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Japan, The Ambiguous, and My Shelf

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“JAPAN, THE AMBIGUOUS, AND MY SHELF”

In the crowded terminal before my flight from Chicago to Tokyo, Kayoko handed me a small, carefully wrapped farewell gift. “It’s a book,” she added with a shy smile. “It was the only thing I was sure you’d like.” Hours later, six miles above the ink-black Pacific, I opened the book to the inscription she’d penned: “ジェームスさんへ” (To James), it began. “*Bon Voyage*.” Then she’d added the date and signed her name in three Chinese *kanji*. The book, *Looking for the Lost*, was a Japan travel memoir by the late British writer Alan Booth, described in a dust-jacket blurb as “an expatriate who found in Japan both his true home and dogged exile.” *Looking* was Booth’s account of the hundreds of kilometers he’d walked through Japan, observing a land intimately familiar yet strangely ephemeral.

I liked Booth’s writing immediately, perhaps because it was easy to see a bit of myself in him. Where he had started off with a Dazai Osamu novel in his rucksack and an urge to “inquire into things that shape and nurse and crack the spirit,” I was headed for Japan with a copy of *his* travelogue and a vague but unshakeable feeling of leaving part of myself behind in a parallel world, with unfixed notions of time and place. “While we sleep here,” Borges wrote in *Labyrinths*, “we are awake elsewhere, and in this way every man is two men.” Soon, “one of me” would, like Booth, begin looking for his true home, dogged exile, or maybe something else entirely.

As for my destination, Booth wasn’t the first writer to wonder if there was any “there” there. “In fact, the whole of Japan is pure invention,” claimed Oscar Wilde in 1886. “There is no such country, there are no such people.” Wilde’s quip prompted me to pack several books from my personal library. This decision, in turn, led to a brief but heated exchange at the airport check-in counter over the weight of my two grossly overstuffed suitcases. *I’ve got a few books in there*, I explained, lamely. The ticket agent (perhaps a sympathetic bibliophile) mercifully waived the \$200 overage charge. Perhaps it never occurred to her that I might have been crazy enough to pay it.

With Booth and Borges in my carry-on, my checked stash included *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, R.W. Emerson's *Essays: First and Second Series*, two novels by Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor's *Complete Stories*, three paperbacks by Vonnegut, Milan Kundera's *The Joke*, and, in anticipation of learning more about the history of my new city, John Hersey's *Hiroshima*. Conspicuously absent were books by Japanese authors. Besides a bilingual dictionary, the sole example was the U.K.-based Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*. Some of these books I'd read many times, others had lingered on my shelf for ages and I hoped they might bloom in a new environment. As A.E. Newton observed, "we cherish books even if unread; their mere presence exudes comfort, their ready access, reassurance." In any event, if all else was somehow lost in translation, at least I'd have a few reliable literary compass points with which to navigate.

Twenty hours after leaving O'Hare and well into a second reading of *Looking for the Lost*, my flight from Tokyo arrived in Hiroshima. It was August 6, 1997, the 52nd anniversary of the Bomb. I settled in to my small apartment and bought a large, used bookshelf. On fall afternoons after work, I'd often sit with a book or magazine on a stone bench in the Hiroshima Peace Park, near a cenotaph that reads, "Rest in peace, the mistake will not be repeated." I would spend the next four years in Hiroshima, living, working and reading in a place never far removed from the ghosts of the past. Where tourists' eyes might see only a gleaming, modern city, the constant daily reminders of its destruction and rebirth out of nuclear ashes proved Faulkner's observation that "the past is not dead. It is not even past." Some time later, I discovered that the narrator in Mishima's *Temple of the Golden Pavillion* had taken this notion even further. "*There are certain memories of the past that have strong steel springs and, when we who live in the present touch them, they are suddenly stretched taut and then they propel us into the future.*"

Perhaps owing to a liberal-arts education too liberally salted with Western "classics," I had to face the unfortunate fact that Mishima's work (and that of most every other Japanese writer) was mostly brand new to me. I knew this had to change, and not simply because I'd read all the books I'd brought from the States. The unexpected catalyst that radically reordered my reading list (and by extension, my bookshelf)

came about when I discovered the work of the 1994 Nobel Prize winner in Literature, Oe Kenzaburo. I purchased *Japan, the Ambiguous, and Myself*, a slim 128 page book, consisting of four essays, including his acceptance speech in Stockholm, from which the book took its title.

Oe's essays struck a deep chord in me. His tone was at once contemplative and wistful, with an unusual depth of solemnity and courage. Even more captivating was the fact that his acceptance speech mentioned the influence of, among others, Milan Kundera and Flannery O'Connor, two authors I knew and loved. Placing Oe's book next to theirs on my bookshelf in Japan, I felt like an archaeologist locating a transitional fossil between two distant epochs. It was the books he read as a child, Oe remarked, that had "like an invisible magnetic field, pull[ed] me toward something remote, unseen, the longing for which has become a lifelong habit." In that single, beautiful line, he crystallized the voices of our shared literary past, the struggle to maintain what he called a "dual identity," and the ambiguity of searching for lost fragments of collective memory, which Booth had begun in his travels and that I was, by some inexplicable synchronicity, continuing in mine.

My second and third years in Japan saw a sizeable expansion of my personal library, as I added perhaps one hundred new and used books, most by Japanese authors. Because my Japanese reading ability could not keep pace with my interests, I usually purchased the English translations. I started with the usual suspects, including the two Murakamis—Haruki (*Norwegian Wood*; *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*) and his darker contemporary, Ryū (*69*, *Almost Transparent Blue*, *Coin Locker Babies*) slowly adding, more traditional works by Natsume Sōseki (*Kokoro*), Yasunari Kawabata (*Beauty and Sadness*) and Yukio Mishima (*Confessions of a Mask*, *The Sound of Waves*). I also picked up Shūsaku Endō's *The Sea and Poison* on the recommendation of a friend, whose Japanese wife had just published a translation of one of Endō's lesser-known works. Endō is frequently compared to Graham Greene, but I thought of him more as a counterpart to Flannery O'Connor. His books, full of memory, regret and the mercurial nature of human morality, remain favorites of mine.

Gradually, my Japanese reading ability improved, freeing me from online ordering, and allowing me to more fully explore Japan's ubiquitous bookstores. A dusty bookshop in Tokyo's Ikebukuro district yielded fine Japanese editions of *Camus' L'Etranger*, and Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. My friend Kayoko visited Hiroshima, bringing with her Booth's second travel memoir, *The Roads To Sata*, which as compelling and beautiful as his first. A chapter on Hiroshima, "A Thousand Cranes, A Thousand Suns" was so note-perfect in its fusion of pain and hope that I wanted to frame it.

Around this time, I also discovered the German-born author W.G. Sebald, and his remarkable prose with its themes of solitude, memory and "leaning against the current of time." In *Vertigo*, Sebald writes that "[m]achines alone have realised that sleep is no longer permitted." It was over lines like these that I formed a friendship with David Mitchell. David was living in Hiroshima, working as teacher by day and writing by night. One night we stood on the balcony of a Tokyo high-rise with the vast, blinking metropolis spread out before us, ruminating about the idea of the city losing all its human inhabitants.

David's first and third novels *Ghostwritten*, and *Cloud Atlas*, were both eventually nominated for the Booker Prize. I treasure his friendship and his books, particularly an advance copy of his second novel, *Number 9 Dream*, which he sent to me, with copious handwritten annotations in the margins. Not long after I received it, I sent back to him a remarkable discovery: Masataka Nakano's *Tokyo Nobody*—a collection of eerily improbable (but undoctored) photos of Tokyo streets and highways completely devoid of human presence.

In 2002, I packed up my books and returned to the U.S. to pursue further study. Four years earlier, I'd begun a new chapter, not knowing what I was looking for or if I would find it. Now, when I take a book from "My Shelf," I often am reminded of Japan. I'm reminded, too, that in literature, as in life, the true destination is often ambiguous, and the resolution, if it exists, may at present simply be too much to take in all at once. As R.W. Emerson recalls Richter saying to music: "*Away, away! Thou speakest to me of things which in all my endless life I have not found and shall not find.*"

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