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My Library is Full of Ghosts

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My Library is Full of Ghosts

Looking at my books, nestled on their cheap Ikea bookshelf, I can't help but notice the ones that are missing. They appear through their absence, a palimpsest of literature that constitutes my personal library, texts both present and not. Schrödinger's books, maybe, alive and dead at the same time. Having moved over and over since joining an international high school in 2006, I started shedding books behind me everywhere I went. From France, where I was born, to Hong Kong for high school, then to Canada for university, back and forth to Japan twice on exchange, and finally to the US. On a student budget, you can only take so much with you when you move.

So, you leave them behind. The collection of *Bungo Stray Dogs* manga that your colleague left you? You gift it to a friend finishing her PhD. That copy of *Swan's Song* that was glued to your hands for almost a month? You leave it to a coworker who mentioned they enjoyed post-apocalyptic fiction. The massive *Tale of Genji* translation that you dragged around from class to class? You smuggled it in your luggage back to your parents' home last Christmas. Your books migrate to seek new purpose, to little neighborhood libraries, donation boxes, and thrift shops.

And then, there are the books you can't leave behind, no matter the shipping costs to your new apartment in St. Louis, like that copy of *The Professor is In* that you read on the bus to campus each morning, wondering if you really *need* to do a PhD. (The debate continues, but here

we are.) A history student noticed the cover and invited you to join their grad student group, even though, at the time, you weren't even a grad student anymore. Of course, the several books you researched for your master's thesis won't leave your side either, particularly the two-volume pocket version of *Towazugatari* by Lady Nijō that you spent almost four years, trying to understand and classify: Is it an autobiography? A fictional journal? A memoir of emancipation? When you first met her in an undergrad class on Japanese women self-writing, through Karen Brazell's translation, *The Confessions of Lady Nijō*, you were so taken by the story of this 13th-century woman that you decided to major in Japanese literature. She died so long ago in a country so far away, and yet her voice still resonated with you, one more ghost who has come to haunt your library. And she'll remain there, being dragged along to maybe end up somewhere else, where I could share her story with others.

On two different shelves are books by people who have inspired me and helped me through my budding academic career. One, *Rewriting Medieval Japanese Women* by Christina Laffin, was given to me and my classmates by our professor. She used her monograph as an example in a class on publishing in academia and to teach us about good bibliography practices as well. On the other shelf rests a novel by my current advisor, Rebecca Copeland: *The Kimono Tattoo*. It exemplifies one of my dearest dreams, publishing fiction while being an academic, a dream I know I share with so many others. The potential for academic fulfillment married with creative writing achievements haunts these volumes.

If you ever read one of those listicles of foreign words that don't have any equivalent in English, you might have come across the Japanese word *tsundoku* 積ん読. It refers to the books that you buy, that you pile up, and yet don't read. I haven't moved in a little while, so my apartment is now full of book piles: books from the library, books my parents sent me, books that my friends lent me. I have to move them when I vacuum, and I inevitably trip over them, causing my baffled partner to ask why I don't move them yet again. My Ikea shelf is not big enough to contain my personal library. It overflows throughout our living space.

I look to the side of my desk, and there is another pile: Tawada Yōko's *Taiyō shotō*, the latest volume covered by the WashU Japanese book club, on top of Ogino Anna's *Horafu Anri no bōken* and Kanehara Hitomi's *Pari no sabaku, Tōkyō no shinkirō*, two books I am using for my dissertation. The text accumulates. I read a few sentences here, a paragraph there, and reshuffle the pile. Someone recalled a book through the library, a volume I've barely opened in the three months I've had it with me. I'm annoyed as I return it. How dare they recall it? That's another ghost whose presence I'll need to resummon later.

Despite the drastic reduction in books with each move, I find myself accumulating more and more each semester. Books bought for classes, given to me for workshops, and won at a department event, or anything that sounds like it could be used for my dissertation. I know some will travel with me when I leave, but others will undoubtedly be left behind. Recently, I realized

that all these books have come together only because of me, the only common denominator among them. When I die, they'll gradually be scattered again, no longer a collection. One of my friends used to say that he couldn't wait to become professor emeritus so that he could donate his book collection to his university's library. A shelf with his name on it. It always struck me as macabre. I'd rather the books were free to migrate to others' libraries. During the pandemic, I bought a Kindle. Now I borrow digital books, a new type of specter, a ghost in the machine, that is sent from the library to my living room.

My library is full of ghosts, but they are helpful, hopeful, and just want someone to listen. More will drift into my life, and most will drift on further still, on to the lives of others. Wherever they've been, hopefully they're remembered, their stories and perspectives remaining a part of anyone who took the time to get to know them. I can't wait to meet more of them in the future, no matter where I'll be or where they'll go.

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