

## Gedächtnis and Erinnerung

[Letters] “The most beautiful part of your body is where it’s headed. & Remember, loneliness is still time spent with the world. Here is the room with everyone in it. Your dead friends passing through you like wind through a wind chime. Here’s a desk with the gimp leg& a brick to make it last. Yes, here’s a room so warm and blood-close, I swear, you will wake- & mistake these walls for skin.” This is a beautiful stanza from Someday I’ll Love Ocean Vuong, by the poet Ocean who identified himself as a poor Asian American queer kid who grew up in a family that has fled to the US as refugees, with the father absent. These lines could be seen as a point of departure for the reading of the letters in Kare Tei Yamashita’s Letters to Memory, as I find these letters to be lyrical prose-poems that reveal the inner landscapes to the outside world. As complicated turmoil of suffering, repression and loss overflow the limits of individual experience, so that soliloquies spontaneously enlarge themselves into dialogues-conversations-an anthology of letters that’s published and circulated as a part of collective memory. The world itself is a room with everyone in it, and it is often the outside we discover at our most interior point, so much so that we cannot say whether we are within the outside, or the outside is within us. An interesting observation made while going through these letters is that the letters are not so much constructed around the representation of the event at their traumatic core, but around its absence, which means that the narrative no longer tells the story of actions but becomes a history of affect and emotions, or to use Raymond Williams’s phrase, the “structure of feeling” in terms of

which this generation lived these events. The absent referent is not treated merely as the unrepresentable, but is accorded, at another level, the authority of a truth in its own right: as the form of appearance of an ontological crack at the core of individual being. The rending of the unity of the self is at its extreme during the trials where the individuals are expected to give testimonies that determine loyalty/betrayal. "They were permitted free passage to testify against others for treasonable acts. The experience of testifying at the trial must have been terrifying and confusing." On the other hand, it could be ironic when "Camp gave his mother a break from constant labor, that being able to spend her days painting was a hidden gift. The first time the sense of leisurely pleasure." The alienation from the previous female domestic roles allowed women the possibility to experiment with their creative impulses for the first time. The sense of loss and pain goes hand in hand with an undying yearning for living properly despite the circumstances, or in other words, the strength of hope and resilience---yet still I rise. "Knowing Tomi, she probably wore a corset all through camp; nothing would stop her from looking svelte, with proper posture and bosom in place, a woman of vitality." Something else that's surprising about these letters is their incredible eloquence. Suppose "Mean years had turned people mean; that is also to say terse, speechless, socially closed, afraid and mistrusting", in the case of these letters, language hasn't failed. There are moments of interruptions, silences, and repetitions, yet overall, writing has created the forms in which the ontology during a historical catastrophe finds expression.

[Memories] “Stories bloom as a kaleidoscope, a space where events aggregate in infinite designs.... Vyasa traces the root meaning of memory: to be mindful, to care for something. Thus, memory is practical, creating and re-creating, re-membling, the process by which anything is cared for. Memory is passed on so that we may continue to care. But what about unwanted memory, the traumatic and violent memory of horrific and terrible deeds, of genocide, torture, imprisonment, irrevocable loss? Gently you remind me that to suffer is the human condition, and attachment is its cause. Trauma means to hold on to anger. Memory and loss must be cared for to lose anger.” It is experience that accompanies one to the far reaches of time, that fills and articulates time. Time is even found in eternity, but it is earthly, worldly time, it no longer destroys, but merely completes. Memory (Gedächtnis), both voluntary and involuntary, aims to protect our impressions, while reminiscence (Erinnerung) aims at their dissolution. Sometimes to forget is to heal, the ultimate protection against stimuli, shock, and pain. The trauma is very often an “unexperienced disaster, that which is beyond any possibility of experience”, there is both the latency and the disassociation from biographical narrative. It is not only that the victim himself or herself faces this “unspeakable” experience, even the audience who listens to the description faces difficulty in believing---what Lawrence Langer has called “the vast imaginative space” separating what he had endured from the audience’s capacity to absorb it.” That vast imaginative space is exactly the gap between the familiar reality and the shocking trauma that’s beyond any possibility of experience.