Even the Gargoyle Is Frightened

Karl Taro Greenfeld

On the eighth day of the third month of the eighteenth year of our Emperor, in incipient dawn, beneath high, frothy clouds like the foam atop whisked tea, we set sail from Yokosuka. The embarkation of a great warship, no matter how depleted and underprovisioned it might be, is a stirring sight. Despite the hour, the wharf was crowded with family members seeing off loved ones: wives, mothers, daughters, sons, a half-dozen Shinto priests in black robes swinging incense lanterns casting sparks, even a few dogs barking in the dim light. From the flight deck I searched the crowd for Lieutenant Urabe but failed to discern him in the dark.

Photo from the archives of the Kure Maritime Museum

At the outset of previous fleet operations, this aircraft carrier would leave port with its sixty-four aircraft freshly painted, scrubbed and armed on deck, nearly two thousand sailors, airmen, flight crew and gunners hailing banzai, a dazzling display of firepower and war-making capability. Now the men still made a show of shouting and cheering, but the Gargoyle made the decision to keep the paltry air wing of sixteen planes out of sight on the hangar deck. In campaigns past, the carrier would have sailed in broad daylight; now, wary of American bombers, we slipped dishonorably out of the harbor under cover of near darkness.

We were towed beyond the first anchorage to the channel, and then, as if to reassure the family members who could barely see us anyway, the Gargoyle ordered the turbines to full, and in the calm morning water we were soon making our thirty-four-knots top speed. Fifteen minutes later, knowing he needed to save every precious liter of diesel, he ordered two of the Kanpons shut down so that we cruised at a sluggish seventeen.

I was greeted upon coming aboard by Boatswain Kobayashi, a boy who nodded proudly when I correctly guessed his age. This was the sixteen-year-old's first tour of duty, he reported, and he was enthusiastic about being at sea. Thus far, his career in the Imperial Navy consisted of scrubbing and swabbing a doorway and stairwell connecting the second deck and the third deck—about twenty-five square meters he had so vigorously scoured that he had stripped the paint. Cleaning detail, apparently, was a twice-daily ritual aboard the carrier. And the rations on board, he told me, were terrible. He believed that once we set sail the food would improve.

My berth was a narrow cabin twice my shoulder width with a curtain instead of a door. There was a wooden slab about eight inches off the floor where I was to sleep, and above that a narrow cabinet and a shelf with an aluminum bowl, spoon and chopsticks. I was to eat from this bowl, I already knew, and use it to gather water to shave, wash myself and clean my teeth. We officers were each allotted two liters a day for personal use; we could bathe twice a week. As a Tokkeitai officer, I was entitled to a lieutenant commander's grade of rations and perquisites, though most admirals, I had heard, went out of their way to ensure we were well provided for. I was somewhat surprised, then, that the Gargoyle had not responded to my requests for an audience before setting sail, and there was no recognition from him that an Imperial Japanese Naval Police officer was even on board.

Boatswain Kobayashi saluted and then returned to his cleaning station. I took the opportunity to familiarize myself with the vessel. Aircraft

carriers, I already knew, were essentially vast factories at sea whose product was successfully armed and launched airplanes. Everything on the ship was geared toward this endeavor. The 1,860 men on board were either seamen or members of the aircrew. The ship displaced 32,000 tons and, when fully provisioned, would leave harbor with 16 tons of rice, 3 tons of vegetables and tubers, 500 kilograms of miso paste, 1,000 kilograms of dried fish, 30,000 liters of drinking water, 100 liters of sake, 15 live pigs and 300 chickens. I had watched the loading of the ship while we were still in port and guessed we had taken aboard barely half of that. I'd counted only 6 pigs. Our empire was running out of everything.

I made my way from my berth on the third deck down to the engine room, descending past the granaries and storage on the fourth deck and the machinery deck. The passageways were cramped, requiring me to turn sideways when crossing paths and to step over structural thresholds, what the crew called "knee knockers." I was pressed against metal everywhere I went on this ship, turning flush to the steel walls and sliding along, my flesh bitten by rivets as I made myself skinny to slip past a bucket brigade moving rice from the granary to the galleys. Every centimeter of this ship was devoted to making war, and those few centimeters spared for men were niggardly in dimension, a resentful afterthought by the ship's designers: You must walk? Then be thin, turn sideways and inch along.

The ship had been struck by American bombs in previous sorties; the bombs had crashed through the unarmored deck to explode down here. The damage was still visible in places: a steel girder bent and hastily rejoined by what looked like questionable welds, the rivets and round heads protruding from joists, the flattened tops of bulkheads, the sheet-metal bulwarks that looked like they had been punched through. Enlisted personal were berthed here on the fourth deck, sixty to a cabin between the machinery or storage and the hull. They slept in bunks stacked in threes, and each had about one-half cubic meter of stowage. It was infernally hot below the waterline, and as we steamed south it would become unbearable. All around was the groaning of metal, steel rubbing steel, water pressure squeezing the hull, immense aircraft elevators clamorously rising or falling. The fumes on board also became more noxious the lower I descended; smoking was banned everywhere on board lest the aviation fuel or munitions or diesel ignite. The ship had an unconventional stack arrangement, with two downward-facing funnels on the starboard side that caused exhaust to back up, especially when the ship would rock in high seas. At a refit, ventilation ducts had been cut into the top of the stacks, but that hadn't been adequate to fully disperse the gas.

The effect, as I descended decks, was a gradually but steadily intensifying sense of suffocation until I reached the hot, damp, smoky cacophony of the engine room. The unmuffled turbines echoed against the steel-reinforced hull, and I resisted the urge to plug my ears with my fingers. The sooty engineers, their faces already blackened so that they were almost invisible in the shadow and smoke, would stuff cotton in their ears. Every few minutes they were allowed to breathe in fresh air from a series of tubes that descended from above the waterline. They wore steel-toed boots, thick fabric gloves and goggles. A few looked at my insignia, the unfamiliar black-and-red Imperial cross of the Tokkeitai, and very quickly identified me as being outside the chain of command. Once we were embarked, these men never saw daylight.

I was rare among naval officers, I knew, in that I had a tendency toward seasickness, and despite the vast size of this ship, as we made south through the Southern Japan Sea, I struggled to keep my food down. In one particularly embarrassing episode the first evening on board, I was taken ill while dining at the officer's galley, coughing mucous and bile onto the floor while my bemused fellow officers looked on. If they didn't know I was a special-action admission to the Tokkeitai, they perhaps could have guessed. When our university had closed down, I had wanted to follow my father, the famed Tiger of Shanxi, on campaign in China, but my mother, the Marquess of Toshie, certain that I was unlikely to acquit myself well in battle, had arranged for my posting to the Tokkeitai. I had spent most of the war behind my desk, reading and censoring naval officers' letters home. My window offered a splendid view of the Hakone mountains, and on off-duty days, together with my very special friend, Lieutenant Urabe, I would visit the many hot-springs resorts up those winding roads, sharing with him wonderful dinners and sampling the regional hot radishes and bean curd.

I missed him terribly. The third night out, as I lay in my berth, remembering fondly Lieutenant Urabe and wondering when I would see him next, there was a call to battle stations. The always-noisy ship became immediately a din, as every man on the vessel seemed to be running somewhere else. I had no station but felt compelled to climb from my berth, slip on my uniform, life vest and helmet and step out into the passageway, where I had to dodge the scurrying sailors. In the darkness—we always ran dark at night, lest an American plane should spot us—I became quickly disoriented and smashed my forehead into a bulkhead, blacking out for a few moments. I came to with Boatswain Kobayashi fanning me. He assisted me in returning to my berth.

I was not sure whom I had displeased to have pulled this duty. Perhaps Commander Honda was jealous of my very special friendship with Lieutenant Urabe; I suspected that Commander Honda was also fond of Lieutenant Urabe. But with no working telephone service and the roads between Yokosuka and Kugenuma now impassable, I couldn't get a message to my mother before we shipped out. Still, capital ships didn't always set sail with a naval police officer on board; when I had drawn this assignment I had asked Commander Honda why it was necessary, and he had explained that we had been receiving reports of disciplinary problems on these types of missions.

What types of missions? I asked.

Suicide missions, he explained.

The carrier, he said, would be launching special-attack units: suicide planes—over a dozen of them.

I had of course heard of this new weapon in our arsenal, the supposedly perfect combination of our fighting spirit and diminishing resources. It struck me as wasteful until it was pointed out to me that it was much easier to train a man to crash a plane into a ship than to train him to fly a plane, accurately drop a bomb and then land that plane successfully. We had long ago run short of pilots, our best airmen shot down in great numbers by the heavier, faster, better-armed American fighters. To train a pilot required hundreds of hours of flight time. To train a suicide bomber required a dozen.

I hoped for an uneventful tour, a quick cruise out, the launching of special-attack units, then a return to Yokosuka and the retaking of my customary position behind my desk. There would be, Lieutenant Urabe and I had deduced, ample opportunity for all of us to die in the service of our Emperor.

The next morning, as we were passing south of latitude twenty-seven degrees, beneath a cloudy sky and in a rough sea, I was finally summoned to the flag bridge, where the Gargoyle and his staff oversaw the piloting of the ship. Here, I realized when I joined the flag officers, were the grown-ups. I had spent my first few days on board among boys; the average age of the crew, I would discover, was eighteen. Our empire was also apparently running short of able-bodied men. The officers gathered here, studying their compasses and chronometers, scanning the horizon with binoculars and relaying commands over their handsets, wore crisp, short-sleeved naval whites, and compared to the seamen laboring belowdecks, they were spectacularly clean. This was my first time abovedecks since embarkation—no

one was allowed on the flight deck who wasn't involved in aviation operations—and I was surprised by the expanse of blue sky, the silvery-gray sea and, dotted around us on the horizon, our destroyer escorts. We were not alone out here.

The Gargoyle was seated on a comfortable elevated leather chair on the port side of the bridge, from where he could scan the horizon and also easily communicate with and even reach down and touch the commander holding the wheel. He was called the Gargoyle because of his resemblance to the mythical creatures—curved chin, narrow, lipless mouth, sharp, long nose and close-set eyes. Most of our *kito butai* commanders had already been relieved or gone down with their ships; the Gargoyle was unique in that he had yet to lose a carrier under his command and so had stayed above water. He never smiled and seldom spoke, save to issue a command. My presence on this ship hadn't seemed to interest him until now.

I bowed, saying my name, rank and department.

The Gargoyle turned to me. Toshie?

I bowed again.

We have royalty on board, he said.

The crew on the bridge laughed.

Walk with me, the Gargoyle said, standing up from his leather perch.

He had a stiff-legged limp, presumably caused by an injury sustained in action. Still, he was nimble as he made his way down the alternating stair ladder from the flag bridge. He stopped in a narrow gangway and opened a cabin door to a small flag office. He slipped in, and I followed, closing the door behind me. We were going to have a conversation here, apparently, our faces just centimeters apart.

We have an issue, he said. He went on to describe a *kamikaze* airman, a suicide pilot, who had been found in his berth with a blade, not his own, in his stomach. He had bled to death. In light of their unique status, the special-attack airmen were given private berths, and no one had seen anyone enter or leave the berth.

I nodded. I was concerned, of course, but failed to see what this had to do with me. I am trained to maintain fighting spirit, I told him, to ensure the men are loyal to the Emperor.

Don't tell me your duties, Lieutenant. His sharp-featured face, everything protuberant and jutting, was so close to mine that the tip of his chin almost touched my mouth. You are a Tokkeitai officer. It is your duty to investigate breaches of the naval code.

He handed me the service history of Special Attack Airman Shinoda. This will give you something to do, Your Highness. He laughed and then ordered me back down belowdecks to Shinoda's berth and then to the hospital, where he had passed away.

There were Tokkeitai officers experienced in this type of investigation, true naval police officers who maintained discipline, tracked down criminals and presided over courts martial. I had very little training in these areas, or any areas for that matter, and I was perplexed as to how to proceed. As I climbed down the ladders and then made my way along the narrow third-deck corridors to the airwing berths, I thought I would conduct a cursory investigation, perhaps using my bureaucratic expertise to drag out the process until we made port and I could somehow reach my mother and get reassigned.

The aviation crews had their berths directly below the flight deck, making this perhaps the noisiest place on the ship during flight operations. But now, with just two operational fighters, it was among the most peaceful areas on board. The special-attack pilots were housed in what would have been the regular pilots' berths, officers' quarters, if we had enough living pilots to inhabit them. Special Attack Pilot Shinoda had lived in a windowless berth flush with the walls of the ship, similar to mine in design and style but with a Shinto shrine lintel set next to his bed. His sheets had already been stripped, but a large, brown bloodstain remained on his mattress, almost perfectly round. Against the off-white of the mattress it resembled our national flag. He had his few possessions in his wooden locker: a headband with a Rising Sun flag, one of the famous belts supposedly made by a thousand women doing one stitch each, a Nambu pistol in a thick leather holster with his name embroidered on it, numerous photographs of his mother, father and sister and a carved wooden aircraft, a toy model of the A6M2 he was scheduled to fly to his death. He had already begun scribbling his death poem, the by-now-familiar expressions of guilt and patriotism, the usual verbiage about bringing honor to his family and becoming a "guardian spirit to his country." I flipped through his training manual, which urged the special-attack pilots to keep their eyes open, to aim for a point between the bridge and the stacks or the middle of the vessel, slightly above the waterline. The manual repeatedly reminded the special-attack pilots of their duty to their Emperor and that upon the successful completion of their missions, they would be enshrined in Yasukuni, deified.

They would be immortal.

I reread Special Attack Pilot Shinoda's attempts at death poetry:

Father, mother, sister,
Asked about me,
You should say
He is a wild cherry blossom

He had not finished any of his death poems. Special Attack Pilot Shinoda was from Fukuoka. He was seventeen years old. I was investigating the murder of a boy who was scheduled to kill himself.

Boatswain Kobayashi was ordered to assist me, and he was enthusiastic about this, as he was about every aspect of his service, though his disappointment at his rations persisted. Even dining in the officers' galley, I had also noticed that we weren't well fed on board, the shortages at home having apparently affected even the Imperial Navy. At least as an officer I received white rice; the enlisted men made do with coarse millet.

The special-attack airmen were fed generously and even had sake with every meal. Boatswain Kobayashi was openmouthed as we entered the airwing galley and saw the boys there, the boys scheduled to die, dining on white rice, pickled plums, dried salmon, seaweed and ground radishes. Still, despite this repast, they were quiet. They snapped to attention as soon as I entered, and I ordered them at ease. A few still bore the bruises of their training. Instead of flight time, these boys spent most of their eight-week training period being abused by instructors ordered to winnow the ranks of overenthusiastic special-attack volunteers. These were the lucky boys who had survived training.

I asked the boys if they had heard or seen anything unusual, if Special Attack Airman Shinoda had had any quarrels or disputes in the days before his death. The boys were taciturn, stolid, showing little emotion, almost robotic in their movements and speech. I guessed they had been trained to be like this, distant and cold, unthinking, to make less unbearable their unbearable task. Still, they seemed distracted, largely uninterested in the subject of Shinoda's death. I could understand, considering these boys knew every passing second brought them closer to their own scheduled deaths. When they were finished, they stood in unison, asked to be dismissed, shouted their love for their Emperor and filed out.

In the morgue, a surprisingly small room next to the more spacious hospital—the deceased were given burials at sea—I saw the soft-featured Shinoda, flesh already graying. His wound had been staunched and the area around it scrubbed, so that the puncture and gash looked almost benign. Yet through this his life had leaked.

Later, when I was in my berth looking through the brief service dossier of Special Attack Airman Shinoda, I was struck by a curiosity: this was Shinoda's second special-attack mission. He had taken off before with a sortie of a dozen planes and been the only pilot to return, claiming in a debriefing that he could not find an appropriate target. This wasn't as rare an occurrence as one might imagine, though most pilots crashed upon landing or intentionally ditched their planes and died at sea rather than experience the shame of failure. Shinoda had landed, somehow intact, and so was sent out on another mission.

I didn't care who had killed Special Attack Airman Shinoda. What did it matter? He was going to die in a matter of days anyway. If the special-attack missions had been made pointless by their ineffectiveness, then how irrelevant was my assignment? I was investigating the interdiction of a pointless act.

I felt awful about the boy, but he had already decided to die.

Boatswain Kobayashi knocked at the doorway, and when I answered, he entered and bowed.

He told me he was thinking of volunteering for the special-attack units.

I looked at him, his soft chin, narrow face, round, almost canine eyes—such a little boy.

He explained that he too wanted to die for our Emperor, to die for Japan. And the food—they were served such appetizing food.

I slapped him.

I wanted to tell him what we in the Tokkeitai already knew: the war was lost, Japan was finished, that special-attack units were no longer even effective against the American ships. Instead, I told him that the Imperial Japanese Navy needed him right here, doing his duty, that his destiny was to be a sailor.

I grabbed his collar: there would be plenty of opportunities to die for the Emperor, I told him.

The Gargoyle was dressed in his admiral's regalia, complete with his ribbons and service medal, a decorative persiflage so thick with metal that it could have deflected a bullet. He had ordered me to appear in his flag office below the flight deck near his berth. He said he was uneasy because I hadn't turned up any suspects in my investigation.

Sir, I said to the Gargoyle, with all due respect, why are we investigating the murder of a man who was going to die anyway?

The Gargoyle did not seem to understand the question. Do you think you are immortal?

No, sir.

We are all going to die. The only control we have, perhaps, is to decide that time for ourselves. Special Attack Airman Shinoda was denied that honor.

As I was making my way back to my berth, there was another call to battle stations, and as I descended from the second to the third deck I could feel the ship swerving violently. The Kanpans must all have been put to full power, as the carrier felt to be making a sharp turn. The Type 89s and the 96s opened fire, a loud, steady popping, and almost immediately I could detect the sulfurous smell of spent shells. I heard a loud buzzing and the staccato report of machine guns. I ducked involuntarily, even though this far below the flight deck I was safe from strafing. I had made it to my berth and grabbed my helmet and life jacket when I heard the first explosion, an echoing report, followed by sustained groaning, the snapping of metal and then the popping of screws loosed from their threads and ricocheting like bullets against the hull. In my panic, I had backed myself into a machine room, and by the time the noise had subsided, I realized I had wet myself.

An American squadron had found us, carrier-based Hellcats escorting Avengers, and we had sustained a direct hit from a 250-pound bomb that had crashed through the flight deck to explode in the starboard enlisted men's berths. In the subsequent fire, eighteen men were killed or missing, and another two dozen were wounded. The Gargoyle had ordered the damage-control and fire-suppression teams into action, but these crews were so badly trained that they lost another fifteen men when an aviation fuel tank (unfilled due to shortages, luckily) caught fire and sent poisonous fumes through the third deck.

I heard from an excited Boatswain Kobayashi that we had scrambled a fighter. Major Hiraoka, the commander of the air wing, one of two veteran pilots on board and too valuable to send to his certain death, had taken off to engage the enemy. That violent swerving must have been the Gargoyle turning the carrier into the wind to launch the plane.

I asked if the major shot any of the enemy down.

Boatswain Kobayashi cocked his head sideways and squinted, as boys in school did when they were asked a question they couldn't answer.

The fumes from the smoldering aviation tank were causing me some discomfort, so I climbed the ladders up to the second deck and then, for my

first time on board since our departure, climbed up to the deck. The flight deck is usually the busiest place on the carrier, a three-acre airport where there are many ways to die. A propeller might cut you in half, a plane might crush you beneath its wheels, a bomb might roll over you, an arresting wire might slice you open, an elevator might crush you, a rough sea might toss you overboard, an enemy pilot might put a .50-caliber round through you. In theory, despite all the obstacles, the aviation crew and deck crew could launch a fully armed attack aircraft every twenty seconds and recover one every twenty-five seconds. Yet we had run so desperately short of carrier planes that we could muster only the fourteen suicide planes for this sortie and carried just two fighters for air defense. That left the aviation crew, a full muster of 762 men, with little to do but swab the flight deck or check and double-check the meager complement of bombs stowed in the hangar deck to arm the suicide planes. Bereft of a functioning air wing, the aviation crew, like Boatswain Kobayashi, were spending their tour at cleaning stations, scrubbing the splintered deck and then repainting it.

Until today.

I saw a plane low on the horizon—one of ours or, I should say, our only one: Major Hiraoka's A6M2, coming in for landing. Updrafts buffeted the fighter as its wings alternated dips and it passed through the plumes of smoke emanating from the barely controlled fires. I was startled to see the plane disappear for an instant beneath the bow, and then, just as I worried that it had crashed, it reappeared and came down hard on the wooden flight deck, the wheels shooting up splinters and the engine sputtering as the tail came down, missing the first arresting wire, then the second, but catching the third, fourth and so on, the whole endeavor violent and out of control, more like the successful crashing of a plane than any landing I had seen. The plane skidded right past me and then came to an abrupt stop, like a toddler grabbed by its mother in midstride. Then the plane recoiled and made a gentle lurch backward. The aviation crew charged out with blocks, water cans and heavy pads. Three men hopped onto the wings and then the fuselage to help pull Major Hiraoka from the cockpit. He was a stirring sight, tall, with a thick mustache and aviator cap, and as he climbed down from the cockpit and began walking across the flight deck in his shearling leather body suit, I reconsidered my decision to interview him as part of my investigation. He was well known in the Imperial Navy Air Corps for having shot down twenty-three American and Chinese aircraft, dating back to the start of the second Sino-Japan War, and he commanded the carrier's aviation wing.

What are you doing on my flight deck? he demanded. He had stopped in front of me on his way into the squadron space, next to the bulkhead where I had inadvertently positioned myself.

I bowed. Excuse me sir, I am—

I don't care who you are. You don't belong on my flight deck. Every man here has a duty and you . . . don't.

I followed him into the squadron space. He turned and looked at me angrily.

I explained myself, my investigation. He looked at my name tag for the first time.

Toshie?

I bowed.

You're related to the Marquis of Toshie?

I bowed again. My father, I said.

Your father is the Tiger of Shanxi?

I bowed yet again.

He agreed to meet with me in the afternoon, on the hangar deck.

That afternoon I wrote another letter to Lieutenant Urabe, describing the attack, the many men we had already lost and the curious demeanor of the special-attack airmen. I was tempted to write that I believed the sooner this war would end, the better for all of us, but our mail would be censored—I had spent a few months doing that sort of work myself—so I kept those thoughts to myself.

The hangar deck was a vast, cavernous space. The tethered airplanes, with their cockpits canvased and wheels behind blocks, filled me with a kind of dread, as if I had come upon large, slumbering animals who might wake and rip me to shreds. The special-attack planes were typical A6M2s, the plane that at home we had been led to believe was indestructible, the fastest, most maneuverable fighter in the sky. But if it was so effective, why was it being used as a flying coffin?

Major Hiraoka was atop a ladder, tinkering with the engine of his A6M2. I bowed and made a slight grunt to alert him to my presence. He couldn't hear me over the persistent racket of the ship, so I made a louder, groveling sort of noise. When he saw me, I bowed.

Major Hiraoka climbed down and wiped his hands with a rag. I noticed that he had been severely burned on his left arm, the flesh there ghostly white and badly wrinkled. He suggested that I follow him to the squadron space, where he took a seat behind a small wooden desk like a student would

use in school. He had a bottle of *shochu* there, which he opened and drank from, offering me a sip.

I don't see why you are bothering with this investigation, he said. We are all doomed.

Not all of us; some of us will make it back, I said.

He shook his head.

There is no going back. We don't have enough fuel to return, he told me. We shipped out with just ten thousand liters in the tanks. The Gargoyle's orders are to launch the special-attack planes, then keep sailing until he detects enemy vessels and engage them with our surface weapons.

That was suicide, I knew. The carrier was armed only with antiaircraft guns that would have little effect on armored surface ships.

What if we run out of fuel first? I asked.

Then we wait for the enemy to find us.

He drank from the bottle. Why do you think the Gargoyle wears his dress uniform on duty? Because he wants to be fully decorated when he goes down with his ship.

I began to shake, and the *shochu* I had drunk threatened to come back up. I thought of Lieutenant Urabe, whom I would never see again. I desperately wanted to talk to him, just as everybody on this ship wanted to speak once again to some loved one: a mother, a father, a wife, a son, a daughter. Every one of us had already created in those who loved us our last impression.

Oh, your investigation, Major Hiraoka said.

I pushed away my vision of Lieutenant Urabe. Yes?

The boys killed him, Major Hiraoka explained. Anyone could have figured that out.

Why? I asked.

Because he represents their fears. He represents failure. They hated seeing him; they hated talking to him. They had to do it.

Well, then I need to write a report, have them arrested—

Write a report? For whom?

For the Gargoyle.

Why?

Because they are criminals—

They are dead boys, he said. Let them fly their mission. Let them become immortal.

The morning of the special attack, when enemy vessels had been located and determined to be within range, the Gargoyle turned the ship into the

wind and the boys were brought on deck, where they handed over their death parcels to the Gargoyle, bowed once, clapped their hands three times in prayer in the direction of Japan and, one by one, went to their planes, where they climbed to their wings via ladder and then were assisted into their cockpits by members of the aviation crew sitting astride the fuselage. One by one the silver fighter planes' propellers clicked and sputtered into blurry motion. I had asked Major Hiraoka for permission to watch the takeoff, as had numerous other officers. In the morning haze, the silver planes with black cowlings, the *hino maru* on each wing, the little bomb like a testicle hanging from beneath the fuselage, made for an imposing sight, and we could imagine that the special-attack units would be devastating. How could such fanaticism not bring the Americans to their knees?

We watched the planes roll down the deck, gather speed and then roll off the flight deck, dipping out of sight for an instant and then reemerging a moment later as they gained altitude and climbed to their operational ceiling. I was surprised, however, when I counted fourteen planes. I asked an officer standing beside me, shouting over the engines' roar, who was the fourteenth.

He told me Major Hiraoka had elected to join the special-attack mission.

Boatswain Kobayashi was standing in my berth, breathless. He said the Gargoyle had located the enemy fleet and we were cruising toward them to engage. He had been issued a sidearm and explained that when we were close enough, he would shoot at the enemy with it. He showed me a holstered Nambu pistol. I recognized it as that which had been issued to Special Attack Airman Shinoda.

Close enough? I asked.

Yes, we are going to ram an enemy aircraft carrier.

Boatswain Kobayashi looked down at his weapon. Lieutenant Toshie?

Yes.

I am frightened. I thought I would be brave, but I am frightened, he said.

I crossed the berth to him and took him in my arms. We are all frightened, I whispered. Even the Gargoyle is frightened.

He sighed as I gently lowered him to my bunk.

I thought of Lieutenant Urabe.

It was sometime after dawn when I heard the Kanpons shut down, one after another. After the steady throbbing of the diesel turbines, the loud cranking of the giant screws, the silence itself seemed like a noise, the

ringing in our ears the residue of the steady days of thumping we had been enduring. But now, nothing.

We were out of fuel. We were adrift. We had nothing to do but wait for our opportunity to die for our Emperor.

Mother, father, lover
Asked about me
You should say I was . . .

Karl Taro Greenfeld

Karl Taro Greenfeld's fiction has appeared this year in the *Paris Review,* the *Sun, Commentary,* the *Southern Review, Zyzzyva, Santa Monica Review, New York Tyrant* and *American Short Fiction* and last year in *Best American Short Stories 2009.* This is his second short story to appear in the *Missouri Review.*

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