



KARASU 烏



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KARASU

In Hideo Furukawa's novel サウンドトラック (Soundtrack), the protagonist finds powerful allies in crows, coming to understand their laws and morals. Crows are very numerous in Japan. Their voices sound like children crying or laughing. Their cries either guide you or throw you off from exploring an alley, depending on their town and your predisposition. Around the year 2000, in certain areas of Tokyo, the municipality started taking measures to halt their prosperity. Their large numbers were due to the ease with which they could access food in the form of trash. Restaurants, konbini, and homes produced so much waste exposed on the streets that it essentially created a daily, all-you-can-eat buffet, free for the taking.

One of the measures taken was the installation of bird-thwarting nets on garbage bags, but what showed to be actually effective was the betterment of excess food management strategies in the city, allowing to reduce the population by 70% in 20 years.

While the woman was performing her rite on my boyfriend, I kept looking past them at the crows. The net, which in fact was mentioned to protect the bag from them, was no match for them. Did you know that crows use ants as antibiotics? They attract them by stomping on their nests and letting them crawl over their wounds.

laying KAZASU

The area was quiet, with only a few people around, and her path made it clear she was heading directly toward us. She was coming from behind the monument. The crows were still rummaging. After some research, I realized she was a follower of one of Japan's new religions, or shinshūkyō 新宗教. They are present all over Japan and their architectonically experimental headquarters are disseminated throughout the archipelago. The Peace Tower, built by Perfect Liberty Kyōdan, is one of the most well-known; it looks like an alien shuttle pad built by termites.

I think she might specifically be a follower of Sukyo Mahikari 崇教真光. "Sukyo" refers to universal principles, and "Mahikari" means True Light.

One of the core practices of this religion is tekazashi 手かざし, or the laying on of hands. In this ritual, a practitioner hovers their hand above the forehead of another person (or even over animals, objects, or natural elements) to channel the Light of God, acting as a spiritual conduit or catalyst.

Perhaps the most famous shinshūkyō is Aum Shinrikyō オウム真理教, mainly because they were responsible for the sarin gas terrorist attack in Tōkyō's metro system in 1995. Some of these religious groups are considered cults, but most of them are communities made up of people in search of spiritual guidance.

TSUKA mound

The place where the encounter happened wasn't just another corner of Kyōto. Just before the woman approached us, we had been walking along a fence that enclosed a stupa atop a small hill, a mound. It was hard not to notice it and we might have paid more attention to it if we hadn't been distracted by the woman approaching.

Weeks later, back in Europe, a friend mentioned that there's an ear museum in Japan. I searched for "ear museum Japan," and the same monument appeared. It isn't a museum but rather an ear site, an ear mound: Mimizuka 耳塚.

In 1597, Toyotomi Hideyoshi launched a campaign to conquer the Korean peninsula. He ordered the decapitation of a large number of people, with their heads sent back to Japan as proof of victory. When transporting the heads became impractical due to their volume, his generals began severing noses instead, bringing those back to be buried in a mound initially called Hanazuka 鼻塚, or "Nose Mound." "Nose mound," however, likely sounded too brutal for modern sensibilities, so the name was changed to Mimizuka, meaning "Mound of Ears." If the word for mound is tsuka, why is it mimizuka and not mimitsuka? Because of Japanese euphonic rules, tsuka becomes zuka when preceded by certain words, like mimi. I suppose its to the ears.

A woman approached us and asked something about "happiness". We were going to the station in Kyoto. We couldn't understand the prayer. She was talking with a low tone of voice.

Our last in Kyoto. We were going to take the train to Tokyo.



We thanked each other, we didn't now what she had done, but we could tell she was being kind.

We were walking in the area around my favorite site: the Sanjūsangendō. Our path from Kawai Kanjirō's memorial house to the Kyoto Tower took us in front of the Mimizuka. We tried to guess who she could be.

I looked at her reciting the prayer on by partner, but my gaze kept being attracted by the crows behind them.

What had just happened? What was that?



A random person came from behind some kind of monument that we later identified as the Mimizuka.



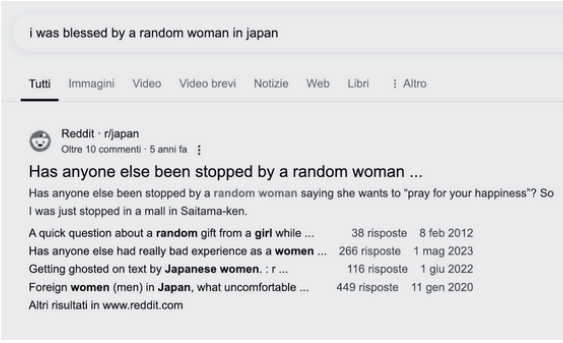
"Mimi" means ears.



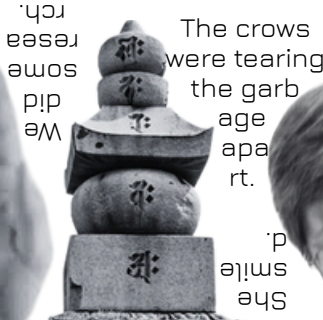
The woman approached us and asked to perform some kind of ritual related to happiness.

I think she was praying.

She did it to my boyfriend first, and then to me.



Behind her the street was empty but the crows kept tearing the garbage bag apart.



The crows were tearing the garbage bag apart.

We took off.

I kept looking past her and my partner, to the crows ripping the garbage bag in the back.



We nodded.

The Mimizuka is a monument.

The woman prayed upon us. Two crows were ripping the garbage apart. She raised her hands and whispered something unintelligible for around a minute.

An older woman approached us.

We thanked her and she thanked us. Then we just kept going towards Kyoto Station. The monument might have been dedicated to the crows. They are everywhere in Japan.

"Happiness" was the only word we actually understood. Were the crows aware of the impact of their actions?

I saw her hand raise in front of my partner's head.