

GOODBYE, OKI

We arrived at Naha Airport around eleven o'clock, bought lunchboxes, and got on the bus. It was hazy and grey outside. We passed a building; every window was decorated with a musical note, with two dolphin sculptures standing beside it. Melodies drifted in from time to time, before the bus reached its stops.

Two years ago, I started collecting audios of marine animal for a performance. Dolphin sounds are very special; the shapes formed by their frequencies and rhythms often give me the illusion that they are there, yet I can not tell exactly where they're coming from. Dolphins make many kinds of sounds: whistles, clicks, pulses, screams, squeaks, gurgles, etc., complex combinations, like dialects.

Two hours later, the bus traveled from the south of Okinawa to near the north. We waited at the bus stop for the residence host to pick us up. When I turned around, I realized there was an aquarium behind us, with a pool-like theater beside it, connected to the parking lot. Walking straight down the slope would lead you to the sea. The water in the theater pool was almost level with the ocean, and their colors were nearly identical. The sun gradually came out, and the sky took on the same hue. From the bus stop, it looked like a towering, transparent blue wall. I heard a familiar sound.

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Two days later, the aquarium released a news: The female Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphin Oki-chan passed away. She had been brought from Amami Island to Okinawa in 1975 and was the dolphin that had lived at the aquarium the longest, with an estimated age of 52. In 1972, in preparation for the Ocean Expo held after Okinawa's reversion to Japan, local elementary school students designed a dolphin mascot and named it Oki-chan. The name represents *Oki* (short for Okinawa) with *-chan*, a term of affection for a girl or child. After Oki arrived, she inherited this name. The *Okichan Theater* takes its name from Oki-chan. For fifty years, Oki was beloved by people of all ages. Everyone remembered her, some had seen her when they were children, others now brought their grandchildren to see her.

April 25, 1975, after completing training in Amami, Oki was transported by helicopter to the Ocean Expo as part of air-transport tests with other dolphins.

"We installed a wooden container at the front of the helicopter's landing gear and transported the dolphins inside it. The helicopter noise was very loud, so to reduce stress during air transport, we carried out training in advance to help the dolphins adapt to the intense noise."

The next day, we again waited for a bus at the aquarium stop. We saw a crowd heading toward the pool theater. We followed them and found a seat. The theater is called *Okichan Theatre*, a dolphin show venue. Our seats were on the far right side, slightly below the level of the pool's surface, at the same underwater height as the dolphins. Cheerful music slowly began; dolphins leapt out of the water, jumping high, and the audience's applause reached a climax. A yellow butterfly darted past my eyes, flashing a frequency amid all the surrounding noises, a sharp, piercing high pitch, with that kind of "ah... ah... ah..." sound.

That night, I had a dream. I fell from a step by a stream and injured my foot. But after that, I could see all the ancient creatures of the seabed. I walked into a building filled with the remains of plants and animals. In one room, a transparent glass container that had been empty except for water now held two long, dragon-like underwater creatures. They glowed and swam along, following the direction I walked. All the animals simply stood there, scattered throughout the center of the room. I heard their voices, like the pores of plants. When I woke up to my body, sunlight was already shining intensely into my eyes.

The tiny yellow butterfly quickly flew past again like a flash of light. Like a bullet breaking through, the invisible wall of sound shattered. How small a life form must one be to keep moving like that? The people around were cheering, applauding, in joy along with the music. Only you began to cry. Black tides surged like a vast warm current, shining harshly against the glass on the right. A distant flock of cranes flew away, flickering over the surface of the sea.

Long afterward, in a small corner cake shop, you and I spoke of this again. Sincere bouquets of flowers, and beside us, a big white dog let out a cry that sounded almost human. Oh, that must be Oki's voice, I thought.

December 17, 2025



In memory of Oki-chan, Dec. 2, 2025