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# Night Moves

CATHY N. DAVIDSON

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*I dreamt Japan long before I went there. Moss gardens, straw-mat rooms, wooden bridges arching in the moonlight, paper lanterns with the fire glowing inside. Whenever I paged through photography books of traditional Japan, I found myself gasping with appreciation. Three rocks, a gnarled pine tree, raked white sand: awe. Pictures of Windsor Castle or the fountains of Versailles have never left me breathless.*

*But what struck me as we drove away from Osaka International Airport was the unattractiveness of the scene. Forget rocks and raked sand! Neon everywhere, billboards as far as the eye could see, concrete apartment blocks dingy with pollution. Even the details radiated a sense of urbanization run amok. Whereas other affluent nations bury power lines and strive for at least some sense of visual harmony, Japan seemed to be clotted with the cables and wires of modern life. Looking out the car window at gray buildings with rusting metal roofs, the power lines crisscrossing bizarrely overhead, I was reminded of some grim old photograph of a nineteenth-century immigrant ghetto, zapped by late-twentieth-century electronic overload.*

My visa papers described me simply enough. Sex: Female. Status: Visiting Foreign Professor. Yet the word *foreign* complicated *female* in ways that I still don't fully understand. Perhaps because in 1980 most visiting foreign professors in Japan were men, the rules for how to treat a woman in my professional capacity just didn't exist. The Japanese professors I met were all friendly, but it was obvious that my male colleagues, in particular, didn't quite know what to do with me. Should they invite me out with them for the normal after-work drinking as they would a visiting male teacher, or would this be an insult to me (or, worse, to my husband)? Should they exclude me from such socializing, as Japanese women professors were routinely excluded, or would I consider that to be insulting, not to mention hopelessly sexist? What was polite, respectable, collegial—and where were the boundaries?

*Female* and *foreign* didn't always go together comfortably away from the university either. My friend Hiroko-san used to insist that traveling

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around Japan with me was like traveling with a man—or maybe even like *being* a man. One time the two of us visited a small pottery village out in the countryside. She stopped a local man in the train station and asked where we might catch a taxi. He stuttered nervously before managing to answer her—and when he did, he used the masculine form of address. As long as she was with me, Hiroko-san wasn't really female. Nor was she always Japanese. Later she asked another villager directions to a particular shop. He practically ran away from us, calling back over his shoulder that he was sorry he couldn't help but he didn't speak any English. Their exchange was, of course, conducted entirely in Japanese.

In professional contexts, more than one Japanese woman remarked that I was often spoken of and to with forms of respect reserved for men in Japan. These women were broad-minded enough to be more bemused by this than resentful. When I pushed the issue, they also admitted that, if I was respected, it might be because in some sense I didn't really count. I was from another world, beyond the pale of professional competition, outside the battle of the sexes Japanese-style. It was as if my foreignness put me in some different gender category, on one level proximate and titillating, on another androgynous and remote.

I discovered more about this category by riding the Takarazuka train. Takarazuka, the end of my own branch line, is the home of the Takarazuka Revue, an all-female theatrical company that produces traditional Japanese dramas as well as Western musicals. With their masculine, clipped haircuts dyed a distinct auburn and their aggressive long-legged strides, the Takarazienne who play the *otoko-yaku*, the male roles, are especially striking. They comport themselves in ways that are unmistakably Western and are at their best as the dashing male heroes in such classics as *The Three Musketeers*, *The Lady of the Camellias*, or more recently, *Me and My Girl*. Hundreds of young girls gather outside the Takarazuka theatre each day, hoping to catch a glimpse of these female “men.” The girls sigh and cry and scream with love like American teenyboppers at a rock concert.

On the trains, I regularly saw the Takarazienne who play the male roles, and saw, too, that they were watching me, examining how I sat, my gestures, even my facial expressions. Later, when I came to know Nomura-san, a retired Takarazienne, I asked her why some of the Takarazienne seemed to be studying me.

“That’s easy,” she answered with her characteristic wry smile. “We often watch Western women to understand better how to act like a man.”

□□ Dietrich, Garbo, Katherine Hepburn, Bette Davis, Joan Crawford—the standard repertoire of Western transvestites—these are the actresses that Takarazuka women emulate in order to portray romantic male leads in Western dramas.

□□ “And young Brando,” Nomura-san added, winking, “when he was still pretty.”

Many foreign women visiting in Japan have had the same experience I have had when entertained in elegant Japanese restaurants. On two or three different occasions, I became the focus of the smiling, seductive attentions of a hostess or a geisha. She flirted and attempted to engage me in repartee as she would a man.

□□ “It’s not what you think,” I whispered one night to a lesbian friend, a visiting writer who was the occasion’s guest of honor, when a geisha started making eyes at her.

□□ Later, at a kabuki performance I attended with the same visiting writer and my friend Hiroko-san, I found myself at a loss when the writer asked me to explain the hordes of women outside—from young girls to aged grandmothers—all swooning over Tamasaburo, the stunningly beautiful actor renowned for playing *onnagata*, the stylized female role in kabuki drama.

□□ “Japanese sexuality is a mystery to me,” I answered lamely, in response to her question about the country’s tradition of professional cross-dressing and the ardor it excites in ostensibly straight, heterosexual men and women in the audience.

□□ “It may be a mystery but you sure like it, Cathy-san!” Hiroko-san chided me. She and I had been to both the Takarazuka Revue and kabuki and often watched sumo wrestling together on television. There are times when we giggled like schoolgirls over the handsome performers in all three.

□□ “I can understand your fascination for the women who play men and the men who play women,” the American writer teased, only half-jokingly, “but one of those overstuffed sumo wrestlers? How could you, Cathy?”

□□ She would not believe me when I tried to explain that I (along with about 120 million Japanese) thought sumo star Chiyonofuji was one of the world’s most handsome men.

□□ The unexpected and unpredictable are always titillating (for me, at any rate). And it is partly the element of surprise that makes Japan so appealing—*so sexy*—for me. I like the excitement that comes from living in a country where I’m regularly at sea about what’s going on. Situations that would be mundane or irritating in America become interesting because they both are and are not recognizable. More than

once I've been baffled by Japanese male attentiveness, uncertain whether I'm on the receiving end of politeness or a proposition. In America I would sense a come-on immediately, but in Japan there are rituals of compliment and deferral—almost like flirtation—that I've seen men engage in among themselves. I've seen it with women, too, a jockeying among politeness levels and status codes that require a more intimate knowledge of Japan than I possess.

Not knowing such rules adds intensity and suspense to the simplest interaction. I think this rubs off on the Japanese too. They can play the role of guide, an interpreter of their culture. Or they can invent rules, make up "Japan" as they go along. This is one pleasure and danger of being a traveler: one never really knows how much to trust one's guide. When a friend was a visiting professor in Denmark, one of her students told her how he had once sent two unusually arrogant Englishmen off to a fancy restaurant with a Danish phrase that, he assured them, meant "We have a reservation." What he had really taught them to announce to the maitre d' was "I am not a pencil."

My most complicated experience of being guided—or misguided—came after I participated with some Japanese academics and journalists on a panel assessing the role of internationalism in Japan. One of the speakers, a Japanese professor, asked if I might be free later that evening to sample some of Osaka's more unusual restaurants, small establishments in the entertainment district that he frequented but that foreigners rarely visited. I immediately agreed, delighted to have the chance to see a new side of Japan. When I met Professor Itō at the designated time and place, I was surprised to see that he and I were the only two setting out for this night on the town.

I had assumed he was inviting the other panelists as well and at first I hesitated. This struck me as one of those existential moments in the life of a happily married woman. On the one hand, Professor Itō was a handsome man, dapper almost to a fault, with a permanent twinkle in his eye. On the other, I had no reason to believe he was offering me any more or less than he had said, a chance to savor his favorite Osaka haunts. Besides, I was dying with curiosity about the entertainment district, the fabled Floating World that I'd read about in virtually every book on Japan written by Western men. These accounts almost always detail the author's liberatory experiences in the unrepressed world of the entertainment districts. Topless, bottomless, live sex, the full array of mysterious Oriental sexual tricks that no Western woman (we're told) can ever master, and all for the asking, guilt-free, in a Floating World happily untouched by either puritanism or feminism.

I had assumed I would be forbidden access to this part of Japan, and now Professor Itō was there, looking every inch the scholar, offering me an opportunity to enter this world, as voyeur, as spy.

“It’s too bad Mr. Davidson isn’t here tonight,” Professor Itō was saying with a decorous bow. “Perhaps some other time all three of us can go. But in the meantime—”

He gestured toward the street, the bright lights of Osaka shining before us.

As we walk through the entertainment district, I try to be free-wheeling and curious, part of the gaudy, festive atmosphere around us. It isn’t working. Embarrassment wells up as we pass one billboard after another covered with photographs of naked women, many of them *gaijin* (foreigners) with pneumatic breasts and tight buttocks. The men we pass on the street look me over, as if I too might be available for the asking. It’s hot out tonight but I find myself pulling my jacket tighter around me.

Professor Itō walks close beside me, protective and even gallant. He makes a joke about these “awful places,” alleviating my anxiety that he might be planning to take me to some topless joint. He turns down a small side alley where the scene is quieter, with fewer glaring neon signs and nude photo displays. Here there are several *nomiya* (small drinking establishments), with charming red paper lanterns out front. Professor Itō tells me about “ladder drinking,” a Japanese version of a pub crawl, and I hasten to explain that I’m not a very heavy drinker. He laughs, insisting that won’t be necessary, and tells me he has three or four places he would particularly like me to see. On just about any night he can count on running into someone he knows at any of these haunts. They are small and intimate, and he assures me that spending time there is equivalent to enjoying an evening in someone’s living room in America. He explains that the elaborate system of bars and restaurants in the entertainment district is partly to compensate for the limited space for entertaining in tiny Japanese apartments.

Also, I think, to compensate for the lack of couples-style entertaining. There are both men and women in the entertainment district, but it’s unusual to see them arriving or leaving together. In this world, men walk, singly or in groups, and women beckon—actually or, more often, pictorially, from the voluptuous photographs. Procurers—possibly pimps?—rush out, making promises about the quality of the entertainment within.

Professor Itō guides me past another gaudy striptease place and a



show promising live sex, and into a small, quiet shop constructed of dark, aged wood. It feels safe to me, cozy, especially after the glitz outside. There seems to be no sign, only a *noren* (curtain) indicating that it is open. We stay a while, have some sake and a little snack, then leave for another shop that seems identical to the first, and then go on to still another.

Each place has five to ten seats arranged around a small bar. Each serves sake, beer, and some kind of food specialty: eels cooked inside tofu, whale blubber, boiled things that I cannot identify. Each time Professor Itō orders something, the other customers protest that “foreigners won’t eat that!” I love most Japanese food anyway, but tonight I’m determined to prove that their stereotypes about foreigners aren’t true. I try whatever I’m offered. At one of Professor Itō’s haunts I am presented with three sparrowlike birds served whole in what looks very much like their nest. Later someone tells me that it *was* a nest. I’ve learned not to ask.

I’m surprised to discover that almost all these places are run by women. Typically, a smiling, attractive middle-aged or even elderly “*mama-san*” is the restaurant’s proprietor. Professor Itō says many of these women actually own the restaurants but sometimes they manage them for someone else. The temperament of the *mama-san* establishes the mood in each restaurant, a mood as distinctive as the food. One *mama-san* is boisterous and bawdy, another cheerfully ebullient, and a third almost morose. Some *mama-san* are former geisha and retain the geisha’s verbal and social skills. Some are former entertainers or bar hostesses. Some perhaps are mistresses, set up in business by a wealthy lover. This is Japan’s demimonde.

I’m especially intrigued by the role of the *mama-san*. Her role is rarely described in detail when foreign men write about the *mizu shōbai*, the Floating World outside respectability that flows through and touches all of Japanese culture. This is always described as a man’s world, although I have heard of bars frequented by married women where the hosts are all handsome young men whose job it is to flirt with and pamper their female customers, all at the same exorbitant prices hostesses charge in high-class bars (fifty dollars for fetching some peanuts, one hundred for coquettishly popping them into your mouth). I’ve even read an article based on interviews with these young men in which they protest how crudely and callously they are sometimes treated by the female customers who regard them solely as sex objects. But host bars are definitely the exception, not the rule. The Floating World exists mostly for male pleasure. The restaurants I visit

with Professor Itō are filled with Japanese men. Except for the *mama-san*, except for me.

In this world of men, *mama-san* is in control. She manages her customers expertly, often through a bantering kind of flirtation, the chief idiom of the night. She flirts with me too, effortlessly. At every one of these bars Professor Itō is careful to introduce me with my full, formal title. He tells the other customers (his friends by virtue of their patronizing the same spot) that, although I might look like a student, I am really a professor at a Big Ten university in the United States (“Big Ten!” his listeners observe admiringly, if a bit mistakenly, a reminder that in Japan everything is ranked).

“*Hontō da!*” they exclaim, or, sometimes, in Osaka dialect, “*Honma ya!*”, untranslatable expressions of wonder and belief, roughly equivalent to “Wow!” I am an academic in the tow of another academic but I realize, unmistakably, that tonight I am some kind of rare specimen on display, like a whooping crane or a snow leopard. I am Professor Itō’s coup, A-Female-Gaijin-Professor-at-a-Big-Ten-American-University-Who-Is-Not-Afraid-to-Eat-Weird-Japanese-Food-in-Japanese-Restaurants-with-a-Man-She-Scarcely-Knows. I am the offering he is making to his other world, his after-work world of the entertainment district where, in a handful of intimate and special places, he is known and always welcome.

Once my status is ascertained, the conversation quickly reverts to repartee. At a bar Professor Itō says is his favorite, a slightly threadbare but fastidious-looking man asks me with a straight face to repeat after him a short poem. I can tell by the facial expressions and various exclamations of the other patrons that they are puzzled by his request. But this man, whose English is very good, knows exactly which Japanese sounds are difficult for English speakers, our equivalent to the Japanese confusion of *r* and *l*. The men laugh uproariously when I repeat the brief poem, and Professor Itō, laughing too, explains that I’ve managed to turn a classical allusion to twilight—“the veils of evening”—into an extended boast about my insatiable desire. I decide to be a good sport and join in this laughter, but, as the color rises in my cheeks, I am aware of how much I’m *willing* myself to laugh. Professor Itō notices my discomfort and in his best *sensei* (teacher) voice explains how the mistake involves several complicated puns turning on my mispronunciation of the word *boshoku* (dusk) as *bōshoku* (ravenous gluttony or, in context, lust). I nod like a student. The man who started this apologizes, assuring me that he meant no harm, then quickly asks his pals to repeat after him an English sentence which



turns on a series of hilarious confusions of *rice* and *lice*. Professor Itō, the man, and I are all in on this joke, and now it is the other men at the bar who aren't sure what they've said that's so funny. The tension has shifted. Professor Itō translates for the others. There is more laughter, more sake. I've passed some kind of test, showing that I can laugh at myself, a virtue esteemed in after-hours Japan, but I feel as if I've also managed to save face, a virtue I'm finding more and more important as the night progresses.

"Sometimes, very silly," the *mama-san* whispers to me, in Japanese, filling my sake cup. It's the kind of sentence that has no stated referent; she nods at me, winks, pats my hand, shrugs at the men. *They*—men—are very silly. I am not alone, she wants me to know that. I am in *her* bar. *Mama-san* has everything under control. I feel instantly safer. I ask if I might have some green tea and feel even better as I sip the bitter, warm liquid.

Professor Itō looks at me while I drink. He compliments me on the graceful way I've learned to hold the small Japanese teacup, with two hands, then he leans toward me, and brushes something from my cheek. He lets a finger linger ever so slightly.

"An eyelash," he answers the question I didn't ask, smiling. His teeth are small, even, white.

I smile back.

"May I take your jacket?" he says, still smiling at me. "It's warm in here. Perhaps you'd be more comfortable."

He helps slide the jacket down my arms. He hangs it out of sight, through a curtained doorway next to the bar. We're obviously staying for a while.

It turns out that the first round of pronunciation jokes is merely a warm-up for the night's real linguistic entertainment. Professor Itō tells me that one of his hobbies is *rakugo*, a form of traditional story telling that usually ends in some kind of wordplay. It demands complicated puns, archaic semantic associations, and other comic turns of phrase. As arcane as it may seem to some Westerners, *rakugo* is actually quite popular. Japan even has a prime-time *rakugo* TV show where performers in traditional garb are rewarded for special displays of verbal dexterity by receiving extra *zabuton* (floor cushions) to kneel upon. By the end of the show, the contestants are perched on piles of pillows of varying heights. Professor Itō likes to test his own verbal skills in this bar where the implicit rule seems to be that the other patrons will set him a puzzle and he will try to unravel it. Instead of mounting piles of *zabuton*, free rounds of sake flow as the night's reward.

At one point, it strikes me that I'm the only person here who doesn't know who the other participants are. They might be high school teachers (there is one reference that indicates as much) or businessmen, but I can't be sure. Everyone in the bar knows everyone else's social status, quite typical since it's difficult to communicate in hierarchical Japanese without knowing whom you are addressing. We make similar accommodations all the time in English but our rules aren't as codified or overt. From Professor Itō's gallant formal introduction, everyone knows who I am (a professor, not some *gaijin* girl picked up in the entertainment district), but I know only the names of the other people. The *mama-san* and the other patrons refer to Professor Itō as "*sensei*" so I'm guessing that Professor Itō might be the most distinguished person here. It's possible there might be some class differences among the customers. I'm particularly thrown by the man who looks shopworn, even down-and-out, but who speaks excellent English (certainly not typical among working-class Japanese).

Perhaps the challenge-and-response verbal games equalize without disturbing status disparities. What is abundantly clear to me, however, is that tonight Professor Itō's game has been given a new, titillating twist: multilingual, female, *gaijin*.

"Honorable Professor," one of the other men addresses Professor Itō in Japanese with mock solemnity, "tonight you will translate for Professor Davidson." There is laughter, a lot of nodding heads. Japanese wordplay can be extremely complex. To translate the twists, turns, and allusions of obscure language into something I can understand will require all of Professor Itō's skill, and especially because Japanese puns are not only aural but also etymological and even visual. Words are both heard and seen. Trying to think of a word, a Japanese will often wiggle a finger in the air, drawing imaginary *kanji* characters until the right one pops back into visceral, linguistic memory. The visual references that come as naturally to a Japanese as breathing can be explained only slowly and imperfectly in English. The stakes are high in this tiny bar. Ego is on the line in front of this *gaijin* lady.

Professor Itō pulls himself up tall on his bar stool. With a swallow of sake, a wiggle of forefinger in the air, he takes on all comers, vanquishing every word problem the men set for him. The *macho* aspect of this performance is palpable, making me think of that scene in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* where Lady Brett participates in the festival at Pamplona, the preparation for the running of the bulls. But here there are no Hemingway heroes—bullfighters, boxers, war pilots. Instead of charging bulls, Professor Itō bravely faces a barrage of puns.

The final challenge comes from a rather seedy-looking individual with one gleaming gold tooth who suddenly blurts out a staccato sentence, maybe eight or nine words in all. There is a long pause, then exclamations of “*Hontō-da!*” and “*Honma!*” as the customers savor the complexity of his pun and more laughter as they realize the task the guy with the gold tooth has set for the distinguished academic. Professor Itō makes a hissing sound that resembles the noise of a child trying to sip the last bit of milkshake from a glass. It is a ubiquitous sound, part of the rich subverbal Japanese vocabulary, and communicates consternation, warning: “This is going to be difficult. I might not be able to help you.” Taxi drivers use it a lot.

Professor Itō requests a piece of paper from *mama-san*. From his suit coat pocket he takes a Mont Blanc pen, leans forward, then draws two intricate *kanji* characters. As I already know, there is little relationship between the sound of Japanese and its visual presentation. One *kanji* can have several meanings, but, even more to the point, because there are only a limited number of sounds in Japanese and there are nearly fifty thousand *kanji*, unless you knew the context, you cannot tell which meaning a particular sound might take. *San*, for instance, can mean mountain or the number three or childbirth. The guy with the tooth has uttered a brief sentence with many possible meanings—but the point is to find the *right* comic readings, only the best puns, and to rework them into others just as clever. Professor Itō explains all of this and tells me a few of the possibilities he is considering. In each *kanji*, he says, there is a root identity or etymology, which often is quite different from the original word, just as the etymology of the English *radical* is *root*. He puns, writes out a new *kanji* for the pun, isolates its root, and then makes another pun on that. To explain the original sentence has required about fifteen minutes. All the while *mama-san* has been offering Professor Itō words of encouragement while the men at the bar have looked on and cheered him with appreciative laughter and occasional bursts of *Honma!* At a particularly difficult place, there is a group consultation accompanied by a chorus of straw-in-the-empty-glass consternation sounds. All of this energy—explaining in English the homonymic and synonymic double entendres on cognates of the ancient root meanings of words—leads, finally, to a new formulation that turns on the simple Japanese words *katai* (hard) and *chiisai* (small).

Professor Itō has solved the puzzle and everyone is cheering. All he needs to do is translate into English and he’s won.

On the brink of victory, Professor Itō suddenly grows silent. In fact, he’s blushing.

"*Hazukashii!*" he mutters, embarrassed. He stares down at the *kanji*, not translating, not speaking.

The man with the gold tooth starts to laugh, cackle really. He leers at me, slapping his hand against the bar, triumphant. Smirks, then wide smiles, then laughter fill the room as everyone begins to realize what's happening.

It's all been a setup. The man with the tooth counted on Professor Itō being too decorous to explain the humiliating joke to an American woman professor from a Big Ten university and he was right. Professor Itō is stopped cold at the boundary we've flitted over, back and forth, all night.

"I guess you win," he says to the man with the tooth. He doesn't look at me when he mutters an apology, *gomen nasai*.

"*Iie, iie,*" (No, not at all). I touch his hand. "*Daijōbu,*" I tell him (It's okay).

This is idiot Japanese but it doesn't matter: *I know the joke*. I recognize it immediately as the retort to the Western putdown of Japanese men as being small.

"We may be shorter, but we stay harder, longer!" I shout out proudly in English, a little bemused at where I am in this 'we.'

Professor Itō blinks, shakes his head, then translates my punchline. There's a moment's stunned silence in the bar and then the place is up for grabs. Professor Itō collapses across the bar, exhausted, spent.

The *mama-san* holds up her hand, laughing, and we slap high-five. She offers everyone in the bar a free round of sake. They toast us as we prepare to leave, then follow us outside, bowing, applauding, and shouting invitations to me to please come again.

Out in the street, Professor Itō and I once more encounter numerous drunks and other cruising men. Everywhere there is prostitution, live sex shows, "no pants" coffee shops, topless and bottomless cabarets, breasts, legs, buttocks on display everywhere. Any woman on this street would seem to be fair game, and especially a *gaijin*. Professor Itō is about 5'5", slight but wiry, not a person one would describe as "formidable." But I note with fascination that as we leave the restaurant, he realigns his body and, even more, the muscles in his face, his eyes. No one bothers us as we walk through the busy streets. *Kamaeru*, this is called, to put oneself in a posture. It's the stance one assumes in swordsmanship, archery, or any of the traditional Japanese martial arts. It signals, "I am ready. For anything." The crowd opens up and makes way for us. No one even comments on my presence there. Without so much as touching my arm, in the territorial way that

Western men will guard and claim a female companion, Professor Itō signals that I am to be left alone.

It is a bizarre night. The sexual dynamic is complicated, pervasive. I can't begin to sort out all the implications. I doubt that Professor Itō would have asked a female Japanese colleague to accompany him on such a tour. I try to imagine an equivalent evening with a male American colleague but can't. We've each enjoyed the safety net of the other's difference, and yet the night has felt like a free fall. Foreignness—our fumbblings at the buttons and zippers of language—is the night's sex.

Sometime around midnight Professor Itō and I hurry back through these same Osaka side streets to catch the last trains, his to some distant part of the city, mine back to Nigawa. After the dim, woody light of the bars, the unforgiving fluorescence of Umeda Station comes as a shock. Once more, I feel exposed. Like many Japanese, my face goes scarlet when I drink sake and I realize I must look a mess. I'm surprised to notice out of the corner of my eye that Professor Itō's face is also flushed, his eyes glassy. Tactfully, we avoid direct eye contact. We bow politely to one another, and Professor Itō thanks me in very formal English for accompanying him. I thank him in stilted Japanese for keeping his promise to show me a side of Japan I'm not likely to see again.

On the train I find a seat near the doorway, next to the only other woman on board, safe from gropers. I pretend to sleep all the way to my stop but the night's *kanji* characters dance against my eyelids: hard, short.

Several months go by before I run into Professor Itō again. We're both giving papers at another conference, mine on the beginning of mass printing in America, his on an obscure English poet from another century. When I give my talk, I can feel his eyes on me and work to avoid looking in that direction. During his talk, he looks once, catches my glance, and stumbles over the next sentence.

At a small cocktail party for conference participants, we avoid one another until it starts to feel conspicuous. We address each other formally, as fellow scholars, and assure colleagues who start to introduce us that, actually, we have met once before, at another conference. I begin to thank Professor Itō again for the tour of Osaka, but a sudden change in his facial expression makes me decide not to. This isn't the place. Our colleagues are watching, listening. I quickly switch the subject, asking him something inane about eighteenth-century poetics. I notice a tiny smile play at the corner of his eyes, a



gentleness, the only shift in his expression. For the next ten minutes, he bores us with a discourse on eighteenth-century poetics.

One part of me (the American part) feels something akin to disappointment, even anger, like a girl who never received the morning telephone call she'd been promised the night before. It's "very American," I know from countless conversations with my Japanese friends, this tendency to want to nail things down, define them, calculate the meaning of an experience, a moment, an act. Nonetheless, I'm annoyed at myself for not talking about that night and equally annoyed that Professor Itō avoids any acknowledgment of our admittedly tenuous relationship.

It's at this point that my Japanese aspect takes over and reads this whole scene differently. One thing I've learned to love about Japan is its freedom from the classic Western notion that a person is a stable, unchanging, continuous entity, some essential self. In Japan, behavior and even personality depend partly on context, on the rules of a given situation. That's one reason why so many of the G.I.s who came as part of the occupation forces after World War II were shocked to encounter gentle, generous Japanese. They expected the barbarous perpetrators of the rape of Nanjing, the Bataan death march or Corregidor, and were surprised to find that, as civilians, the Japanese were, in a word, civilized. It is only from a Western perspective that this is a contradiction. For the Japanese, it is the contingency and truth of life.

My Japanese self realizes that some things aren't explicable, aren't reducible to those things that, in the West, we like to partition off as "logic" or "common sense." My Japanese self sees that the woman and man who spent a night wandering the Floating World are different people, different selves, from the two professors who stand here now wearing bilingual name badges, in a sterile conference room, sipping white wine in plastic cups, nibbling chunks of cold cheddar skewered with toothpicks. After a few moments, Professor Itō and I bow to one another, then turn to mingle with the other guests, as if here, in this room, at this moment, our Night-Town walk through Osaka never happened.