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Picturing the Flames of Daimonji

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CLARK LUNBERRY

Picturing the Flames of Daimonji

“...silence in the house, not a sound, only the fire, no flames now,
embers [*Pause.*] Embers. [*Pause.*] Shifting, lapsing, furtive...”

Samuel Beckett, *Embers*

“I shall speak of ghost, of flame, and of ashes.”

Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit*

Three Women

As the fires were burning on top of the mountain, I saw before me the woman holding out the photograph, the picture in her hands set against the flames. With one arm outstretched and the other clasping her camera, she then proceeded to take a photograph of the photograph that she held tightly, the tall fires burning just a few feet in front of her. From where I stood, the picture that the woman was holding appeared to be of another woman, though I couldn't be sure; she was around ten feet away and down the mountain trail. I then turned my own camera onto this scene, taking a photograph of the woman who was taking a photograph of the photograph. We were surrounded by hundreds of others standing together on the side of the mountain, the lights of Kyoto spreading out beneath us.

It was the end of the O-Bon festival, annually held on August 16th, around 8:05 in the evening, and, from where I stood at the top of the mountain, the fires of Daimonji were burning furiously—on the right and the left, above and below, spelling out in flames the enormous Chinese character *dai* (大). In the distance, surrounding the city, the shaped fires on four other mountains—all of them an integral part of Kyoto's Daimonji festivities—would also soon be seen, ignited separately in five-minute intervals.

Moments later, the woman that I had watched and then photographed handed her camera to someone beside her; perhaps her daughter, though I couldn't be sure. From where I stood, there was, however, a clear resemblance. She, the mother, if it *was* the mother, then posed for the camera, as she held up in her hands the same photograph that she'd held moments before. This time, though, she was photo-

graphed *with* the photograph, positioning herself alongside the person in the picture. As if standing together, the two women looked into the camera as the photograph was taken, both of them holding still for the picture, the fires burning just over their shoulders.

I continued to take photographs of these three women and, with the aid of my camera, zooming in, was then able to see more clearly that the original person in the picture was an older woman who very much resembled the woman holding the photograph. In addition, this same woman also resembled the younger woman who was, at that moment, taking a photograph of her. Developing before my eyes, there was a kind of generational mirroring reflected between the three women, with the photographed family resemblances set against the photographed flames.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR

Three Generations

Let's suppose, not unreasonably, that what I was seeing that night was in fact what it appeared to be: three generations of women—a daughter, a mother, and a grandmother—gathered together at the fires of Daimonji, and gathered together also in photographs taken of them: the mother's, the daughter's and then finally mine. Let's suppose as well that the grandmother in that first photograph is dead, perhaps recently dead, and that the mother who resembles her is now mourning her loss, grieving still, with the daughter (who resembles *her*) subsequently photographing them both standing before the flames. After all, O-Bon is a festival of and for the dead, an annual event when the ancestral spirits return from what, in Japanese, is translated as the "other world" to spend three days in "this world," the world in which, living, they'd once inhabited—the world in which, living, we inhabit now. The Daimonji festival, on the final day of O-Bon, marks the conclusion of that brief period of the return of the dead, and the official "sending off" of the ancestral spirits back to the "other world" where they will remain until the following year.

Notably, this "other world," this spirit world from which the dead have briefly returned, is not generally characterized as occupying an otherworldly dimension, a metaphysical or supernatural space that transcends our physical, natural world, or one that exists entirely elsewhere from our own. Instead, this "other world" is, it would seem, a world *within* the world, or one that is somehow dimensionally adjacent to it, resembling it (as one person might physically resemble another—the dead resembling the living, the living resembling the dead). Understood as geographically located

"over the mountains," this "other world" remains, however, beyond the boundaries of the known city itself, the city of Kyoto seen that night just beyond the Daimonji flames.

In light of the festival's promised return of the dead, the photographed woman whom I saw photographed that night, the one who was holding out the photograph of her own mirroring mother, might now be understood as having enacted something of the historical, ritualistic actions that have long been at the heart of O-Bon. For this mother, as she set the photograph of her dead mother against the flames, was seen momentarily reuniting and then "send[ing] off" the spirit within that image back to the "other world." Generationally crossing, this event was soon followed by this other mother handing the camera to her mirroring daughter, as she then placed herself alongside her own mother in the photograph. In that split-second of the camera's quiet action, they—the mother and her mother, the dead mother alongside the living one—were joined together in the daughter's just-taken photograph of them. Shoulder to shoulder, picture within picture, their twinned images were photographed beside the light of the fire before the mother's, the grandmother's, final separation into the smoke of night.



Writing on the Mountain

The Daimonji festival's long tradition of engaging the ancestral spirits of the "other world" has generally involved, not photographs of the dead, but their written names, and the writing of these names by those who have survived them, by those still living. Days before the Daimonji fires, thousands of people gather at sites throughout the city, but in particular at the base of Daimonji, just outside Ginkaku-ji. There, they purchase and then write upon small split logs, or flat clean-cut *gomagi* sticks. These pieces of wood are later transported to the top of the mountain, the bundles carefully assembled into around 100 different highly flammable pyres that have been precisely laid out across the mountain to form the monumental character *Dai*.

In the days leading up to the festival, I often visited Ginkaku-ji where the writing was occurring, observing the many people, young and old alike, who had arrived to write out the names of their ancestors, or sometimes also to write a prayerful appeal to the gods. Great care and deliberation were taken in the act of writing on the wood, a seriousness of purpose by which the messages were inscribed. This ceremonial writing, performed in the traditional manner with a brush dipped into a bowl of black ink, is intended as a means of communicating, of transmitting a message from this world to the other.

There's something remarkable, even moving, about watching such writing as it carefully occurs, this very private act of putting words onto wood, as a public and ritualistic event intended to communicate between worlds. And if Wittgenstein is right that there is no such thing as a "private language," there is nonetheless a kind of privacy *of* language, *in*

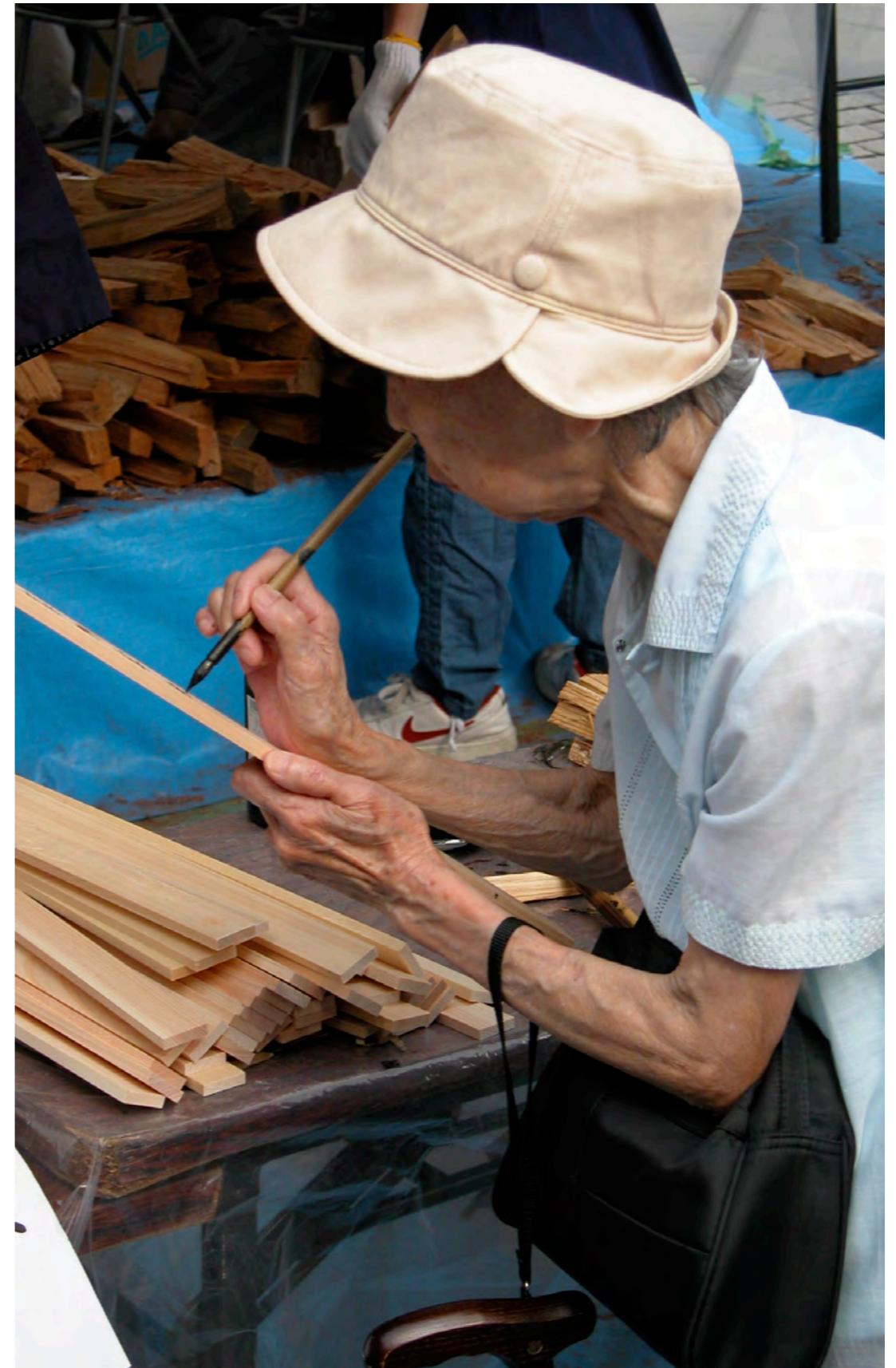
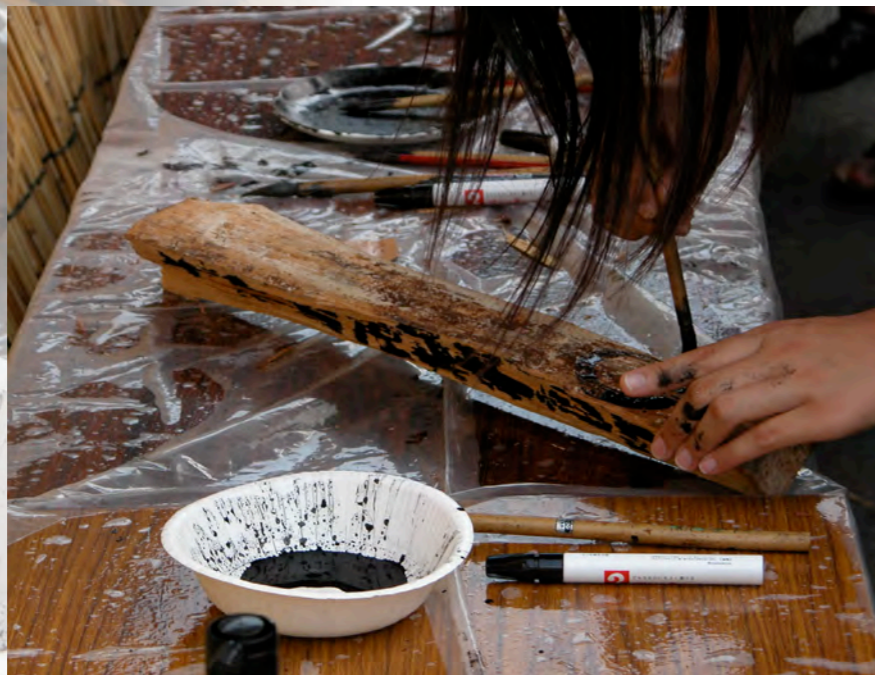
public, and in the visible spectacle of a hand dipping brush into ink, applying ink onto wood, the wetness of just-written words drying in the afternoon light.

And taking photographs, of course, allowed for a degree of scrutiny of such public writing that might otherwise have proven difficult. For through the camera's viewfinder, I was able to attain a degree of proximity to those involved in the event, seeing close-up (looking over shoulders) the care and concern put into this calligraphic act of writing the names of the dead, the wishes of the living. I watched the hands holding the brushes and, as the piece of wood was held in the other hand (not unlike the mother I'd soon see holding the photograph), the names and messages were written, their lines of black liquid shaping into mystic meaning.

All of this writing would, once transported to the top of the mountain, come to create that other writing that is finally formed up above, that single character *Dai*. For those thousands of individual pieces of wood written in the days leading up to the Daimonji festival are finally assembled into the pyres that then spell out that word. And with this collective event of memorialization and inscription, one sees that it is, in fact, the many thousands of people individually writing on the wood who have, together, formed that one enormous word on top of the mountain, a shared and public act of writing on the landscape. Like a monumental manifestation of a traditional Japanese *renga*, a linked-poem collectively composed, this myriad of private messages finally forms that opening utterance of Daimonji's brief and blazing prayer, a ritualistic poem intoned in fire.

This prayerful sending off of those previously written words to the "other world" acts as an agent of ceremonial

destruction, a kind of transubstantiation of language into sacred smoke, through the intermediary agent of flame. Indeed, this sacramental burning might even now be understood, in more contemporary terms, as what Derrida characterized as a “writing under erasure,” offering a means of saying and un-saying what cannot be said about that “other world,” and of which, echoing Wittgenstein, “we must remain silent.” However, with the fires of Daimonji, in this annual act that is so vividly annulling (while fulfilling) of its own carefully wrought inscriptions, what we see is a writing that is not just “under erasure,” but a writing under incineration. Having just days before been so carefully written by those at the base of the mountain, the names of the dead and the wishes of the living are then reduced to cinders and ash, the smoke rising up as if directed to the “other world,” as if translated out “over the mountains.”





Writing with the Camera

Let's suppose, not unreasonably, that the mother and the daughter I photographed that night had earlier contributed to the fires then blazing; that in the days leading up to the festival they too had written on wood the name of their loved one, that other mother. Let's suppose also that the piece of wood upon which the dead woman's name had earlier been written was now, piled in its pyre, burning somewhere on the mountain; and, as the photographs of the living mother were being taken by the daughter, the name of the dead mother was being simultaneously transformed into flame, a part of the fiery backdrop to the now-photographed scene.

Photography is, of course, at the heart of so much contemporary ritual. Still, photography's presence and, in particular, its omnipresence at such rituals as the concluding Daimonji fires contributes to photography's own easily overlooked involvement in the events, its psychic (even spiritual) connection to the situation unfolding. Roland Barthes, in his seminal book on photography, *Camera Lucida*, strove to break through our own over-exposure to photography, to reawaken us to the medium's latent magic, its forgotten "madness." Seeing photography anew, Barthes suggested that, since its inception in the 19th century, photography has always presented, acknowledged or not, an enhanced awareness of time itself, its passage out of the present and into a fixed and photographed past, offering a form "of primitive theater, a kind of *Tableau Vivant*, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead."

Barthes' book was written not long after his own mother had died (with his own untimely, accidental death tragically

near). In what consequently turned out to be his final book, Barthes' writing is very much infused and motivated by his own sustained mourning for his mother. In his bereavement, Barthes undertakes a reexamination of the uncanny relationship manifested between photography and death. Looking at an assortment of photographs, he locates in these images evidence of death's own chemical imprint within the medium itself. And it is there, Barthes writes, that the sources of trapped light have both captured and intimated a kind of physical transcendence of time, while offering the "living image of a dead thing." Barthes goes on to note that even the very word "Photograph" retains etymologically within it, "through its root, a relation to 'spectacle' and adds to it that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead." But how, one wonders, were the dead to return through an image, as if returning through the umbilical "root" of a word and, in their return, to defy time, coming back to keep company with the ones seeking them?

Of the mother in Kyoto who was seen photographing her photographed mother, the "spectacle" of death that I witnessed in the remarkable familial resemblances of the three women present might now also be understood as having offered not just the "return of the dead," but a new means of "sending [them] off." For, alongside the centuries-old custom of burning the names of the dead, photography today participates in and re-imagines this now-extended ritual, enacting through the actions of the camera a new means of spiritual transmission between worlds.

As indicated, what Barthes saw in his own closely examined photographs was "evidence" of the presence of death, followed by a very personal prefiguring of his dead mother's

return within a photograph of her. But seen also in the photograph was an even more personal prefiguring of death, his *own* death written within the image, a kind of death-sentence read in the root of the word, for "...at the end of this first death [his mother's], my own death is inscribed; between the two, nothing more than waiting..." (As noted, Barthes' fateful insight would prove fatally true, his own death just around the corner, when he was hit one afternoon by a laundry van while walking the streets of Paris.)

Photographing the three women against those sacred flames, what I saw that night in Kyoto was evidence of another mother's death, another mother's return, and Daimonji's enduring ritual of inscribed longing and loss, of engagement and release written between the worlds, and death inexorably located within it. And of those flames, inscribed in the heat of the night, its mirroring reflections finally reflected us all, with our own names already registered within its prewritten records.



Three Sites

On top of the mountain, the inscribed Dai of Daimonji represents both a word and a picture. For this sign can be seen as both the Chinese character of “big,” “great” or “grand,” but also as an enormous pictographic representation, or symbol, of the human form, with arms and legs outstretched, as if splayed monumentally across the mountaintop. As such, these two signs of Daimonji—the ideographically *read* and the pictographically *seen*—are simultaneously present at the site, as word or image, as word *and* image.

In addition, the ideographic dai is the initiating line of the “Great” wheel of Buddhism, the opening utterance of a consecrated prayer that orients this festival. Seen in this manner, one thus understands the Dai of Daimonji—the largest and most prominent of the five fires on the Kyoto mountains—as the first word of a continuing prayer that begins there, upon the mountain, but then spreads (like fire) across the expansive space of the city, from mountaintop to mountaintop, where the four other fires continue and then complete that prayer. Once more, the traditional renga, or linked poem, comes to mind, as it had before with the thousands of people contributing their writing to the flames; this time, though, the linking is geographic, as the five parts of the poem move from mountain to mountain, gradually encircling the city of Kyoto below.

Of the four other fires, the “*myo*” and “*ho*,” from the *Lotus Sutra*, are seen several miles away; this is then followed by the fiery pictogram in the shape of a boat that forms itself further off in the distance (a vessel intended for the spirits of the dead and their voyage from the “other world”). Next, a

much smaller, but otherwise identical Dai is seen way off to the west (and where, in the flames, the spirits are said to “purify” themselves again after having been tainted by their brief return to the “mundane world”). Finally, the ancestral spirits make their exit through the *torii* gate pictogram (the fifth figure) to the extreme west of Kyoto, as the fiery culmination of the festival, the end of the evening, the end of O-bon, the end of the prayer.

It is, of course, also noteworthy how the very word inscribed upon the mountain is itself so very “big,” “great” and “grand,” with its first stroke at nearly 75 meters, the second at 160, and the third at 120. With the massive scale of this word in mind, one can now add to Daimonji’s ideographic and pictographic components a third dimension that contributes even further to the form’s stature and significance: the sheer physical fact of the character’s prodigious presence, as a word that, written above the city, represents its own vast scale, a sign of itself prayerfully intoning something of its own immensity, just prior to that form’s own imminent destruction.

On the night of Daimonji’s fires, those on the mountain stand within the word, the pictographic form that represents us, our bodies symbolized in its shape. Made miniature by the character’s immense scale, as if reduced within the frame of a photograph, we are dwarfed by the word’s massive size. Among the sprawling limbs and ligaments of this burning word, we are positioned beside the fires, as the character is ceremoniously destroyed right before our eyes, feeling its flaming lines as they spell out the greatness of the Dai, alongside the incinerating diminutions of each of us.



Dreaming Daimonji

This is true; this is remembered; this actually happened (in as much as a dream can be said to happen). Sleeping in Kyoto on that first night of O-bon, August 13th, and three days before the fires of Daimonji, I dreamt of my dead mother and, then, separately, later, of my dead grandmother. Of these two distinct dreams, one vivid detail, one clear image is still remembered, and it is of my grandmother, dead for decades, but who was briefly resurrected that night in the heat of my dream. I was walking around a corner, or perhaps entering a room of some kind, and there, suddenly, she was, my grandmother in a floral dress, blue, I believe, standing straight up against a wall. I remember thinking, within the dream (in as much as one can be said to think within a dream), how tall my grandmother seemed at the time, standing there alone, as I approached her. Or was she waiting for me? The expression upon her face looked coldly neutral at the time, unmoving, and certainly unmoved by my being there, perhaps disapproving of my presence within the dream, an intrusion onto her unreality, onto the privacy of her being dead, her grandson now next to her, after so many years apart. “Why are you here?” her face, almost scolding, seemed to say.

As for my grandmother appearing tall at the time, at the time of the dream (in as much as there can be said to be time in a dream), that detail about my grandmother’s height struck me later, once awake, as an odd one to have recalled. For my grandmother, living, was not particularly tall, and otherwise quite average in height. Still, in the dream, perhaps it was instead I who was the one who had become small, looking up at her, reduced by her presence, made

miniature by her height (like a figure reduced within a photograph, or one seen from a distance on the side of a large mountain), as if I were a child again, or a child in the dream, as a little boy seeing from below my living grandmother towering above me, momentarily returned, us together again.

Both my grandmother and I then quickly vanished and the dream disappeared into thin air. I was gone, she was gone; I was awake and she was dead again. Nonetheless, this fleeting image of my tall grandmother stayed with me that day and, in fact, stays with me still. It is as if, within the dream, I’d somehow photographed a fragment of that dream, of my grandmother standing so tall against the wall, and that I could then see it again and again. As if those figures seen within dreams might be made to hold still for a moment, to pose for a picture, to be captured by a camera that had been somehow smuggled into the otherworldly space of the dream, the image caught before those within it otherwise faded away, as if disappearing in a puff of smoke.

Being in Kyoto during O-bon, and thinking about the rituals and traditions surrounding this ancient Japanese holiday, it occurred to me at the time that the appearance of both my grandmother and mother at the very start of O-bon, at the very time, August 13th, when the ancestral spirits are believed to return to “this world,” might somehow be understood to have constituted something not entirely unlike the return of my own ancestral spirits, manifested in the form of a dream. After all, what, I innocently wondered, are spirits? What, after all, are the images innocently seen within a dream? Might the two be more similar in substance than otherwise imagined, even resembling each other in some manner (as one person, seen in a photograph, resembles

another)? Might my mother, and my tall grandmother, even be imagined as having come back to me in the darkened night, or I to them, their spirits awakened in my slumber? But spirits awakened by whom? By *me*? As if those by whom I had been primordially conceived, I had now—after their deaths, *postmortemly*—conceived in return. Either way, their images would seem to have been called forth, as if sent, or pictorially projected onto the surface of my own sleeping self, as elusive images developed from out of the darkroom of my own dreams.

Months later, back home, I discovered to my astonishment a photograph of my grandmother, one that bore a striking resemblance to the grandmother seen in my dream—standing tall, against a wall, in a floral dress. I had entirely forgotten that I had this picture, tucked away in a pile of many other family photographs. Still, that image must have long ago imprinted itself onto my imagination in such a way that, in my dream, it had come forth, as if chemically emerging into the consciousness of my unconsciousness, my grandmother coming back to me, from beyond the grave, from out of the forgotten photograph into the recollected dream. Had she, or something of her (call it spirit, if you will), been stored there in the image all along, preserved and waiting for restoration?



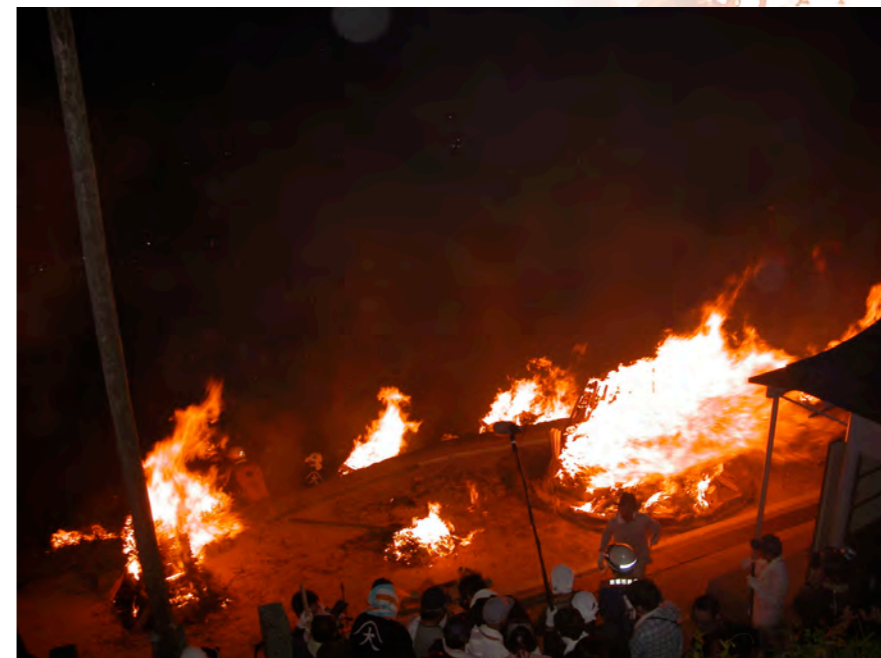
Staging Death

One might reasonably assume that the dead are indifferent to the Daimonji festivities, unmoved by its elaborate and magnificent rituals, and that Daimonji is instead a festival for the living, the not-yet-dead. Yes, this festival is intended as a means of memorialization for the living, of the dead, a way to honor and remember those perhaps loved and now lost, or lost and now loved. However, might the Daimonji Festival, as a *de facto* event for the living, be seen as one in which death itself is ritualistically foreshadowed by its own fiery events, in which a staging of death is represented for all to see? For the fires of Daimonji are in fact set up with an arrangement of many different pyre-like structures which, when ignited, then enact, or resemble, the events of a crematory-like destruction. We stand back, adjacent to the fires, as if present at our own incineration, feeling the flames that will eventually consume us all.

Photography, as noted in the photographs of the three women participating in the Daimonji festival, creates a kind of hole in the real, a pinhole into which death climbs in, a two-dimensional space into which we, reduced or miniaturized, flattened, finally squeeze through. The camera thus has within it, as if built into the very medium of photography, death's own latent inscription, a mark of mortality placed upon everything that it touches. By stopping time, the camera enframes and exposes time's otherwise unstoppable flux and flow. "The true picture of the past flits by," Walter Benjamin wrote of photography. "The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again." While at Daimonji it is not only the past which "flashes up," but the future as well, *our* future, in which the violent flash of Daimonji's fires

act as the capturing flash of a camera picturing us inside its flames.

Daimonji might, with photography and fire, be imagined as a kind of theater, a *tableau vivant*, in which a ritualistic initiation is annually enacted, in which the body's own immanent vanishings are represented for all of us to see, for all of us to feel. "Impermanence," as Dōgen described it, is a "fact before your eyes." While before *our* eyes at Daimonji, high atop the mountain, adjacent to the fires, we, the living, are there, as if present at our own prefigured cremation. For, in commemorating the deaths of ancestors, aren't we in part commemorating, in reverse, something of our own inevitable deaths, remembering what has yet to happen (by forgetting what has already happened to others), rehearsing the ritual of our own disappearance, a staged ceremony at which finally we cannot be present but to which we are all certainly invited, or rather, required to attend?





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This article is dedicated to Michael Lazarin and Hitomi Shimizu