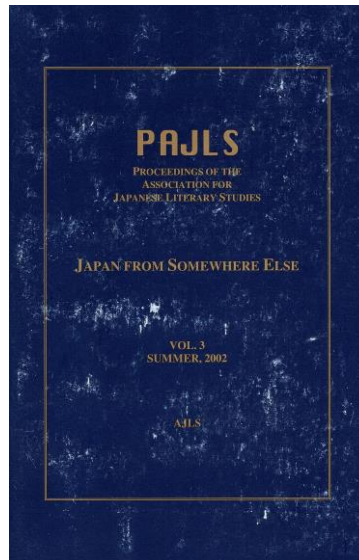


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TIME AND PLACE: “JAPAN FROM SOMEWHERE ELSE”

Kyoko Mori

As an American writer who grew up in Japan, I think of Japan mostly as a place of my childhood—formative, nostalgic, and mysterious all at once. In my writing and in my memory both, time and place feel interchangeable, like the vertical and the horizontal lines of a graph. If you turn the graph sideways, the lines would still cross at the same ninety-degree angle. To me, Japan is not just a particular place but also a particular time—my childhood which spanned the years between the late 1950s to 1970s. Like family, love, difficult friendships, marriage, or the discipline of writing, it is something I have known intimately and yet do not understand completely.

These are some of the images from my Japanese childhood: narrow curvy streets with four-way mirrors in the corner, small black hawks flying overhead at dusk, the bow-shape of the Osaka Bay in the distance, bright neon signs of the buildings in downtown Kobe at night, the cherry trees planted along the river and how they looked like a huge white cloud from the train station platform in April. In my memory, I am standing on a hill, near the *Shukugawa*, *Ashiyagawa*, or *Mikage* station of the *Hankyu* train line and looking down toward the sea. That area between downtown Kobe and northwestern Nishinomiya is the only part of Japan I know well. All my friends lived up on the hill north of the train line and attended Yamate Elementary School in Ashiya and then Kobe Jogakuin, an all-girls' private school my mother and I had chosen because it was the only school in our area—private or public—that didn't require its students to wear some version of the identical militaristic-looking blue uniform. My friends and I could go to school in whatever outfit we wanted to wear, so long as we pinned a tiny school pin, the size of a thumbnail, on or near our collar.

As a result, I only know one kind of Japanese life: suburban, upper-middle-class, educated and leisured. My understanding of Japan, such as it is, is purely personal rather than cultural, sociological, or political. My understanding of America—where I have lived more than half my life now—is mostly personal, too, but at least as an adult in the States, I've gotten to know different kinds of people and places. I have a pretty good sense of what it's like for someone to grow up on a dairy farm in Wisconsin with nine brothers and sisters (your house was near a small lake, but your mother, who didn't have time to watch over all of you, told you never ever to go near that lake because you will surely drown; as a result, even your most athletic brother had to take the basic swimming class, called

“Overcoming the Fear of Water,” at the Y in his thirties before he could attempt a triathlon; also, years after you left the farm, you would drive on the freeway in the summer and see people working in hay fields and you would remember how your arms itched for days), or to become a school teacher not because the teachers in your small Midwestern town were so great but quite the opposite (you were sent home in second grade for not being able to tie your shoes even though, due to your being left-handed, no one could really show you how; later, you wore two pairs of jeans to high school—one baggy, one skin-tight—and shed the baggy pair at your locker so your mother would not see how tight your jeans were, till one afternoon when you were sent home for your jeans being too tight). I know what it’s like to work at a paper mill or a pickle factory or to drive a cab. I can easily imagine the day-to-day life of someone living on the upper-west side of Manhattan, in Lincoln Park or Wrigleyville in Chicago, or in Amberg, Wisconsin which does not have its own high school or post office. Because I am a writer and not a sociologist, my understanding of these lives still focuses on the personal. Still, the spectrum of what I call “personal understanding” is much broader in my American life.

Whether I am writing fiction or nonfiction, I don’t think of myself as someone writing about Japan (or any other place for that matter) in a direct, comprehensive, and authoritative way. Still, my limited and personal view hasn’t prevented me from including Japan in my writing. In fact, the opposite is true: I include Japan in my writing because my understanding is limited in just the right way. I believe that the best subject for a novel, a memoir, or a personal essay is what we know intimately and yet don’t really understand. We need the gap between knowledge and understanding in order to write with complexity and ambiguity, instead of flat didacticism. Maybe that is why, for most of us, there’s a five-to-ten year gap between experiencing something and writing about it. It takes several years for us to admit that something falls in the category of “what I know well and don’t really understand.” The events, people, and places of our present day-to-day life tend to strike us as ordinary and fairly easy to understand; otherwise, how can we possibly get up every morning to face them? We assume that we understand our present life well enough, or that we will come to a better understanding soon enough. It’s only when we look back to our past that we can admit that we have never really understood our own childhood, adolescence, early twenties, first marriage, and the people and places from these times. I set my two coming-of-age novels in Japan for that reason: I wanted to write about the kinds of people and places I knew, not because I had some clear interpretations about them, but because they still remained mysterious to me. When I wrote those novels, I was in my twenties and

early thirties—finally old enough to admit that there were things about my childhood that I would never really understand.

Although I will always turn to the personal mental photographs I have of growing up in Japan as something to write about, they are not my only resource. Especially in the last five years, I've come to think of the Midwest as a basis of my inspiration and my knowledge. After having lived there all my adult life, I feel ready to admit that there will always be truths that will elude me there, too. For me, this is the paradox of inspiration: the more I get to know a place, the more familiar and mysterious that place becomes at the same time. There are also other topics or sources—not places but activities or observations—that are integral to my writing: running, bird-watching, snow storms, the small moments of kindness or cruelty between people, the way people wear their hair or clothes. I think of myself as a novelist or essaying who writes “about” these things as much as “about” Japan. I would not want to be classified only as someone who is writing about “Japan from somewhere else.” Japan is only one of the many topics in my writing, and that “somewhere” isn't just anywhere: my writing is as rooted in the American Midwest as it is in Japan.

Although Japan, then, may be one of the important “topics” of my writing, I don't write in the aesthetic traditions of Japanese literature, mostly because those traditions have not been a formative part of my education. I read some Kawabata, Soseki, Mishima, etc. in high school in Japan but they were presented to me as important and unapproachable texts, not as models of writing I might emulate. Later, in graduate school in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, I read some Japanese women's poetry because I had proposed a translation project in lieu of the “written” portion of my Ph. D. prelims—if I'd taken a regular prelim, I would have been locked up in a room with a topic for six hours to write an essay on the spot. My adviser and I decided that by translating a sampling of modern Japanese women's poetry, I could avoid this grueling exam and also justify using my Japanese as a “major foreign language” I was required to have to get a Ph. D. More recently, I read some modern Japanese novels in English: *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, *Botchan*, *Silence*, *the Lake*. What I learned in the end is that, much as I admired the poetry and the novels I read, they felt as foreign to me as the Russian novels, the French symbolist poetry, or the German Expressionist art.

In the end, what we write about or where we come from is insignificant compared to how and where we learned to write. For a writer, the study of writing always trumps the subject matter he or she writes about. By the time I was reading the modern Japanese women's poetry or the major Japanese novels in translation, my understanding of literature had been formed by my

schooling as an English major and a writing student. The way the Japanese poets and fiction writers approached the material—even though the material included times and places from my personal background—was something I could only admire from a distance. I did not “get” the Japanese poems and novels because, unlike the poems, novels, and short stories I had studied and come to love, they seemed both very abstract and yet very thematic.

I was used to reading Sylvia Plath, who portrayed her failing marriage through the step-by-step description of how to start a bee hive from which to harvest honey or the list of objects in her hospital room (the framed photographs of her husband and children in which their smiles look like little hooks trying to hold on to her). I didn’t know how to read the Japanese women whose work alternated between a barrage of surrealistic images—umbrellas falling from the sky, a riderless carriage speeding down a city street, the moon turning into a glass house—and flatly-stated declarations of their unhappiness. I learned how to use telling but small details from reading Jane Austen (something really *is* wrong with Frank Churchill because he never closes windows and doors; little wisps of air are always seeping through the gap of his inconsiderateness), Raymond Carver (you know how upset the mother is in the story “Boxes” because she invites the narrator to eat supper with her by saying that all the food is going to rot anyway if he doesn’t come), or Charles Baxter (you understand that the long-lost brother in “A Relative Stranger” is both a patient man and a control freak when you see the miniature ships he’s built inside bottles). Faced with Mr. Mizoguchi who kept telling us why he had to burn down the golden temple or the omniscient narrator of Endo’s *Silence* who brought up the main character’s obsession with the face of Christ every ten pages, I felt frustrated because I understood all too well and too little: I got the point, I felt like saying, but why are we hearing about this again? The writing in those novels was so complex and beautiful in spite of these obvious repetitions, but it was utterly different from anything I wanted to do.

Even though—as a woman of color—I find a lot of American and English literature to be problematic, the poems, short stories, and novels I studied form an indispensable part of my heritage as a contemporary American writer. In college and graduate school, like most young women readers, I was offended by the way Hemingway portrayed women. Still, I could hardly fail to learn how expertly he created dialogue in which people skirt around the things they want but can’t say (“Hills Like White Elephants”), how he used simple declarative sentences to build a clear and bleak mood (the beginning of *Farewell to Arms*). No matter how grotesque I found Faulkner’s Southern Gothic characters to be, I couldn’t help noticing the relentless momentum of the plot in “A Rose for Emily” that results in

the discovery of Emily's grey hair on the pillow next to the skeleton; it was fascinating to see how the odd first-person-plural point of view he'd chosen for the story contributed to the sense of urgency and perspective both. Because I did not go to college or graduate school in Japan, because I did not study writing from reading Japanese literature, I don't have the same kind of understanding about Japanese literature. So much of my education has consisted of how to read as a writer, and the material I've gotten to know through that education is mostly modern British and American literature.

When I write about "Japan from Somewhere Else," then, I'm using the concrete and clear (and very understandable) skills I've learned "somewhere else" to write about a time and a place that will always remain mysterious to me. Both portions of my background—subject and method, past and present—are important to me. I would never want to be identified with one aspect of this double heritage at the cost of the other. I write about Japan (sometimes) because I don't really understand it. I write from a tradition I understand and cherish.