy Day Circus (1973)

Japanese title: パンダ・コパンダ 雨降りサーカスの巻 (*Panda Kopanda: Amefuri Saakasu no Maki*)

Translation: *Panda, Baby Panda: Winding Rainy Day Circus*

Production: *Tokyo Movie Shinsha - A Productions*

Notable Collaborators: *Hayao Miyazaki (writer, scene design, key animation), Yasuo Otsuka (animation director, character design), Yoichi Kotabe (animation director)*

Chie the Brat (1981)

Japanese Title: じゃりン子チエ (*Jarinko Chie*)

Translation: *Chie the Brat*

Also known as: *Downtown Story*

Production: *Tokyo Movie Shinsha, Toho Co. Ltd.*

Notable Collaborators: *Katsu Hoshi (composer)*

Gauche the Cellist (1982)

Japanese Title: セロ弾きのゴーシュ (Sero hiki no Gōshu)

Translation: *Gōshu the Cellist*

Production: *Oh! Production*

The Story of Yanagawa's Canals (1987)

Japanese Title: 柳川掘割物語 (Yanagawa Horiwari Monogatari)

Translation: *The Story of Yanagawa's Canals*

Production: *Independent (through Nibariki)*

Notable Collaborators: *Hayao Miyazaki (producer)*

Grave of the Fireflies (1988)

Japanese Title: 火垂るの墓 (Hotaru no haka)

Translation: *Grave of the Fireflies*

Production: *Studio Ghibli*

Notable Collaborators: *Yoshifumi Kondō (animation director, character design, storyboards)*

Only Yesterday (1991)

Japanese Title: おもひでぽろぽろ (Omoide Poroporo)

Translation: *Memories Pour Down*

Translation note: *This title is essentially untranslatable. Omoide means memory, but Poroporo is onomatopoeic, suggesting the sound or image of things falling to earth in large drops. Together, the words illustrate an image of memories pouring down.*

Production: *Studio Ghibli*

Notable Collaborators: *Hayao Miyazaki (general producer), Kazuo Oga (backgrounds), Yoshifumi Kondō (art direction & character design), Katsu Hoshi (composer)*

Pom Poko (1994)

Japanese Title: 平成狸合戦ぽんぽこ (*Heisei Tanuki Gassen Ponpoko*)

Translation: *Heisei-era Tanuki War Ponpoko*

Translation Note: *Heisei is the current era in Japan, having begun in 1989. In this case, it refers to the modern struggle the Tanuki face, as their war against the humans explicitly begins in the early nineties, thus indicating a modern status quo. Ponpoko is the onomatopoeia for the sound the Tanuki make when banging on their tummies, as they do several times during celebrations during the film. The word is featured in Japanese children songs, and is closely associated with the creatures.*

Production: *Studio Ghibli*

Notable Collaborators: *Toshio Suzuki (producer), Hayao Miyazaki (general producer), Kazuo Oga (art direction & backgrounds), Yoshifumi Kondō (key animation), Osamu Tanabe (key animation)*

My Neighbors the Yamadas (1999)

Japanese Title: ホーホケキョとなりの山田くん (*Hōhokekkyo tonari no Yamada-kun*)

Translation: *Hōhokekkyo, My Neighbors the Yamadas*

Translation Note: *Hōhokekkyo is an onomatopoeia for the sound made by the Uguisu, or Japanese bush warbler, and has no literal meaning within the title other than to indicate mood and atmosphere (the Uguisu is also a central figure in the film's marketing images).*

Production: *Studio Ghibli*

Notable Collaborators: *Toshio Suzuki (producer), Osamu Tanabe (co-storyboards)*

The Tale of the Princess Kaguya (2013)

Japanese Title: かぐや姫の物語 (*Kaguya-hime no Monogatari*)

Translation: *The Tale of Princess Kaguya*

Translation note: *While there is no definite article in Japanese, and thus no way to literally extrapolate the extra 'the' in the official English-language title, it is added for extra formality to fully convey the meaning of the honorific 'hime,' and has customarily been seen in translations of the original story as well.*

Production: *Studio Ghibli*

Notable Collaborators: *Joe Hisaishi (composer), Kazuo Oga (backgrounds), Osamu Tanabe (storyboards), Yoshiaki Nishimura (producer)*