

from Death Obscura

Rick Bursky

Without Explanation

Ayano Kobayashi sat next to her cousin on a bus. She was a forty-two year old bookkeeper for a shoe manufacturer in Northern Japan. The cousin thought Ayano fell asleep. But she wasn't asleep, she had suffered a brain aneurysm. At the moment the cousin realized something was very wrong the bus stopped in front of Nagoya University Hospital. I was once ordered into a river at night to retrieve a dead body. Do both eyes close together or does one lag with cowardliness? Ayano was pronounced dead in the emergency room. A clean white sheet placed over the body. Her shoes were removed and given to the cousin. The body moved to the hospital morgue in the basement where it was examined and x-rayed. The date was August 4th, 1973. I am one of the few people who believe that the unseasonable rain had something to do with what happened. Eventually, the electricity in every brain stops leaving it dark as a night sky after a lightning storm. And then what? Seventeen hours after Ayano Kobayashi was pronounced dead she was found walking barefoot and sobbing through a basement hallway. It doesn't matter how the hospital explained this. Though she was thought of as a happy woman with no history of depression, three weeks later Ayano drowned herself in a public swimming pool at night. Her neatly folded clothes were found on a nearby bench. There was no note.

The Obituaries

In 1900, seventy-two colleges offered courses in writing obituaries. I wonder, though not often, if this was out of respect for death or life. Three colleges have closed since then. A well-crafted obituary has undertones of a self-effacing apology. By 1965, only four courses remained. Three ended in 1973, and the last was dropped in 1977. Though people have continued to die. Antoinette De Paiva was an associate professor at Brooklyn College when she taught the last course. When I interviewed Ms. De Paiva over the phone she was retired in Lancaster, California. A polite woman, she asked if I would mind if she ate midget plums picked from a tree in her yard and smoked Pall Malls as we spoke she. There were pauses in the conversation when she drew on the cigarettes, followed by quick bursts of facts, as if to make up for the silence. She had re-written her own obituary one hundred and eleven times, “like a self-portrait;” and offered to write a draft of mine. I told her my age and said I was too young. She said I wasn’t.

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