Teeth

*By Phil Kaye*

\*Konnichiwa is what I call my Japanese grandfather

In 1945 this Tokyo home was burned to the ground.

Grampy is what I call my American grandfather

In 1945 he was serving on the U.S.S. Shangri-la, sending off American

fighter pilots to burn down Japanese houses

Our jaws have not yet healed.

\*1906 Poland.

Grampy’s father is hiding in an oven. He has heard men singing on the

street below, hyenas my family called them, after drinks and songs the

outside townspeople will come into the Jewish ghetto for a celebration

beating. Molar fireworks and eyelid explosions. Even when Grampy’s father

grows up the sound of sudden song breaks his body into a sweat.

Fear of joy is the darkest of captivities.

\*1975 Tokoyo.

My father, the long-haired student with the pension for bad sexual

innuendo meets Rako Hori, the well dressed banker who forgets the

choruses to her favorite songs. Twelve years later they give birth to a lanky

lightblub.

\*1999.

My mother speaks to me in Japanese. Most days I don’t have the strength

to ask her to translate the big words. We burned that house down, Mother.

Don’t you remember?

\*1771 Prague.

In the heart of the city is a Jewish cemetery, the only plot of land where

Grampy’s ancestors were allowed to be buried. When they ran out of room

they had no choice but to stack bodies one on top of the other, now there

are hills of tombs. Individual tombstones jutting out crooked like valiant

teeth emerging from a jaw left to rot.

\*1985 My parent’s wedding.

The two families sit together smiling wider than they need to. Montague

must be so happy we can Capulet this all go.

\*1997.

From the safety of his Tokyo apartment Konnichiwa scrawls postcards to his

Old four-poster bed: haven’t been able to sleep since you left, wish you

were here.

\*1999.

I sit with Grampy’s cousin. He is 91 and dressed in full uniform. I beg with

him to untie the knots clenched in his forehead. He says, “Hate is a strong

word, but it is the only strength that I have left. How am I to forgive the

men that severed the truck of my family tree and used its timber in the

fireplaces of their own homes?”

\*2010.

Grampy and I sit together watching his favorite: baseball. In the infertile

glow of the television I see his face wet. Grampy’s sits in his wheelchair,

mouth open, teeth gasping out of his gums like violent and valiant

tombstones in a cemetery left to rot. The teeth sit and I can still read them.

William Chotles, killed at Auschwitz.

Sara Lee killed at Dachau.

Bill Kaye killed off the coast of Okinawa.

“I will never forget what happened to our family, Grampy,” and he looks at

me with the surprised innocence of a child struck for the first time.

\*“Forgetting is the only gift I wish to give you. I have given away my eldest

son trying to bury a hatred I can no longer burden. There are nights I am

kept awake by the birthday songs of children I never let live. A plague on

both your houses. They have made worm’s meat of me.”