

## First the Darkness, Then the Light

Jami Nakamura Lin reckons with old journals, ancestral folklore and the yōkai, or spirit world, to reimagine the modern memoir.

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by **Mek Yimam**

@1000hoursleft

Mek Yimam is a writer, editor and comic artist who lives and works on Dja Dja Wurrung Country.

From age five, Jami Nakamura Lin journalled obsessively. Her notebooks now fill three large bookshelves, stacks of milk crates and towers of bankers boxes. Then there's a digital trail across hard drives and on the servers of LiveJournal and Xanga – blogging sites that had their heyday in the early 2000s, when Lin was a teen.

"It's always been restorative for me, to put my experiences into words," says the Chicago-based author. But when taking stock of her archive while developing her debut memoir, Lin became conscious that one particular story, once on the page, would be the lens through which all else was read: in 2006, she was hospitalised following an overdose on pills she'd used to self-medicate her then undiagnosed bipolar disorder. But her story doesn't begin nor end there.

*The Night Parade: A Speculative Memoir* juxtaposes Lin's own stories with folklore from her ancestral lands – Okinawa, Japan and Taiwan – illuminating her experiences of family, grief, motherhood and mental illness. In this experimental, genre-bending work,

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supernatural characters also come to life through illustrations by her sister, Cori Nakamura Lin.

*The Night Parade's* folklore and yōkai – a Japanese catchall term for spirit entities – include those Lin grew up with, care of stories her mother had read to her and songs her grandmother had sung. Of all the yōkai, it's the rokurokubi, a cursed woman, to which Lin is most drawn, even planning to get it tattooed. An illustration in the book shows the rokurokubi lying on a futon: her neck is stretched, contorting away from her body, tentacle-like, while her head floats above – eyes shut, mouth wide open, spewing blood. "The relationship between body and mind, for me, has been so fraught in different ways, yet so integral," says Lin. "This woman, with a stretching neck, and this thing that only happens at night, felt so akin to what I've felt."

The "thing" to which Lin refers is the rokurokubi's proclivity for wandering in the wee hours, her head departing through a window while her body remains in repose. As a teen, Lin would count out pills each night, recording the dosage and effects. In detached

second-person tense, she writes, "Under the pills your body and mind splinter."

Writing her memoir meant crafting a coherent narrative from something that, in Lin's words, was inherently fractured. "I tried to be as true as I could to having the pieces be fragmented, while also creating something that is comprehensible to read. So there were trade-offs," she says. "A smoothing of things... It was a move towards the Hello Kitty version of the past."

In the book, Lin cites the kappa – a turtle-like humanoid water sprite – as a creature that, over time, has been made palatable for those outside of the tradition to which it belongs. The ugly, malevolent figure of Japanese folklore has morphed into the smiling, cartoonish version preferred by the plush toy market. In some ways, *The Night Parade* has similarly reshaped the contours of Lin's past.

"My relationship to different experiences has changed," she reflects. "Before, it felt loose and amorphous, like a whirlpool. Now I can see the shape of it. The geography is clear. It seems less like uncharted terrain." The experience has also freed the author from the hold of 2006. "It's still a central thing," she says, "but, after narrativising it, it seems like part of a larger story, instead of being pulled back to that specific place." She laughs with the recognition that she is, in fact, being pulled back to that critical year for her current project – a speculative fiction novel set in 2006, featuring teenaged characters.

No date is yet set for the novel's release, but that doesn't stop Lin's five-year-old from asking when it'll be finished. "As an artist, she draws, then has us write down the words. So she writes books every week, and she's always tired at how long it takes me to write books."

These days, Lin's journalling has dwindled. She wishes she could fit morning pages into her routine – the stream of consciousness writing method prescribed in Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way* as a panacea for emotional, creative and spiritual blocks. Still, her child's prolific output means there's paper everywhere, covering everything. As Lin beams in on a video call from her home, her background is blurred. Details of children's art, and the markers of life – from the sentimental to the practical – are smoothed beyond distinction. A story for another day. ■

*THE NIGHT PARADE: A SPECULATIVE MEMOIR* IS OUT NOW. IF YOU OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW NEEDS HELP WITH DRUG OR ALCOHOL ADDICTION, CALL DIRECTLINE ON 1800 888 236.

