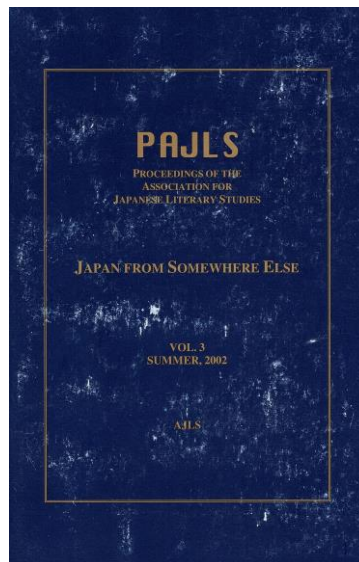


“Year of the Dogs and What Japan Meant to Me”

Holly Uyemoto 

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**YEAR OF THE DOGS
AND
WHAT JAPAN MEANT TO ME**

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“YEAR OF THE DOGS”

The 1929 stock market crash, Pearl Harbor, and September 11: all occurred in Years of the Snake. The Serpent brings unexpected reversals and sudden ambushes. According to lore, anything can happen in a Year of the Snake.

I was ambushed twice in 2001: first by cancer, then by dogs. Now everything is about cancer and dogs.

In this Year of the Snake, I got a dog. I never had a pet before and always considered myself more of a potted plant person, as they're harder to kill. The way this dog came to me was that my Uncle Henry wanted a dog.

When I spotted our puppy at the pound, I liked the little dog immediately because he didn't bark. Despite the surrounding din and stench, he was quiet. He was small, about 30 pounds, and young, about 10 weeks old. I liked his expression, one of friendly confidence. His high spirits were evident in his bright eyes, prancing long legs, and eagerness to meet us. The guy at the pound said, “This one will never bite anyone out of fear.”

Uncle Henry, on the other hand, chose a dog named Buddy that was 14 years old, half-blind, and listing to the right. Buddy looked like a budget-fracturing vet bill waiting to happen. I thought about the Anais Nin quotation, “We see the world not as it is, but as we are.” Could that be applied even to selecting a dog? Uncle Henry had just been diagnosed with Stage IV non small cell lung cancer with metastasis to his thoracic spine. He was given about 3 months to live and he had had a stroke 3 days after his first chemo, so now he too listed to the right. Even Buddy would probably outlive him.

Uncle Henry and I debated over which dog we would take home. When the guy at the pound said of the puppy I had picked, “This one will never pass 50 pounds,” that decided me for good. The wretched, geriatric Buddy was some kind of Doberman, Loch Ness Monster mix who weighed as much as my uncle. I was driving a Ford F150 at the time and I could just imagine what it would feel like, smashed against the driver's side door by the combined forces of 130 pounds of uncle and 130 pounds of dog, all of us breathing on each other.

I knew so little about dogs that if the guy at the pound had said, “This one will actually *shrink* as he gets older,” I would have thought that was

amazing and neat-o. The other choices were various pit mixes or a precocious little Jack Russell Terrier. I reasoned that I didn't need Guard Dog or Trick Dog and I certainly didn't want a dog that was smarter than me. I wanted Basic Dog to fulfill my dying uncle's Dog requirement. We adopted the dog I liked, a chocolate Lab, German Short-hair Pointer mix and in exchange for a year's supply of dog food, I let my uncle name him Shadow.

"Holly, he's licking me. Make Shadow stop licking me!" Soon it was obvious that the truck wasn't big enough for the 3 of us. Even as my uncle shrank, Shadow grew and grew. Just the sight of him, or the 3 of us, elicited laughter and commentary around town, at the hospital, and among friends and family. "When are you going to get the saddle for him?" is one that I heard almost daily, as well as, "Look at those enormous paws!"

Prior to my adoption of Shadow, the canine narratives in the family were exclusively around men and dogs. There was Zeus, who ate a steak off my grandmother's table. There was Thrush, my dad's German short-hair who took off for the car at the sound of the gun. There was the dog whose name nobody remembers, but everyone remembers that when he misperformed while my grandfather was hunting ducks, my grandfather turned around with his rifle and shot the dog.

Shadow is more than a dog; he's a family member. I have big paws too. The angle of relation of Dog to Family has changed considerably since my uncle was a kid or since my dad last had a dog. Their dogs lived outside, ate dog food, and did dog things. Shadow sleeps on my bed, shops at Old Navy, and attended his first dinner party on Halloween. I made his costume. He was supposed to have been a cougar, but he chewed his headpiece when I wasn't looking, so instead he was a Flintstone-ish cavedog.

When we got Shadow, Uncle Henry was on Carboplatin and Taxol, a particularly aggressive chemotherapy regimen that diminished him in every way. In order to build him up a bit, I began dragging him to the gym every morning. He exercised his failing body with a will to live that surprised me. I was warned that the gym might kill him, but after a few weeks of weights, cardio, and yoga, plus waking up at 5 am and taking care of the puppy, I became convinced that Uncle Henry would only grow stronger - would *probably live forever!* - and this new regimen would kill me.

My uncle is a 67-year-old retired farmer. Systemic tobacco abuse contributed to his cancer. When I fill out the insurance and hospital forms, next to "tobacco" I check "yes" and in answer to "How long," Uncle Henry likes me to write "39-plus." It sounds more benign than 40-plus or the truth, 42 years.

“Holly, I like the gym. Holly, I like yogi.” He runs on the gym treadmill and you could really believe that he can outrace time, or at least make it to the end of the time on his clock. The man has discovered a new world, a gift at any age. As of November 5, he has lived 8 months beyond the oncologist's initial prediction.

Born in a Dog Year, 1934, he is loyal and wants to please. Shadow is the same way. He's 11 months and is well past 50 pounds, upwards of 80, and the vet tells me that he'll hit 105 or 110 full-grown. On his hind legs, he stands as tall as me. He isn't a fear-biter, but he bites my mom on the butt for fun and keeps my uncle's ears clean. In August I bought a Volvo turbo wagon with a pet barrier in the back, to keep them separated. One of the proudest days of my life was the day that we graduated from puppy kindergarten.

Now everything is about cancer and dogs. In the midst of all this, my 10-year relationship ended for good and I began dating again. I met 2 of these fellows at the dog park and the hospital. You date whom you meet. Propinquity is everything, or nothing, as tile case may be. One guy, born the Year of the Rabbit, was the owner of 5 dogs and the dog park played a major role in his life. Another was my uncle's doctor, also named Henry, born in a Snake Year.

We went to see a play called “Expiring Minds Want to Know: Six Women on the Verge of Brain Death.” In the second act there was a fake game show called “Wise Up or Die!” In my demented state of mind, out on a date for the first time in over a decade, I heard that as “Wise Up *and* Die!” As in, no matter how much you learn, the end result is the same.

2001, the Year of the Snake, has turned into my Year of the Dogs. But it is not Henry, born in 1934, or my puppy, which is the dog. In servitude to another, waiting on the whim of a master, and my desire to enact the will of a dying man, I am the dog in all of this. Because, it's my year too.

“WHAT JAPAN MEANT TO ME”

"Japan from Somewhere Else" is a complex and celebratory subject for me. While I am proud to claim my heritage and I have fond feelings for Japan, nonetheless, thank goodness my great-grandparents left and thank goodness America won the war.

After September 11, many of us examined our attitudes toward the freedoms that we enjoy in America, for example, the First Amendment and what that means to the writer or the artist. The playwright Ed Albee said

recently, "Artists have a responsibility not to lie to people. We must tell the truth, even if the truth hurts."¹

The truth of the Japanese American experience sometimes hurts. Social and cultural constraints color the transmission of truth as Americans of Japanese descent decide how to communicate their narrative to a larger community. The internment camps of World War II can be viewed as a stain of shame or, as a permanent dye that gave marks of distinction to a hyphenated American, ethnic fabric.

We are not all cut from the same bolt, but we can admire and respect others' cloth. Individual Japanese Americans as well as the JAACL, Japanese American Citizens' League, have been active in their protest against recent persecution of Afghan Americans. Even without specific mention of internment camp, this vocalization is underscored by an inherent reference to the truth of the Japanese American experience.

Like the warning on car side-mirrors, "Objects may be closer than they appear," Japan is closer to most Japanese Americans than it appears. I look at Japan from "somewhere else," but I look like I'm from "over there." Barring invasive cosmetic surgery or a disfiguring accident, that is not going to change.

What is in the process of changing is the perception of someone who looks like me automatically assumed to be from "over there." Forces such as the Civil Rights movement, globalization, and increased cultural sensitivity have diminished the world for consumption and diminished overt intolerance.

However, the reality is that being American of Japanese descent goes beyond appearances. As in the movie "Blade Runner," wherein non-humans are identified by their oblivion to stimuli that produces emotional response in humans, even in disguise, I would be identified as Japanese American by an emotional response to seeing Mr. Gotanda's "Sisters Matsumoto" at the San Jose Repertory Theatre, or having Spam and rice.

I know Americans of Japanese descent who regard their ethnic inheritance as one would behold ugly jewelry from a dead relative nobody liked. That's a mistake. Cultural hybridization, like genetic hybridization, changes and improves stock. From within and without, the problematics of cultural hybridization involve issues of acceptance, understanding, and consumption.

An agronomic comparison: a "plucot" is the result of hybridizing two stone fruits, a plum and an apricot. Prejudice and miscegenation fears

¹ Edward Albee, "The Sacramento Bee," November 3, 2001.

incurred accusations of racial abasement in people; now people resist manipulated or "mixed" foods.

The novelty and binary qualities of a plucot make it a hard sell in the marketplace. In selling the Japanese American experience in any art form, the relative novelty and binary qualities of being Japanese American must be addressed persuasively and responsibly, as writers and artists create desire for new fruit.