

## 21 BUTTONS FOR YOSHIKO 包み釦二十一個

*A poem on the wedding dress of Yoshiko Creagh (nee Ishikawa), made in Tokyo, 1956, held in the National Museum of Australia.<sup>1</sup>*

### 1 一個目 *ikkome*

*If you cannot procure buttons in the correct colour,  
you can cover them in fabric.*

The pleats in the skirt are impeccable, precise.

A pale cloud of tulle swells underneath.

There are twenty-one hand-covered buttons,  
tiny silver-shelled creatures, studding  
each wrist, trailing down the front of the bodice.

### 2 二個目 *ni-kome*

*Even the simplest,  
cheapest buttons can look truly elegant  
when covered correctly.*

She wasn't sewing when she met him.

There was more money  
waiting tables

at the Base cafeteria.

Every day, the pink, loud men,  
jostling, chewing  
with their pink, loud mouths.

### 3 三個目 *san-kome*

*Take a circle of fabric, not too large:  
when you draw the edges together  
over your button, they should not quite  
meet in the middle.*

The sour smell of Western food.

She noticed how *he* ate –

with his mouth closed. His hair:  
how it curled and waved,  
every which-way, how he looked  
innocent, earnest, kind,  
a little unruly.

### 4 四個目 *yon-kome*

*Too much fabric  
will bunch up  
and become unwieldy.*

They say there are hundreds  
like her. War Brides. 戦争花嫁.

To her it sounds  
like they're married to War,  
like War is a husband  
with hundreds of wives.

5 五個目 *go-kome*

*If your button has some kind of texture  
you would like to hide, use a piece of felt  
the same size as the top of your button.*

Sometimes War is called  
Clem, or Harry, and lives  
in Toowoomba, or Mount Isa.  
Her own War is Victor  
from Brisbane, with the unruly hair.  
When he asks, she enlists  
without hesitation  
and starts sewing again  
in earnest.

6 六個目 *rokkome*

*Knot your thread and work  
from the wrong side  
of the fabric.*

The day comes: she is clad  
in the silver brocade,  
the bodice is tight, tight,  
but the buttons hold  
and look marvellous.  
Even in her kitten heels,  
the top of her head only reaches  
to Victor's lower lip.

7 七個目 *nana-kome*

*Start weaving your needle in and out  
of the edge of your circle,  
all the way around. The smaller your weave,  
the better the outcome.*

The tulle swishes against her thighs.  
They thrash through it, dolphins in a net.  
Her pearl necklace, just peeping  
through the deep V at her throat.  
On the outside of her lacy glove,  
the gold ring, glinting.

8 八個目 *hakkome*

*To finish, place your button  
back in the centre of your circle,  
then pull your thread. It will cinch  
right around the button,  
creating a nice cover for it.*

Four months later  
she is sitting on the deck  
of the steamship *Tai Yuan*  
She kept the picture:  
four girls together,  
all of them married to War now.  
Demure skirts, slender-waisted cardigans,  
pale dainty shoes, crossing that  
unknowable sea. Wondering.

9 九個目 *kyuu-kome*

To secure, knot the thread-end,  
keeping the cinched in fabric  
nice and tight.

Brisbane. *Bu-ri-zu-bē-ng*. Strange flowers  
with their pink and yellow tongues.

The muddy smell of the river,  
those stilted houses.

Nowhere to buy soy sauce  
or *tōfu*, or seaweed.

No one has even heard of *miso*.

10 十個目 *juu-kome*

People refusing to serve her  
in the dusty shops.

*Go back to Japan!* She can't,  
of course, not ever, now, she is  
a shameful thing, *sensō hanayome* 戦争花嫁,  
War Bride. The neighbourhood  
would be whispering, endlessly.

*Fallen woman. Prostitute.*

*Sensō hanayome. Traitor.*

(When you draw the edges together,  
they will not quite meet in the middle)

11 十一個目 *juu-ikkome*

Victor told her

about the *Immigration Restriction Act*,  
how it meant, Only Whites Allowed.

How the Minister said once,  
“[I]t would be the grossest act  
of public indecency to permit a Japanese  
of either sex to pollute Australia.”<sup>ii</sup>

(If you cannot procure buttons in the correct  
colour, you can cover them in fabric.

Knot your thread and work  
from the wrong side)

12 十二個目 *juu-ni-kome*

They had to change the rules  
for the War Brides, slowly,  
grudgingly. Poor Cherry Parker,  
Sakuramoto-san: four years,  
two children, all in limbo, waiting.

(In and out, in and out.

Always from the wrong side)

13 十三個目 *juu-san-kome*

The air in Brisbane, sticky,  
 like a Tokyo summer,  
 but all the time. Palm trees,  
 green and waving, even in the city.  
 On the side of a tram: ARNOTT'S SAO.  
 She had to ask what it meant.  
 (Pull your thread. Knot the end,  
 keeping the cinched in fabric  
 nice and tight)

14 十四個目 *juu-yon-kome*

The Army gave classes. She tried  
 to pay attention. Giggling behind her hand  
 in Japanese with the other girls.  
 Pay attention. Teach your children  
 English only. Give them  
 English names.  
 (Nice and tight.  
 The smaller your weave,  
 the better the outcome)

15 十五個目 *juu-go-kome*

Seven years on, she's NATURALISED  
 (*na-chu-ra-rai-zu-du*)  
 The Queen is on the piece of paper,  
 radiant in yellow taffeta,  
 in diamonds. Such power,  
 to divide the natural  
 from the unnatural  
 with only a word.  
 (Your button has some kind of  
 texture you would like to hide)

16 十六個目 *juu-rokkome*

The typewritten details  
 on the Certificate  
 so awkwardly placed  
 on the dotted lines, so ugly:  
**eleventh of June nineteen sixtythree**  
 Back home it would be calligraphy,  
 and it would be impeccable.  
 (Even the simplest,  
 cheapest buttons  
 can look truly elegant  
 when covered correctly)

17 十七個目 *juu-nana-kome*  
 With Victor, it was fine.  
 She was still married to War, in a way:  
 always moving, base after base.  
 It was fine. Fine. The children came.  
 Singapore, Korea, Australia again.  
 Fine, fine. Until it wasn't.  
 (To finish, place your button  
 back in the centre of your circle,  
 then pull your thread)

18 十八個目 *juu-hakkome*  
 She stays in Australia,  
 even after the divorce.  
 She has friends, her children,  
 a life. Independence of a kind.  
 Besides, what the Queen gives,  
 the Emperor takes away:  
 the law says, she cannot be Japanese  
 any more.  
 (Too much fabric  
 will become unwieldy)

19 十九個目 *juu-kyuu-kome*  
 She starts sewing again.  
*Kimono* this time.  
 So different to Western dresses,  
 but no less precise.  
 (Start weaving your needle in and out)

20 二十個目 *ni-juu-kome*  
 With *kimono*  
 you must pay attention  
 to both the inside  
 and the outside, the way  
 the fabric folds and turns over.  
 (Knot your thread and work)

21 二十一個目 *ni-juu-ikkome*  
 With *kimono*  
 the inner and the outer  
 are always showing,  
 there is never  
 a 'wrong side'.  
 (And no buttons, of course.  
 No buttons at all.)

Melinda Smith, 2019

<sup>i</sup> 21 buttons for Yoshiko was commissioned by the National Museum of Australia, June, 2019, for the 'Collections and Verse: Studio Objects' project.

<sup>ii</sup> Arthur Calwell, quoted in the *Argus*, 10 March, 1948, rejecting the first official application from an Australian serviceman to marry a Japanese bride (made in October 1947 by Corporal H.J. Cooke).