

“If, as I did, you grew up on the likes of *Ultraman*, *Zatoichi*, and *Godzilla*, you’ll feel right at home with, but also challenged by, the stories in *Where We Go When All We Were is Gone*. It’s an exhilarating debut that serves up every guilty-pleasure pop-culture satisfaction one could hope for while simultaneously reframing and refashioning those familiar low-art joys into something singular, unanticipated, and entirely original.”

—Pinckney Benedict, author of *Town Smokes* and *Miracle Boy*

“Ghosts, Godzilla, shape shifters, sea creatures, snow babies; Sequoia Nagamatsu’s fantastical characters are nonetheless grounded in modern-day conflicts, creating a fascinating and haunting mix of science and myth, past and present. These are stories of gods and monsters walking among us, told with wit, longing, and wisdom.”

—Timothy Schaffert, author of *The Swan Gondola*, an Oprah.com Book of the Week

“These stories deftly breathe new life into the myths and pop culture of an older Japan, bringing them into the modern world and directing them in unexpected ways. It’s hard to tell if Nagamatsu holds nothing sacred, or if he holds everything to be. In either case, the effect is the same: these are deft atmospheric romps that a hell of a lot of fun but also worm their way under your skin before you know it. An addictive and compelling debut.”

—Brian Evenson, author of *Lords of Salem* (as BK Evenson w/ Rob Zombie) and *A Collapse of Horses*

“Strange, subtle, emotionally resonant—Nagamatsu’s fiction is consistently excellent.”

—Kij Johnson, Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy Award Winning author of *The Fox Woman*, *Fudoki*, and *At the Mouth of the River of Bees*

“The stories in *Where We Go When All We Are is Gone* make up a rich tangle of the familiar and beautifully new. These are bright inventions but they will also satisfy our longing for the stories we have always loved.”

—Ramona Ausubel, author of *No One is Here Except All of Us* and *A Guide to Being Born*

**Where
We Go
When
All We
Were Is
Gone**

**Sequoia
Nagamatsu**



**Black
Lawrence
Press**

For Cole

This is a dream I dreamed . . .

—Natsume Soseki

*I could wish for nothing more than to die for a childish
dream in which I truly believed.*

—Ryūnosuke Akutagawa

*What isn't remembered never happened. Memory is
merely a record. You just need to re-write that record.*

—Serial Experiments: Lain

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Transcript:

Woman (Identity Concealed): And we heard a crash outside. People were running down the street. There was smoke. I'm not sure from where. Everywhere? We felt the ground shake, so I grabbed my son and we ran with the crowds. They pushed. We pushed. We didn't dare stop. There was an old woman, and I wanted to help. Everybody was screaming. A man ahead of us turned and pointed up. His eyes wide, his mouth twisted. And that's when I saw it.

Young Boy (Identity Concealed): Godzilla. It was him, I swear. My friends and I were hiding in the school cafeteria with our teachers. He was fighting a giant spider. Picked it up and slammed it right down on a bridge. Bam! Our teachers told us to get away from the windows, but how could we? My friend Toru and I cheered: Go Godzilla Go!

The Return to Monsterland

Train Car, 1998

Mayu called me from the train car that Godzilla had grabbed hold of—no screaming or sobbing, no confessions of great regrets, no final professions of love. She did not ask to speak to our five-year-old daughter, who was unknowingly watching the news coverage of her mother’s impending death, as the train crashed into the side of a skyscraper and through a set of power lines. My wife spoke of feeling the radiation of *his* body coursing through her own, the view down *his* cretaceous mouth, an atomic breath swirling in a maelstrom of blue light. And then, before there was nothing but a roar and static, she said: “You should be here; he’s simply magnificent.”

Godzilla (irradiated Godzillasaurus)

{Descp. Resembles Tyrannosaur with pronounced arms. Dorsal plates similar to Stegosaur. Semi-sapient. Powers: Atomic breath, nuclear pulse, imperviousness to conventional weaponry (and meteor impacts), regenerationw, amphibiousness, telepathy with other Kaiju. Weaknesses: High voltage, Oxygen Destroyer WMD, Anti-Nuclear Energy Bacteria, Cadmium Missiles, MechaGodzilla}

Field Notes: lumber-waddle. posturing roar. rhythmic stomp with son. perhaps a game? picks up palm tree and throws. swats sea gull. Defecates two-meters high—radiation: 15 krad. moves arms up and down. calisthenics or victory dance. long roar. shuffles across beach. throws log into water. throws rock into water.

Two weeks living among their kind on the island reserve we've created for them, and I still can't wrap my head around the love my wife felt for these creatures. During the atomic age, when nations illuminated the atolls dotting the Pacific, we gave birth to many of the Kaiju. Annihilation begetting annihilation when the living ghosts of Hiroshima still roamed the streets. The Ministry of Defense contacted me partly out of kindness, I suspect. The widower of the famous monster biologist, the silent partner who stayed in the lab. I knew the creatures almost as well as Mayu did—the half-life of their blood, the frequency of their telepathic thoughts, the variations of their origins and resurrections. I could, without a doubt, answer Japan's questions of new monsters being born in the wake of Fukushima, of old monsters shaken out of armistice. And so I said yes because I hated their kind, because my daughter, now a college student, still reads the letters her mother left her, because I need to experience the beauty my wife saw before she died.

Dear Ayu,

I had to watch the video of your first steps from the bottom of the ocean. I wish I could have been there. But I guess all of our practice trying to walk paid off! Do you remember how we watched old news broadcasts of the epic Kaiju battles of the 60s? I'd pick you up by the arms, your feet resting on mine, and we'd take one giant step after

another, waddling across the living room. Whenever I let you go, there would be a moment where we both thought that you could make that first step on your own. But you flapped your arms like Rodan or Mothra, trying to maintain your balance before crashing to the ground. Your father tells me you're moving non-stop now with your new found freedom, that you circle the house until you're so tired that you need a nap. I wish you were here with me. I hope these letters will help you understand why I was away so much. It's just me, a steel sphere, and two tiny windows right now. Miles of ocean are dead because of us—the Oxygen Destroyer killed a former Godzilla several decades ago along with everything around him: suffocation before the atoms of his body weakened, leaving nothing but bone. A shark hunts in vain—still. A jelly billows past like a cloud. I rake away layers of shells and fish husks from his skeleton with the submarine's robotic arm, collect him piece-by-piece. Godzilla died then because we didn't understand, because we are always afraid—and despite him saving us from danger time and again, we never seem to learn.

Mu

Sunken civilization. Geologic curiosity. Aquatic paradise. Scuba dive excursion. Mu, home of the Nacaal, shaken beneath the waves overnight—temples entombed in lava, megalith highways to the Mariana Trench. The Nacaal, catamaran refugees, ancestors of Egypt and the Fertile Crescent. Manda, water dragon guardian, still defending the Nacaal after millennia. At a college dive, Mayu and I discussed her dissertation on the Kaiju as Heritage, creatures who came before us, were created by us, that served us. Creatures, I added, that no longer belonged. But we must find a way for them to belong, she insisted. “Try reasoning with a three-story lizard,” I said. “Tell that to the parents of children who died when these

creatures decided to throw down on their school.” A piece of Mu has been placed off the coast of the reserve for Manda to protect, a collection of pillars, the worn smirk of a sandstone warrior, three-thousand pounds of drowned mountain. Five miles of ocean surrounded by an electromagnetic field. This is what we can give them. This is where they belong.

Mothra (Moth Goddess, current stage: larval)

{Descp. Segmented Brown body. Blue eyes. Pronounced mandibles. Powers: Silken spray. Several beam weapons. Strong psychic communication. As an adult, able to create gale force wind with wings. Lightning from antennae. Effectively immortal (phoenix lifecycle). Travels with faery sisters, the Elias—three inch women in red tunics.}

Field Notes: Undulates around island. tries to follow butterflies and moths. visits other Kaiju. sways head with Varan. chews on shrubs and grasses. draws mandalas on beach with body. sends sonic pulse to Manda. The Elias, Lora and Moll, ride its back. The Elias laugh frequently. whispers. song.

A glorified grub, a far cry from the bright orange and yellow wings that Mayu and my daughter loved. Perhaps the most beloved of the Kaiju because she is a Goddess, because through her spritely companions, we understand the moth’s chirps, the roars and groans of other Kaiju. “Godzilla doesn’t hate humans but humans hate us,” the little sisters declared on national television. Fair enough, I say. But he still flattened my favorite soba shop in the country with several elderly ladies inside, used Tokyo Tower like a toothpick.

Maybe we shouldn't have used missiles, maybe we could have spent time coming to an understanding. But parlays are an afterthought when people are running out of their cars and screaming down the street. Mayu said that's typical human behavior, the kind of trait that would ruin humanity in the end: shoot first, ask questions later. She reminded me it was the Kaiju who saved us from alien invasions—the Kilaakians, the Millenians. Ayu, who became quite the activist in her junior high class, following her mother's letters as text, would always say, "Kaiju don't kill people; people kill people" and "Love is the greatest weapon of all!"

The Elias sisters pay me no mind most of the time but occasionally flutter around my head, giggling like school girls, providing me insight into each of the creatures: *Godzilla is very sad today. Godzilla remembers your wife and is sorry. Godzilla cannot help being Godzilla. Manda is lonely. There were once many sea dragons in the sea. Manda knows Mu is far away. Mothra remembers when humans were not here. Mothra says those were peaceful times. Mothra says quiet will come again one day. Baragon has indigestion from eating a strange plant. Gorosaurus wants to find love. Angurius wants to get to know Rodan better. Nobody really likes Kumonga. Kumonga is grumpy. Kumonga will try to kill you.*

Dear Ayu,

Yesterday I brought you with me to the NHK television studio to talk to the Elias. You've just turned two now, so I imagine you won't remember any of this except for impressions of faery feet dancing on your tummy, making you laugh, of Lora and Moll singing lost melodies into your ear. Atlantean ballads, Babylonian hymns, they said. You held your Mothra stuffed animal, your most prized possession,

that has watched over you in your crib since you were born. Lora and Moll reclined on the plush wings, as I interviewed them. I have to admit, I'd like to fancy myself the Margaret Mead of the Kaiju world. The people have stopped running, little one. At least for now. The time has come to listen to those we call monsters.

The sisters talked of Mothra being part of a menagerie of Earth deities, each with a counterpart, creating balance in the world. The Earth created Battra to destroy evil but this moth became evil itself. And so Mothra was created to bring good into the world. When darkness rises, the forces of good must restore balance. One cannot exist without the other you see (even for the creatures humanity creates). And so some of our monsters are reborn when we need them. I try explaining this idea of balance to you during our hikes. You on my back, as I shed calories at the base of Mt. Fuji. I tell you these things in the hope that you'll grow to appreciate life, to see humanity in concert with the Earth instead of in control of it. Your father and I, despite what he might believe about his semi-annual donations to environmental non-profits, disagree in this matter.

Back home, I put you on the quilt your grandmother made you with your Play Zone console while I transcribed my interview with the Elias. I reclined on your father's chair and concentrated on my work. You've figured out how to play Pop Goes the Weasel by pressing a red button and seem genuinely delighted every time you hear the music play, as if it's a new discovery. I put on my headphones and ignored you for the rest of the afternoon. I gave you a sippy cup and read through a study of a colleague's pharmaceutical research based on the DNA of sixteen captive shape shifters. Imagine, anti-aging skin! You stared at me blankly. You did not cry or fuss. You've always been good about letting mommy be.

Angurius (Irradiated Ankylosaurus w/ Styracosaurian cranial features)

{Descp. Long, clubbed spiked tail. Orange spikes and horns on gray skin. Five brains (one in head, others near limbs—heightened reflexes & locomotion). Capable of bi-pedal motion but generally quadruped. Powers: Lacking in ranged attacks and special abilities but rarely concedes in battle. Advanced burrowing abilities. Use of spiked carapace by jumping backwards onto enemies. Able to curl into ball and travel at high speed. Oldest and perhaps most consistent ally of Godzilla.}

Field Notes: Chews on palm. Burrows past Kumonga. Emerges beside Godzilla. Rolls between hills. Rolls into coconuts. Perhaps bocce? Rests on carapace. Godzilla spins friend. Both roar. Both wave arms. Follows Godzilla. Sleeps with Godzilla.

Late for our dinner and distracted by work, Mayu said yes to my marriage proposal almost as an afterthought. I honestly didn't care. I was the safe bet for her, the guy who would always be there (and I always was even when she was nowhere to be found). Maybe I thought marrying my best friend and colleague would be enough and the rest would take care of itself. She could grow to love me—and our professional differences would stoke the passion that I thought we had found in our night long debates in graduate school when we would seamlessly shift from biochemistry to the bedroom. "You're like a puppy barking at the television," she'd say. "You're adorably confused about the reality of things." And I'd say, "You're the hippie that's doing all the barking." She was a ten to my marginal six (in both beauty and professional pedigree), something my jackass friends would often remind me of, and perhaps it was

this fact that, in part, fed a nagging insecurity, prompting me to do nothing when I suspected Mayu was having an affair with her research assistant—a blond post-doc from Berkeley who looked more surfer than scientist. As long as she came home to me. As long as we were still a family.

Angurius is not the strongest of the Kaiju. He does not fly, does not shoot lasers from his horns or mouth. But he is loyal to his allies. He never gives up even when he is beaten down. Ruled by atomic instinct and rage, even these creatures understand friendship, something that I've read about in papers but could never believe until I lived among them. And I wonder even after all of their deaths and rebirths if they remember—or is who they are and what they mean to each other not so much memory as stitching in the fabric of their being?

Dear Ayu,

I really wanted to take you with me during the filming of my National Geographic special but your father said the journey would be too arduous for a little girl who already has a full plate with kindergarten and after school English classes. He worries too much. (And could you think of a better education than this?) You would absolutely love it. Maybe he would just miss you. I know you hear us fighting sometimes, and I want you to know it's not your fault. Mommy has to be away a lot, so sometimes daddy gets lonely. He gets jealous because you want to be with me instead of him even though I can't be there for you every day when you get home from school. I can't take you to do fun things on the weekend like going to Ueno Zoo to look at the Red Pandas... but know that I really want to. Be a good girl for him. He does try, and he loves you. One day I'll be home more. You'll come home after school and you can tell me about your friends, show

me a project you're proud of—macaroni necklaces, cardboard dioramas, book reports dotted with stickers from your teacher. But there is still so much work to be done. Oh, the things you're missing right now. My research assistant, Tyler, who you've met (I believe you said he looked like "in the movies"), scouted out locations for us to film: abandoned parts of Tokyo, Paris, London, and Cairo that were once battlegrounds of great Kaiju battles. We traveled to Monsterland to talk to scientists doing experiments on containing the Kaiju with chemical mists and electromagnetic fields. Containment vs. extermination is our goal, so we can foster better relationships with these terribly misunderstood creatures. Your father sent me photos of you and your grandmother under a cherry blossom tree. Are those new overalls? I've only been away three months and yet you seem to have grown so much. Enclosed are photos of me and Tyler with some of the Kaiju in the background.

Rodan (Irradiated Pteranodon)

{Descp. 200 meter wingspan. Reddish-brown. Powers: Immune to atomic breath and gravity beams. Shockwaves while flying. High winds via wings. Quite strong despite spindly appearance. History of self-sacrifice to help others.}

Field Notes: crushes rocks with beak. spreads wings. blows down trees. topples Kumonga. takes off. circles island. perches on mountain top. extended screech.

My father worked long hours at the post office for decades to provide for me and my siblings. He took us fishing on the weekends and gave

us what little money he had to buy manga—Ultraman, Space Pirate Captain Harlock. His only joy was watching baseball on television while drinking a cold Sapporo. My mother dreamed of becoming a nightclub singer (and from what I understand had interest from a Russian owned Roppongi club), but I would only ever know her voice from the lullabies she sang in my childhood. I never expected Mayu and I to follow in my parent's footsteps, giving ourselves so completely to our children. Our livelihoods, particularly Mayu's, required a certain level of commitment. But I did expect some sacrifice, some change in her that never happened. I never minded being the one to chauffeur Ayu, cook meals, help with homework, and read bedtime stories. But, if I'm honest, Ayu grew up only with the mystique of her mother, the legend of her spun from letters and occasional visits. Tell her I love her, Mayu would say whenever I was on the phone with her. Give her this for me. Send me pictures. Mayu became the giver of gifts, the adventurer with stories, the person my daughter turned to for understanding when I became the target of hatred. After Rodan transferred his life force to Godzilla so that he could defeat MechaGodzilla, Mayu talked on American television about the love of Godzilla for his son in defeating his enemy, about the sacrifice of Rodan in helping his friend to victory. "These creatures," she said. "Are more like us than we'd like to admit. They love and they protect that which they love. They may fight sometimes, yes. But, when the cards are down, they would do anything for each other."