

## Minae Mizumura

TWO PROJECTS:

I. Authoring *Shishohetsu From Left to Right* – a talk

II *A Real Novel* – synopsis, excerpts, and appendix

### I.

#### Authoring *Shishosetsu from left to right*

Writers, as you know, are self-indulgent people. Even the minor ones happily assume that their work and what they have to say about it are of great interest to everyone, including, of course, the distinguished (and soon-to-be distinguished) scholars of literature like yourselves. I don't claim to be an exception. I will be commenting today on my own novel, *Shishosetsu from left to right*, published in 1995. And I will indulge myself so far as to argue that my novel addresses, or at least tries to address, a very fundamental question: What does it mean to be a writer in Japanese in this day and age?

Let me take some time to summarize the story of the novel. It takes place around the end of the nineteen- eighties, in a university town somewhere along the East Coast of the United States. It is a Friday night in December and snow is falling heavily. Inside a stuffy, over-heated apartment, totally cut off from the rest of the world, Minae, a Japanese woman and one of those eternal graduate students you find in a university town, is composing a diary entry on a computer. That day has proved to be a special day for her. It started with a telephone call from her sister, awakening her and reminding her of the dreadful truth: Exactly twenty years have gone by since her family left Tokyo and moved to New York. Like most of the Japanese who are sent abroad by Japanese companies, her family never intended to settle permanently in the States. But unlike most of them, they kept putting off the time of their return until it gradually became apparent to them that they had irrevocably lost the right timing. As Minae recalls the long and numerous conversations she had with her sister over the telephone that day, she is inevitably led to reflect upon the last twenty years of her life.

The changes the passing of time brought to her family weigh heavily on her heart. America was still the land of golden dreams when the family left Japan, united, happy, and filled with vague hopes. Who would have imagined

then that the price of the Japanese yen and the price of Japanese land would soar so monstrously that, were they to return home twenty years later, they would fare far worse than when they had left? Who would have imagined then that the two sisters, with all their triumphant American background, would fail to catch a respectable Japanese man and would end up husband-less in a foreign land, having to fend for themselves? Who would have imagined then that their mother, both in despair and upon calculation, would abandon them all and follow a young Japanese *salaryman* to Singapore? Or that their father would be prematurely consuming his last years in a nursing home, sickly and half-blind? The sisters, now in their early thirties, uprooted and lonely, spend hours every day on long-distance calls, lamenting the passage of time and the unexpected turn of events.

What makes the recollection of the past twenty years most disturbing for Minae, however, is the sense of having wasted her own life. Certainly, there had been the initial thrill of living in America. But that thrill had soon faded, and as far back as she can remember, all she had ever wanted to do was to go back to Japan.

America had taught Minae that she was an "Oriental," an outsider. She felt that she had no legitimate place in this country, and, more critically, that she would never be a legitimate user of the English language. That was probably why, from her early days in junior high school, Minae had turned her back to English, keeping the necessary contacts to a minimum, while immersing herself in an old collection of Japanese novels her parents had brought with them. In college and beyond, she took up frivolous things like painting and French so that she could go on with her usual business, turning her back to English, immersing herself in the world of Japanese literature. Thanks to the thousands of days spent obsessively in this single pursuit, her Japanese turned out to be almost as good as if she had never left her native soil, making her naively assume that she could write like those wonderful writers she had been reading. It has been a long time since she began harboring the desire to go back to Japan to become a Japanese writer. Nonetheless, years have passed without her being able to make a decisive move. She has been afraid to face her choice -- afraid, also, to leave her sister behind, all alone in America.

Twenty years have already gone by... A pang she had felt in learning the dreaded truth that day provides her with the last push needed to make that decisive move. She is now determined to go back to Japan to start writing in Japanese. That determination, however, rather than alleviating her mind, lets loose the obvious questions she had previously tried to suppress. Indeed, if all she ever wanted to do was to go back to Japan and to write in Japanese, why had she not done so earlier? Why had she wasted her precious youth like this inside a stuffy, over-heated apartment in a boring little town? And more profoundly, what was the meaning of those twenty years in America if all she had ever wanted was to become a Japanese writer?

As Minae keys in her diary entry and reflects upon her life, sad and confused, the telephone rings, piercing the late night air. It is her sister again.

Despite the hours Minae has spent talking to her sister that day, she has been unable to bring herself to tell her that she finally must abandon her. Now it is her sister who, unexpectedly, gives Minae leave to go: "Yes, you can return home. Go ahead and give it a try." Suddenly, a glimmer of hope, and along with it, all the forgotten yearnings for life itself, awaken in her mind. "Yes, I should give it a try." The novel ends as Minae throws open the window and lets the fresh winter air into her apartment.

Needless to say *Shishosetsu from left to right* is basically an autobiographical novel. Ever since Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, what can be called "how-I-became-a-writer" stories have flourished in the world. *Shishosetsu from left to right* is no doubt a variant. You may even detect in my novel that self-complacent, self-congratulatory tone, characteristic of such stories. Yet, in my novel, inextricably connected to this tale a hundred times told, is a more sober tale, full of regret. For my story is not just a how-I-became-a-writer story. It is a how-I-became-a-Japanese-writer story and that story necessarily runs parallel to the story of how I failed to become a writer in the English language.

What does it mean to write in Japanese in this day and age? Well, it means first and foremost that you are writing in a highly local language -- as a matter of fact, in a highly singular language as well since the Japanese language does not even belong to a larger linguistic family. What does it mean then to write in a highly local language? The answer, obviously, is not too auspicious. For it ultimately means that you may toil till death in an effort to create great works of literature but you are not likely to have even the slightest chance of becoming a truly *major* writer -- that is, a writer whose work, both in the original and in translation, will reach so far into the distance that she will, in the end, be read by millions of her true readers, some of whom will, in turn, create their own works which will engage in a direct dialogue with her, thus sending her words still further into time and space. Jane Austen, for me, exemplifies such a writer. I have encountered many people -- lots of women -- in many places on earth who read Jane Austen with an astonishing passion. And Jane Austen wrote, of course, in English. Naturally, no one becomes a Jane Austen nowadays even if one wrote like Jane Austen. To compare yourself with Jane Austen and lament that you are not graced even with the slightest chance of becoming a writer like her is, I know, preposterous. But writers, as I've told you, are self-indulgent people and it is in their nature to be a bit megalomaniacal, both in their hopes and in their despairs.

More and more stories of how people born on foreign soil turn themselves into American writers are appearing on the American literary scene. Those stories are not just how-I-became-a-writer stories. They are how-I-became-an-American-writer stories. On the surface, *Shishosetsu from left to right* may look as if it were just a mirror image of those stories. One may say that some people just choose to write in English and remain in the States while others, like myself, just choose to write in their original tongue and return home. It's a free world

and you make your choice, and the two choices are equally valid -- so the assumption goes. Nevertheless, however laudable in its egalitarian impulse, such symmetric view of the relationship between the two languages is at best naive. The choice between the English language and the language that is not English does not represent a choice between two different languages. It represents a choice between a universal language and a local language.

At any given place at any given moment in history, there is always a language more universal than others, that is, more widely used than other languages among the people who are not born into that language. And yet, at no time in history has one, single language acquired so much universality worldwide as English in our age. Today, even Japanese, Chinese and Korean writers read each other's work in English translation -- something that was unthinkable only half a century ago. Moreover, this trend, being a linguistic one, follows its own logic of propagation, independently of the rapidly changing world political and economic picture. While the supremacy of America may be increasingly challenged by the rest of the world, the predominance of the English language is only growing, relegating the writings done in other languages to ever more marginal places. No doubt the trend will continue for generations to come.

I don't know what other writers writing in other non-English languages think of this asymmetry. I know that the Japanese writers do not waste much thought on it. However, I was made to be acutely aware of my asymmetric predicament because I was in a situation in which, theoretically, I could have chosen otherwise. Indeed, most people who come to America at my age will make the "right" choice without even thinking and adopt English as their first language. I was so busy resisting English that I could not see the two languages for what they were, totally unaware of the choice I had until the choice was irrevocably lost.

My English, as you can see from this presentation, is not quite up to the level of Jane Austen -- though when I come to think of it, my Japanese is not quite up to the level of Soseki, either, but then that's another story.

Let us go back to *Shishosetsu from left to right*. *Shishosetsu from left to right* can thus be read as a story of a woman who made a wrong choice in her life. If that were all there were to the story, I could only feel sorry for the protagonist, for myself and for Japanese literature. But then, running alongside this story, fortunately, is the story of a woman very much elated by the idea of writing in the Japanese language. And here, of course, is where the notion of the untranslatability of language comes in.

Why did the protagonist persevere in her resistance against English? It is true, as I have said, that, as an "Oriental," she felt she was an outsider. It is perhaps also true that she was too proud or too cowardly, afraid of the humiliation that necessarily accompanies the process of learning a new language. Yet these sociological and psychological reasons cannot explain away what in the last analysis remains a profoundly literary phenomenon. For what made the protagonist persevere in her resistance against English was an act of

reading. The more she immersed herself in the Japanese novels the more she had to turn her back on English. It was in reading that she encountered the irreducible material difference of the Japanese language from the English, which made it acutely uncomfortable for her to live in two worlds, to live with two subjectivities.

Hence the peculiar form of *Shishosetsu from left to right*, which is an attempt to answer my original question: What does it mean to be a writer in Japanese on this day and age? As the awkward title indicates, *Shishosetsu from left to right* is a novel that may be called a "bilingual" novel. It is written horizontally in Japanese with English sentences scattered here and there. It actually begins with an English sentence, "Alas, twenty years since the exodus." The part written in English, though limited in quantity, is integral to the understanding of the novel.

On the one hand, I hoped, through this bilingual form, to attest to the linguistic asymmetry that I just mentioned. A writer who writes in English cannot possibly expect her readers to understand Japanese. In contrast, a writer who writes in Japanese can quite reasonably expect her readers to understand some English. Moreover, no other language could have replaced English here. Gone are the days when Chinese writing reigned supreme in the Far East. Indeed, it would be possible to translate *Shishosetsu from left to right* into any other language in the world, be it Korean, Polish or Arabic, and still replicate its bilingual form by leaving the English sentences intact. The only language into which it would be impossible to translate the work would be English. If we leave the English sentences as they are, how are we to replicate the bilingual form in the translation? Yet into what language are we to translate the English sentences? No other language in the world functions in the same way as does English. In fact, the impossibility of translating the work into English, and the singularity of that impossibility, is the clearest testimony to the linguistic asymmetry we now have in the world.

Throwing light on this fundamental asymmetry, however, was not the only objective of the novel. Inextricably related to that objective was another objective, more critical. By juxtaposing the two languages, what I hoped to convey above all was the irreducible materiality of the Japanese language. I hoped to make the readers truly see that the Japanese is a language that is different from the English, different from any Western language, and furthermore, different from any other language in the world. It is not that I tried to make a case for the uniqueness of the Japanese language. I tried, through the Japanese language, to make a case for the irreducible materiality of all languages, the reason for which writing even in the most local of all the local languages becomes a worthwhile activity in itself.

Indeed, the irreducible materiality of language -- the untranslatability of language -- is that which prevents the world from ultimately making sense only in English. Imagine a world in which the cream of all societies, the most well-educated and the most prosperous, expressed themselves exclusively in English. Not only would humanity be less rich in variation, it would also be less subtle,

less articulate, and less capable of checking the tyranny of one Logos. Perhaps I am being megalomaniacal again, but I would certainly be happy if, on top of all the intrinsic pleasures involved in writing in Japanese, to write in Japanese today meant working to save humanity from succumbing to that horrid fate.

All this finally brings us to the notion of *Nihon kindai bungaku* ("modern Japanese literature") and its significance within Japanese literature. Let me call your attention to an apparently obvious detail: What the protagonist in *Shishosetsu from left to right* read was not *Manyoshu*, *the Tale of Genji*, or *Chikamatsu*. What she read instead was a collection of *Nihon kindai bungaku*, a retrospective term invented to designate Japanese literature which is written after the Meiji Restoration and which is comprised mainly of Japanese version of modern European novels. Not all non-Western societies witnessed the flourishing of their own version of *kindai bungaku* as they came into contact with the West. Aside from the national independence that made possible the pursuit of higher education in the native tongue and the sophisticated use thereof, two other historical conditions were met in Japan allowing for *kindai bungaku* to flourish: first, the strength of existing literary traditions and second, the willingness to understand the West and to become a part of the West, the "universal" world, by radically transforming those literary traditions. The Japanese language, with all its blessed and the cursed burdens of the past, had to be transformed.

Hence the reason why it was only *kindai bungaku* that could have indicated to the protagonist the untranslatability of language. The language of *Nihon kindai bungaku*, born initially out of an effort to come up with translations of Western literature, is a language that sought the translatability of language in the language. (A writer like Izumi Kyoka who prided himself on his work being untranslatable was an only small minority.) It was a will to universal signification that was at the core of *kindai bungaku*. And it was this very will to universal signification, with its conscious and unconscious emphasis on the referential function of language, that necessarily brought forth to the eyes of the protagonist the intrinsic and inalienable logic of the Japanese language.

It is for these reasons that my novel has the subtitle: "*Nihon kindai bungaku*." *Shishosetsu from left to right* is a story bred by *Nihon kindai bunaku* and a story that is an homage to *Nihon kindai bungaku*. Moreover, and rather sadly, it is also a story that bids farewell to *Nihon kindai bungaku*, for, whatever the Japanese writers are doing today, one thing strikes me as being certain. There may be some writers today, as there always were and always will be, who play with the notion of the untranlatability of language. But no writer today seems to find it necessary to actually seek the translatability of language. The translatability of the Japanese language is already assumed as a fact. The language, in other words, has become transparent.

I would have liked to end this short talk on an optimistic tone, yet it is not in my power to do so as I look at the state of contemporary Japanese literature. Perhaps it makes little sense for a contemporary Japanese writer herself to

complain about the state of contemporary Japanese literature, but I cannot help it. However filled with intricate metaphors, strange, violent, or erotic, there is this inescapable impression that the language has become transparent, that is, devoid of the genuine effort of signification. You may say that all modern literature has come to a dead end. Yet, I do not think so. The cyclical process of rebirth that visits a literature from time to time may still be in order for some other literature today, though not, I fear, for Japanese literature. It is certainly not only my nostalgia that makes me think that Soseki, Ogai, Ichiyo and Tanizaki were better than us. Those writers no doubt were of uncommon literary talent but they were also blessed with the imperatives of history. They were forced by historical necessity to struggle with the language itself, that is, with the medium itself. And the struggle with the medium itself has always been and will always be the condition for any true work of art.

As a writer, all I can say for myself is that although I am not blessed with the imperatives of history -- or with the slightest chance of becoming a writer like Jane Austen -- I'll just have to keep on toiling in an effort to create *good* works of literature, because that's what's being a writer is all about, Japanese or otherwise.

\* \* \*

## II.

### *A Real Novel*

Synopsis and Excerpts  
*A Real Novel* (tentative English title)

Originally published in Japanese as *Honkaku Shosetsu* (2002)

Everyone knows *Wuthering Heights* to be one of the most absorbing classics in the world. It carries the reader to a realm where everything becomes at once dream-like and harrowingly intense, holds her transfixed in that realm, and even after she has closed the book, won't let her go for a long while afterward. When *A Real Novel*, a remaking of *Wuthering Heights*, was published in 2002, readers, critics, and scholars eagerly reported having the same experience. Some even went on to say it affected them more intensely than *Wuthering Heights*. *A Real Novel* brings back to life the celebrated lovers. It even brings back to life Nelly, the problematic narrator. It uses the same narrative structure to tell the tragic and yet blissful love story --- though with infinite changes. For *A Real Novel* is not only a remaking of a classic but a remaking of the English classic *in postwar Japan*. Hence, interwoven with the central love story is another story that makes the novel absorbing in a very different way. It is a story of Japan: how its prewar social structure, the source of much misery, plight, yearning, splendor, and human drama, gradually gave way to a happy, middle-class vapidness in the fifty years following World War II.

### Prologue

*A Real Novel* comprises two parts: a long prologue, one fifth of the entire book, and the main novel. The prologue is presented as an account of the author's life in the United States and of her numerous direct and indirect encounters with Taro, the central character in the main novel. In the following excerpt, Minae, the author, recalls how she first met him.

\*

At the time, I was still in a U.S. high school and, now that I try to remember the exact year, I must have been in the eleventh grade --- that would be the equivalent of the second year of high school in Japan. My sister, two years older, had gone off to a music school in Boston and I was left living with my father and mother in a suburban house in Long Island, not too far from New York City. Four or five years had already elapsed since the family left Japan to join my father, who had been on a foreign assignment yet, rather to my shame and regret, I was still unable to reconcile myself either with America or its language, English. While my body could acutely feel the severity of the New York seasons as the summer sun burned the lawn and winter snow froze my eyelashes, days just came and went and I had no real sense of living in America.

Looking back, I realize I belonged to three separate worlds during those years.

The first was the world I shared with the Americans in the American high school I attended. It was the world I just physically came into and went out of. Wearing a sleeveless dress and sandals in one season, a hooded coat and seal leather boots in another, my small figure would go, around eight in the morning, through an entrance to a brick building with a Star-Spangled Banner rising high above. The same small figure would go out the same brick building a little past three in the afternoon. That is all I can say about that particular world.

Thrown into an environment wholly unimaginable when living in Japan, I closed my heart with an obstinacy typical of an adolescent, rather than seek acceptance, and the years simply went by.

The second world, in contrast, existed only in my mind and it was as rich as my sense of reality about being in America was poor. It grew even richer as Mother started to work, with my sister having gone off to college, and I had the entire house to myself, attic to basement, when I came home from school. I would seat myself on one end of a sofa framed by a pair of lamps with eggshell colored silk shades capping large, faux-antique Satsuma vases, which, turning Japanophile, I had entreated my mother to buy at the Japanese department store Takashimaya in Manhattan. I would light one of those lamps, then lose myself in reading old Japanese novels my parents had packed for their daughters; I would keep turning pages until nothing was left of daylight, while an obese collie we had brought along from Japan named Della kept me company at my feet. My mind overflowed with sepia-colored Japanese words, and my entire body ached in longing for a Japan I had never lived in. I spent my days dreaming day and night of the moment I would finally return to Japan --- to the Japan which no longer existed. Of course, other things besides old Japanese novels made their way into my mind as well. There were pocket books, I never knew who brought them when, of translated European novels whose pages had turned brown. There were movies at the two nearly-empty theatres in front of the train station that never made full sense due to my partial grasp of English. There were the occasional ballets and operas for which we got fully dressed up, and which Mother drove us to see at the Metropolitan Opera House. There were even LPs of nostalgic melodies Father brought back from Japan on his business trips as well as 45s of popular songs others brought for us from Japan as gifts. On the weekend, when my parents stayed home, I would shut myself in my small bedroom and let my mind wander for hours in that world, sometimes never ceasing to gaze into a mirror. I felt as if my future was filled with all that life can offer in terms of what is beautiful, what is enthralling and what is dramatic. Perhaps that world I so cherished could simply be described as the interior life of an adolescent, formed by various art and art-like mediations: but because I was separated from my homeland, it was thoroughly steeped in nostalgia; and because I had no friends from my own generation, it was anachronistic nearly to the point of being comic; and because I felt so totally alone, it was singularly deep. I became considerably more inward-looking than what my nature really called for and I lived shamelessly engrossed in that world.

I would have lost my mental balance if these two worlds were the only ones to which I belonged. Fortunately or not, I belonged to a third world. It was the world I shared with my father and mother, inhabited mainly by the Japanese adults, especially those adults related to the company for which my father worked. The adults were without exception generous with me, a mere accessory to Father. The language spoken there, moreover, was mercifully Japanese. Nevertheless, it was also a world much too prosaic for my taste and I found it difficult to believe I was part of it. Phrases such as *head office*, *back to bachelor assignment*, *business trip*, *customer service*, *branch manager*, and *local hire* filled that world; the kind of phrases that would typically appear in *salary man novels*; phrases that sounded familiar to a daughter of a *salary man* yet which disenchanting the heart of a girl who immersed herself in *literary novels*. My father was a businessman who loathed being one and it may also be that his loathing had permeated me. Without knowing, I looked down on the very world that provided me with everything in terms of food, clothing, and shelter: three good meals a day; clothing that allowed me to look at least decent among my well-to-do classmates; and an average American house which was still easily twice the size of our house in Tokyo. I was perhaps

just a chatty girl in that world and I may even have had a happy face on. But it was a world that was all too banal, ordinary, and commonplace.

The name Taro Azuma made its appearance in that third world.

It came out of Father's mouth one evening when three of us sat having dinner in a small nook next to the kitchen which the Americans referred to as the breakfast room. I remember that particular evening because of the unfamiliar term *live-in chauffeur* my father used. The name Taro Azuma entered our conversation as that of a *live-in chauffeur* hired by Father's American acquaintance.

Piqued by the strange word, I raised my head only to find the familiar face of my father and, behind him, the familiar wallpaper of the breakfast room.

-----A *live-in chauffeur*?

Apparently Mother thought it strange too for she repeated the word and looked up at Father.

-----Yeah, Atwood hired him. He told me the guy has already moved in.

So speaking, Father pushed his plate slightly forward indicating he was finished with his meal. In the space he thus created he would either spread out his New York Times or line up a series of brown and clear bottles from which he would take an assortment of digestives and supplements whose effectiveness was beyond the interest of his teenage daughter.

The term *live-in chauffeur* remained stuck in my mind.

Unlike California, which faces the Pacific Ocean, New York, facing the Atlantic, had fewer immigrants arriving from the Far East. Growing up as an expatriate's daughter in New York, *the Japanese* meant other expatriates with immaculately parted black hair, wearing dark suits and stiff neckties. The only other kinds of Japanese which came to my mind were the ones who catered to those expatriates such as sushi chefs at Japanese restaurants or hostesses at Japanese piano bars. I had never heard of *live-in chauffeurs*. Moreover, the man was not even a chauffeur hired to drive Japanese corporate VIPs but a *live-in chauffeur* in an American household.

-----Goodness. Atwood must be rolling in riches, Mother exclaimed, pouring tea in her bowl. She had a predilection for all things western yet claimed she didn't feel like she'd eaten unless she finished her meal with tea over rice, Japanese pickles on the side.

-----He apparently decided to hire the guy as a favor to someone he knows, Father answered.

-----Does that mean he hired him out of kindness?

Mother sounded skeptical.

-----No, Atwood isn't that big-hearted. He probably thought the guy would actually come in handy.

-----I would think so. The rich are like that, Mother said, nodding this time. -----It's probably saving him taxes too, Father said, and continued.

-----His company's doing well these days. His books probably say he hired a *high-earner*.

-----My, my, a high-earning chauffeur?

-----No, he's probably documented as a manager of a Japanese-related business of one sort or another. Besides, they won't even issue you a work visa if you're merely a driver --- driving isn't considered a special skill.

While serving as an executive at a broadcasting company known to everyone in the U.S., Atwood had a small company of his own and, apparently, Taro Azuma was issued a work visa with the company listed as the employer.

-----What kind of person is he? I interjected, while pouring tea over the rice left in my bowl, having been tempted by Mother.

Father repeated my question.

-----*What kind of person?*

-----The chauffeur.

-----I never met him so I don't know what kind of person he is.

-----Has he been here long?

I found myself drawing an image of a man with a deeply lined bronze face who owned nothing but the clothes he had on, reaching New York after years of rambling, either from California or South America.

-----No, he seems to have just arrived from Japan.

-----Is he then a regular Japanese?

-----Yeah, I would think so.

-----Why would a regular Japanese come all the way to America to become a *live-in chauffeur*?

-----*Why?*

Father wondered how best to explain it. Mother took over, saying, "Minae, you've got the story upside down."

She continued.

-----Nobody would come all the way to America in order to become a *live-in chauffeur*. It's in order to come to America that some people are even willing to become a *live-in chauffeur*, that is, if there's no other way.

-----Humph.

I was offended.

I had turned into a girl patriot as a result of having grown up steeped in nostalgia, and I felt humiliated in no small measure by the way East Asians, typically the Chinese, were commonly portrayed in this country. Television in those days almost always showed East Asians as live-in servants such as cooks, gardeners, maids, who all kept bowing their heads while ceaselessly repeating "ah so" with an absurd smile fixed on their faces. Every time I witnessed such figures, I felt my blood seethe in anger and shame. That the East Asians should be put into the roles of live-in servants by itself may not have been so far removed from reality, given the history of the west coast immigration. Yet having entered America through the other entrance, the east coast, and being neatly settled as I was in a suburban house surrounded by green lawns, all supported by Japan's economic growth, I felt as though the whole phenomenon was based on undue prejudice. How can anyone come from my beloved homeland, from the country that has the brightly neon-lit Ginza and the world's fastest bullet train, that is, from a country just as good as America --- that was what a girl patriot like me thought of Japan at the time --- and take a job that can only reinforce the American prejudice against East Asians?

While finishing her tea over rice, Mother said.

-----You know, you don't know a thing about the real world. Yet you always try to measure it by a yardstick of your own making.

Without hiding my disgruntled feelings, I closed my mouth. The whole story seemed far too removed from my life anyway. When Father retired to the second floor to watch television and Mother and I stood by the kitchen sink to take care of the dinner plates, the story was no longer in my mind and I listened to the usual grumblings of Mother, who was turning more and more apprehensive about the future prospects of my elder sister Nanae, now leading a college dormitory life. "Wearing such short miniskirts and exposing her legs like that! She may think she looks great but that won't do, in the eyes of proper Japanese men," and so Mother went on.

It was at a time when I almost forgot the story Father told me about the *live-in chauffeur*. The sound of a car stopping outside my house at night led me to look out of the Venetian blinds from my bedroom, my forefinger making an opening in the folds. A long and large

shining car was parked adjacent to the lawn and a tall, thin figure was about to open the door for Father. Light from a lamp post lit the figure with a driver's cap on his head. Before I could discern his face, the long and large car fast disappeared.

And that tall, thin figure was that of Taro Azuma.

As I came jumping down the stairs from the second floor, Father saw me and spoke to me.

---- I was with Atwood, and he had that Azuma drop me off.

Atwood lived a little further down in Long Island so he seemed to have given Father a ride home after dining together in Manhattan.

----Papa, wasn't that a limousine? I excitedly asked Father, who was hanging his coat in the closet. Limousines then were unusual and still considered exclusive.

----Uhuh.

The effect of dinner drink on Father was noticeable as it was with some satisfaction that he reported to his daughter how the interior was equipped with wireless telephone and stocked with alcoholic beverages such as whiskey and gin; however, being a grown-up, his interest in limousines did not extend much beyond that. Skipping up the stairs after him, I saw him untying his necktie and heard him reporting to Mother his observations about Taro Azuma.

-----You know, I think the guy has got real intelligence.

Father's favorite refrain was "There's no use for a man with no brain," so he was praising Taro Azuma to the highest degree.

A while later, just about when I again forgot about the story of the *live-in chauffeur*, Taro Azuma drove Father home once more. Apparently, Atwood was leaving for a business trip somewhere, so after driving him to La Guardia Airport, Taro Azuma gave Father a ride home. Without Atwood around, Father must have felt a kind of Japanese camaraderie for he invited Taro Azuma into our home.

Wearing a navy colored uniform, Taro Azuma sat down on a sofa, his back straight. He refrained from touching the glass of Budweiser I tried to serve him from a lacquered tray and his "I don't drink" was cheerfully met by Father who said, his neck turning scarlet right after downing his own glass of Budweiser, "Indeed, that's how it should be, your being a chauffeur. I'm impressed." Taro Azuma's response to that was at best reserved, if not cautious.

Still a young girl, I was somewhat confused seeing a splendid-looking young man not at all like what I had imagined Taro Azuma to be.

\*

Minae gradually finds out that Taro is no ordinary man. He soon starts working in her father's office, rises rapidly within the company, and later leaves to ascend even higher in the business world. During the years that follow, Taro works indefatigably and metamorphoses into a relentless entrepreneur, eventually amassing a large fortune and fulfilling the American dream. Minae watches Taro's ascendance, first from the perspective of a romantic young girl who is vaguely attracted to him and then from the perspective of an educated grown-up woman who is slightly repelled by what she thinks is his transformation into nouveau riche. Minae ultimately goes back to Japan determined to become a novelist and never sees him in person again, yet continues to hear rumors that Taro's success is making him a living legend in New York's Japanese community.

Her last visit to the U.S. brings her unexpected news, however. Taro has suddenly disappeared and nothing is known about his disappearance.

When Minae, now a middle-aged novelist, is teaching Japanese literature at Stanford University, she is visited by a young Japanese editor, Yusuke, who, with the knowledge that she once knew Taro, sought her out wanting to tell her a story he heard from a woman some years ago in Japan. It is the story of Taro's early life in Japan – a story which, when told, strikes Minae as if it were a precious gift from Providence. The story not only transports Minae back to her own childhood in postwar Japan – to the years she is trying to portray in the personal novel, or *shi-shosetsu*, she is currently trying unsuccessfully to write. It also strikes her as being “just like a novel,” bringing back to memory the European novels she used to read with passion as a girl, especially *Wuthering Heights*. Minae is awestruck by her fortune as a novelist and decides to write a real novel, a *honkaku shosetsu*, retelling the tale she has just heard. (Needless to say this prologue not only fills in the missing link of Heathcliff's transformation from a ragged boy to a rich gentleman, but also adds another layer to the already layered story-within-a-story structure of *Wuthering Heights*.)

### **Main Novel**

The main novel is set in Japan and has two narrative layers: the on-going story of how Yusuke, the young editor, comes to hear the story from a woman he meets, and the story the woman tells him.

The time is mid-August, exactly half a century after the end of World War II. It is the night of the Lantern Festival, when the dead are believed to come back for a brief reunion with their loved-ones, and when old people, the last guardians of tradition, make fires at the gates of their homes to welcome the returning dead. The place is Karuizawa, a much celebrated summer resort and a legacy from the country's quasi-colonial past. Discovered by a Christian missionary during the Meiji period, in the late nineteenth century, Karuizawa soon became a mountain retreat for Westerners from all parts of East Asia, later for the upper-class Westernized Japanese, and eventually, as the country grew richer after World War II, for middle-class Japanese.

Yusuke is riding a bicycle down a dark, narrow, unpaved road in Oiwake, a village near Karuizawa. An overworked young man in his mid-twenties, Yusuke has decided to take a week-long vacation in Karuizawa where his friend has a summer house; he is now trying to return from a day trip. Lost in the night as if bewitched by the full moon, he is speeding downhill when he suddenly experiences a strange sensation, loses control of his bicycle, and smashes into a hedge. A middle-aged woman emerges out of the dark, and seeing him bleeding,

invites him inside a small, weather-beaten cottage to provide assistance. Inside, Yusuke encounters an enigmatic man who startles him with his flagrantly unwelcoming stare and unusual physical presence. The woman calls this man Taro-*chan*, indicating a familiarity in their relationship, but the man seems too young to be her husband and too old to be her son. Learning that Yusuke is an editor working for a literary magazine, the man says, almost in a soliloquy, that he once knew a writer named Minae Mizumura a long time ago. As it turns out, Yusuke has lost the key to the house to which he was to return, so the woman offers him a place to stay for the night, in an old barn behind the cottage. In the following excerpt, Yusuke meets yet another character when he is awakened in the middle of the night.

\*

Yusuke had no idea how long he had been asleep.

All of a sudden, a gust of wind threw open the door of the barn.

The night was warm, yet Yusuke felt a chill run through his body as he saw clear moonlight shine through the open door. There, in the translucent light, stood a girl wearing a yukata, a cotton kimono, for the Lantern Festival. Her frizzly hair flaring like mane of a lion, she glared menacingly at Yusuke who was lying on the top bunk bed. Her small fist, gripping a round paper fan, was tightly clenched. From afar, a festival dance tune, *Song of Tokyo*, could be heard playing in the air. As Yusuke raised himself and looked at the girl, holding his breath, she cried out a few unintelligible words as if half-mad, abruptly turned around and dashed out of the barn, the long sleeves of her yukata fluttering in the air.

Moonlight entered at a low angle through the barn door.

Reflecting the piercing and silent light, a myriad of fine dust particles could be seen in the doorway, flickering in mid-air. No more than a few seconds could have gone by as Yusuke watched but it felt longer, as if everything were in slow motion. The moonlight remained ever so still despite the delicate disturbance of the air.

A moment's silence: an eternity.

Recovering himself, Yusuke quickly descended to the floor, slipped his sneakers on like a pair of sandals and hastened out of the barn. He saw something white go out of the gate and turn right. Suddenly, he remembered having also seen something white cross before his eyes when his bicycle smashed into the hedge, and the next moment, he became certain that the two were the same. When he ran out of the gate, however, there was no one to be seen.

The pampas grass shined under the moonlight, looking just as eerie as before.

Returning inside the gate, he found the man standing on the verandah, suspiciously observing Yusuke's behavior. The man apparently came out upon hearing Yusuke's running footsteps on the gravel. He must have remained awake in the dining area for he was still wearing the white shirt and black trousers. He may have continued to drink. "I must have been dreaming," Yusuke said.

The verandah lights were turned off and the moon, now low in the sky, shed its pale blue light upon the man's face. Yusuke spoke to that face.

"I thought someone came into the barn and then left."

"Was it a woman?"

The question came out too eagerly.

“No, a girl. In a yukata.”

“A yukata?”

Yusuke explained that it was probably because the woman he saw last night was working on the very same yukata. The man’s gaze turned savage.

“The yukata with red carp on it?”

“Yes. I think that was it.”

His face was now contorted. The next second, he jumped to the ground and rushed out of the gate toward the right. Startled, Yusuke followed him to the gate only to see the white back of a man frantically running up the hill as if possessed by the moon herself. Yusuke stood at the gate and waited. When he could no longer bear the mosquito attacks, he returned to the barn, sat on the top bunk bed and looked down through the window. No matter how long he waited, the man did not return. It was as if the man had been engulfed by the mountain. The lights in the dining area remained amber in the dark.

A moth had entered the room during the commotion and was flying around the ceiling in crazed agitation

\*

Next morning, while breakfasting alone with Fumiko, the woman, Yusuke finds out that she is not the proprietor of the summer cottage as he had assumed but only a maid working for Taro, a U.S.-based entrepreneur. The revelation comes as a slight shock to Yusuke. Born after Japan became a thoroughly middle-class country, he has never seen a maid. Moreover, he remembers how, the night before, Fumiko, far from behaving like a maid, seemed to lord over Taro as if she had some absolute power over him.

In spite of his usual inclination to distance himself from all human dramas and to remain aloof, Yusuke finds that the strange couple provokes his curiosity, and so he is pleasantly surprised when he runs into Fumiko the next day in front of an upscale supermarket in the center of Karuizawa. Apparently sensing his curiosity, Fumiko allows him to carry the groceries to an estate nearby where two dilapidated but elegant Western-style mansions stand; she leads him inside, and introduces him to the three Saegusa sisters. Aged but captivating and haughty, the three sisters claim to have known Taro since he was a little boy doing small chores about the house for them. They seem to regard his later success with a mixture of bitterness, disdain and awe, ridiculing how Taro, a rickshaw man’s descendant, began his career in the United States as a chauffeur, *true to his blood*. They also inform Yusuke that the small cottage Yusuke saw in Oiwake once belonged to one of them. Yusuke is further intrigued by the untold story of those he chanced to meet in Karuizawa, and Fumiko, as if she herself is caught by an inexorable urge to recount the story, invites Yusuke to revisit the small cottage the next day to hear the entire tale.

Fumiko’s tale is a story of forbidden love interwoven with family sagas covering three generations. It is also a story of how much Fumiko herself has traversed

and seen in the last fifty years. It thus also becomes the story of postwar Japan, of the change and loss of things through the passage of time.

Fumiko was born a farmer's daughter near Karuizawa before the war. Despite mounting nationalism, the social hierarchy at the time still strongly reflected the initial impulse of the modern Japanese state: out of Asia and into the West. At the tonier end of the social scale were the rich, urban, leisurely, enlightened and the cosmopolitan who often had direct contact with the West --- and vacationed in Karuizawa. At the bottom end were the poor, rural, hardworking, uneducated and the indigenous for whom the West and the Westernized Japanese vacationing in Karuizawa represented something totally alien to them. One looked at the other with contempt and pity; the other at the first with suspicion and awe. The two ate, dressed, talked differently and lived different lives. Needless to say Fumiko's family belonged to the latter as did majority of the Japanese population at the time.

The end of World War II announced a new era with the American occupation forces enforcing economic reforms as well as the idea of democracy. In less than half a century following World War II, Japan not only transformed itself from a war-ravaged country into one of the wealthiest nations in the world, it also transformed itself from an economically and culturally hierarchical society into one of the most egalitarian and homogeneous societies in the world.

Fumiko's narration carries the reader through this transformation by first taking the reader back to the early postwar years when Japanese still live under the shadow of prewar social structure. Like most country girls at the time, Fumiko, the brightest in her class, has no chance of going beyond junior high school and, as soon as she reaches fifteen, is taken by her uncle to Tokyo to work as a maid in a U.S. military base. She later enters the household of one of the Saegusa sisters where she comes in direct contact for the first time in her life with the privileged, Westernized Japanese. Fumiko quickly discovers that she feels more at home with those people and, rather than getting married to her social equal after a few years of service like most maids, she ends up staying with the family for over ten years.

It is during these years that Fumiko comes to witness how Taro, a destitute orphan, falls in love with Yoko, one of the daughters of the Saegusa sisters. That their love is doomed is apparent from the start. Repatriated, half-starved, from China, Taro and his uncle's family have just moved into a shack behind Yoko's house to join his granduncle, a former rickshaw man who once worked for Yoko's grandfather and who is now living on the charity of Yoko's father. Taro's extreme poverty and lineage are not the greatest obstacles, however. Taro is rumored to be half ethnic Chinese, born in Manchuria to a Japanese woman raped by a Chinese bandit seeking to avenge his family. Being part Chinese, or having any Asian blood other than Japanese, automatically makes Taro an

outcast in Japanese society. It is only because Yoko's parents are rarely home that the two children grow up almost as siblings under the protection of two women, Fumiko and Yoko's grandmother, a stepmother to Yoko's father. A former geisha and mistress turned lawful wife, Yoko's grandmother is looked down upon by the Saegusa sisters and comes to feel an affinity with Taro, another social outcast. The two children are only vaguely aware of the social gap that separates them until one day in summer, described in the next excerpt, when Taro is taken to Karuizawa and comes into contact for the first time with the Saegusa sisters, who are vacationing in their Western-style mansion built before the war.

\*

It seemed at first that Yoko-chan wanted to go look at the new cottage in Oiwake as soon as she arrived here. Yet, as her mother, Natsue-san, persuaded her to get settled first in Karuizawa, two days and then three days passed until Yoko-chan, perhaps having gotten used to the joys of Karuizawa, no longer insisted on going. The knowledge that she would eventually be made to go and stay in Oiwake anyway may also have helped her want to make the most of her time in Karuizawa where she could play with the other children. Days went by as Yoko-chan's planned visit to Oiwake was postponed time and again, and so it was that she ended up seeing Taro-chan in Karuizawa.

It was *Sunday Dinner* in the first week of August and I was in the Shigemitsu's kitchen, working as usual with another maid, Chizu-san, under the command of the head maid, The Demon, as we called her. Yoko-chan entered the kitchen.

-----Grandma's coming today, isn't she? she asked me quietly, pulling the sleeve of my smock.

-----Yes, she is.

Yoko-chan's grandmother's visit to Karuizawa that day had been planned beforehand.

-----If grandma is coming, will Taro-chan be coming with her? whispered Yoko-chan standing on her toes, trying to reach my ear. I said, *I don't know*, unwilling to give her a straight answer.

I expected Yoko-chan's grandmother to bring Taro-chan along that day. She would have left him behind were it only a matter of her own convenience in traveling from Oiwake to Karuizawa. Yet I didn't think it was in her power to do so for she knew too well how much Taro-chan longed to see Yoko-chan. I also imagined how apprehensive she must be. I myself had such vague apprehensions, or rather, unsavory premonitions about the moment Taro-chan would make his first appearance in Karuizawa that I tried not to think too much about it until this very day. There was no way Taro-chan and Yoko-chan could play together all by themselves in Karuizawa. Besides, I wasn't even sure if Yoko-chan would want to play with Taro-chan alone. Yet I couldn't imagine Taro-chan playing with the other children. To begin with, I couldn't imagine either the Shigemitsus or the Saegusas allowing their children to play with a boy like Taro-chan.

Rather than giving her a straight answer, I asked Yoko-chan, "What would you do if Taro-chan comes?"

-----Well, there're so many things I want show him, both in this house and in the other house. I also want to show him the Kumoba Pond, the monster mushrooms that grew after yesterday's rain. I want to show him the heavy fog and the huge dragonflies....

Looking up at me, she eagerly counted with her fingers. I suppose she was getting bored of being left out by the other children who were older than her.

-----But there are huge dragonflies in Oiwake, too.

Perhaps the way I interjected was a little severe, for Yoko-chan looked bewildered, shut her mouth, and gazed at my face. I continued.

-----One more thing. Even if Taro-chan comes, he wouldn't be eating with you. He'd be eating with us.

-----Why is that?

-----Well, because he isn't a house guest.

-----Humph.

Yoko-chan seemed to understand vaguely, and as if to persuade herself, repeated "humph."

Blessed with good weather that day, we laid out the deck tables on a wide verandah that extended from the east end of the house to the west end and covered them with white linen. The Saegusa sisters, even more gay and chatty than usual, were setting the tables. The Shigemitsu and Saegusa elders were engaged in conversation, seated in cane chairs in the garden; Masao-san, the younger Mr. Shigemitsu, was reading alone under the shade of a white birch tree, and Hiroshi-san, the younger Mr. Saegusa, was swinging a golf club as usual, away from the others.

It was against such a backdrop that the two figures, grandmother and Taro-chan, suddenly made their appearance like two frozen shadows.

I was too busy on the verandah with The Demon and the Saegusa sisters to notice the taxi arriving in the driveway. The two figures suddenly emerged between the two mansions, and though they were bathed in bright, mid-day sunlight, a dark sinister air surrounded them as if they were apparitions straying out from the Realm of the Dead. Even I, who was used to them, felt a chill on my back and I was certain everyone must have had a similar sensation. The children who were making noises until that moment suddenly grew quiet and stared at the two figures. The elders stopped talking. Hiroshi-san lowered the golf club he was about to swing. Only Masao-san remained oblivious, absorbed in his book.

Even Yoko-chan, in the distance, looked alarmed, taken aback for a moment.

I blushed inside. I felt as if our daily lives in Chitose Funabashi were suddenly exposed to daylight and the society was accusing us of secretly taking part in some dubious activities. With her somber-colored kimono and old-fashioned upswept hairdo, grandmother always seemed out-of-place whenever she showed up in Karuizawa, but on that particular day with Taro-chan next to her, she almost looked like some old beggar woman wandering onto others' grounds with a strange urchin.

But why did poverty in that age stand out so much? Taro-chan was wearing a half-sleeve shirt that was yellowed and patched, and black trousers that were too short on him, bare, thin ankles showing underneath, ending in canvas shoes. Put into words, that was all there was to it, but he stood there as if he had a signboard hanging from his neck saying "Poor." Moreover, what was more conspicuous than his poverty was his sense of shame. As everyone's eyes were turned on him, he seemed instantaneously to understand their meaning, and his humiliation in knowing he was in a place he didn't belong was too cruelly visible on his face. His humiliation was apparently passed on to grandmother for she stood there as if ashamed of having brought Taro-chan down with her.

Harue-san and Fuyue-san stopped setting the dining table on the verandah and, slightly inclining their heads, looked inquiringly toward their sister, Natsue-san, waiting for some explanation. Natsue-san also seemed to have been taken aback by the sudden emergence of

the two figures but she had no need to share Taro-chan's humiliation as if it were her kin's. She immediately answered in a nonchalant voice.

-----Oh yes, that boy. Remember Roku, the former rickshaw man?... the one that my husband let live in the back of our house? That boy's the nephew of that rickshaw man. No, no, he's the nephew of the rickshaw man's nephew. Whew, it's so confusing!

As Natsue-san went on to explain he was brought down from Tokyo to help out grandmother during her stay in Oiwake, I saw Yoko-chan break away from the other children and run toward the two. The Demon, who was near the verandah steps, slowly descended to the ground, walked toward them, and taking grandmother's baggage off Taro-chan's hand, started saying something to them. I saw signs of distress growing on grandmother's face.

-----Hm, I see. What's his age?

Harue-san squinted her eyes, scrutinizing Taro-chan from afar as if to appraise him. When I told her that the boy was in Yoko-chan's grade but probably a year or two older, Harue-san repeated, "Hm, I see."

We then saw The Demon take Taro-chan toward the service entrance, leaving grandmother and Yoko-chan behind. Those in the garden seemed satisfied in seeing the boy who so visibly betrayed his poverty taken toward the service entrance and they returned to their initial positions. Just as I left the verandah to enter the kitchen, Taro-chan was being led in by The Demon.

Taro-chan had those eyes, blank as glass beads --- eyes I had not seen for a long time. He didn't even look at me.

That day, Taro-chan was made to wash his hands in the kitchen, was told to sit and wait for awhile on a chair in the "servants' hall," and was made to eat with us maids in the European style. Perhaps grandmother could not bring herself to warn Taro-chan beforehand that he may not be eating with Yoko-chan for he seemed to find it an unexpected turn of events. He also seemed to find it an expected turn of events to have to eat in the European style, though in an entirely different way. During "Sunday Dinners," we maids were to set our table with the thick white undecorated plates the Shigemitsu's had brought back from London for our everyday use and we were to eat in the European style. The Demon saw at once that Taro-chan didn't know how to handle knives and forks and, in a dry voice not bothering to hide her contempt, ordered, "knife in your right hand, fork in your left, eat like I do." Taro-chan's earlobes were glowing red, but without resisting he picked up his knife and fork as told. With a stiff-faced boy at the table uttering not a single word, hardly any conversation emerged. A peaceful meal was never ours to enjoy anyway for either Chizu-san or I had to rush to the verandah whenever a small silver bell rang to see what was demanded of us.

I could feel the urge Taro-chan must have had to just dash out of the room. I was also aware, however, of the kind of self-control he had which went well beyond the reach of an ordinary grown-up. Besides, I could not think that a boy like Taro-chan came here simply brimming with excitement to be with Yoko-chan. Having heard Yoko-chan speak of her summers in Karuizawa, he must have come here also with trepidation, trying to picture that world to himself, trying to figure out what kind of place it was and how he would be treated there. Yet how could a boy like Taro-chan even begin to imagine a world like this one. Quiet boulevards lined with larches, black stone gates standing tall, two European-style mansions casting shadows on a moss garden --- a world he never knew existed unfolded before his eyes as if by magic. Yet the same world was taken for granted by Yoko-chan with whom he had been playing day after day for a long time. A world like this one had always been a part of Yoko-chan, ever since she was born. On top of the indignity Taro-chan was enduring in

being made to eat separately from Yoko-chan, a sense of mortification must have been filling his heart. I suppose he was desperately trying to convince himself that, as long as this world was part of Yoko-chan, he just had to resist disobeying whatever the adults told him if he were to avoid his expulsion from it.

-----Taro-chan!

Yoko-chan quietly opened the door from the corridor. She must have pretended to go to the bathroom. Afraid of The Demon, Yoko-chan was particularly meek before her and she made sure only her head was poking inside the room. Her eyes, intent on looking at Taro-chan's face, were instead glued to the table. She was visibly turning red as she noticed we weren't eating the kind of food the others in the house were eating, with hardly any meat on our plates.

-----Come play in the yard later, alright?

Having uttered only those words, she closed the door quietly again as if she had just misbehaved.

Taro-chan's face was blank. Hearing Yoko-chan's remark, The Demon raised her eyebrows but she found nothing to say as Taro-chan persisted in remaining expressionless.

When the meals are finished, English tea must be served in the garden. The Demon and Chizu-san stood up to prepare the tea while Taro-chan and I started to clear the table. Taro-chan did not utter a word and neither did I. While stacking the dirty plates, I was at a loss as to what to do with him next since I hardly thought it appropriate for me to suggest to him to go out and play in the yard as Yoko-chan requested.

It was then that Harue-san came into the room from the verandah, through the kitchen.

-----Oh, here he is. I asked Granny Utagawa and she's lending us that boy. She tells me he's very useful. It's so timely, you know. There are so many things that need to be done in our house over there. Come, come, this way, my boy!

Waving her hands, she beckoned Taro-chan to follow her and opened the door leading to the corridor. Before I had time to see Taro-chan's reaction, a heavy oak door closed behind the two.

It was rather strange that I felt suddenly relieved at that moment, suddenly liberated from the anxiety that, until then, had haunted me. Until that very moment, it had never occurred to me that, after dining in the "servants' hall," Taro-chan, instead of playing with Yoko-chan, would be ordered around like a boy servant of the Saegusa's. Yet, once what took place did take place, I was immediately convinced that things couldn't possibly have been otherwise, that what took place was the most natural course of events.

\*

Treating Taro as if he were a houseboy, the Saegusa sisters make him keenly aware of the ominous future lying ahead of him. Taro and Yoko are allowed a few more years of blissful isolation until around the time of Grandmother's death, when circumstances change dramatically. Yoko's father, a professor of medical research, takes a post at the University of Hokkaido and the family moves to the northernmost island of Japan, separating the two lovers. Since Yoko's parents are reluctant to take Fumiko with them to Hokkaido and to bind Fumiko for the rest of her life as their maid, they arrange a marriage for her which she comes to accept.

Fumiko's marriage, however, quickly dissolves and she ends up living alone in Tokyo, finding a job in a small office. Now the only protector and confidante of the two young lovers, Fumiko acts as their go-between, a role she willingly plays out of her sympathy for Taro. While Yoko attends an elite private high school in Hokkaido, Taro is made to quit further study and to work all day at a family metal shop his uncle managed to start, thanks to the rapid take-off of the Japanese economy. The two lovers contrive to communicate secretly during their separation, but the difference in their worlds eventually takes a toll and results in a passionate confrontation. In despair, Taro runs away from his uncle's house, but having no where to go, finds shelter in Fumiko's tenement, where he stays for nearly half a year before leaving Japan to seek his fortune in the United States. Gradually becoming weary of living alone in Tokyo after Taro's departure, Fumiko remarries a widower from a place near her native village, which brings her back to the outskirts of Karuizawa and allows her to start working again in summers for the Saegusa sisters. This time, she witnesses how the only son of the neighbor who owns the adjacent Western-style mansion in Karuizawa falls in love with Yoko. Yoko marries him, promised that she is free to leave him if Taro ever returns. The couple have a daughter.

The Japan to which Taro, presently a man of fortune, returns fifteen years later in order to find his young love is a very different place, not only prosperous but egalitarian both in its ideology and reality. Taro first contacts Fumiko who is still helping the Saegusa sisters during the summers, now more in a position of an old ally than a maid. She assists his reunion with Yoko. Though exhilarated by seeing Taro again, Yoko has no desire to leave her husband and an unearthly but stable triangular relationship ensues, connecting Tokyo, Karuizawa and New York. As a sanctuary for this strange union, Taro acquires *Windrush*, a large ruin of an old estate on Long Island's northern shore and, together, the three restore it to its former glory. Soon afterwards, however, Yoko dies, and a few years later so does her husband, as if to follow her.

Their deaths coincide with the time when a sense of disillusionment is spreading across Japan. Japan has not only realized its century-old dream of being economically on a par with the West but has also achieved a society in which no one group can claim hegemony. Yet, the high hopes that ran in the country immediately following the war or, going back further, at the beginning of its encounter with the West, seem now to have dissipated into thin air. The conscious emulation of the West by the elites is now replaced by an unconscious emulation of all things American by the entire population, rendering their lives uniform and devoid of any sense of real drama. Japan is left with its own version of mass society, somehow even more vacuous than its counterparts in the West. When Yoko meets her early death, there is no longer any reason for Taro to return to Japan. *A Real Novel* ends as Taro decides to leave Japan, perhaps never to return, and his decision seems only too emblematic of his final judgment on Japan.

Throughout the main novel a streak of mystery courses, as Fumiko's first-person narrative of what happened in the past intertwines with the on-going third-person narrative of how Yusuke spends his week-long vacation in Karuizawa. The latter centers around the question: Who really owns the estate in Karuizawa? In the middle of his stay, when Yusuke is invited to high tea by the Saegusa sisters, he learns the story behind their cherished estate. When what is commonly known as the "bubble economy" came and went in Japan a few years ago, it not only put an end to the country's rapid economic growth, but also redistributed the final remains of the prewar legacy --- real estate in premier locations --- thus relegating the old social structure to near oblivion. The Saegusa sisters were not exempt from this ultimate blow. The appraised land price in Karuizawa was at its peak when their father died and, unable to bear the inheritance tax levied on them, they had no choice but to put the estate on sale.

A Dutch company then turned up to purchase the estate and rescue them from their financial woes with a special provision which allowed the family's use of the estate until further notice. The three sisters tell Yusuke of their belief that behind the company is a romantic hero from Holland who had a business in Indonesia before the war and vacationed in Karuizawa, where he frequently associated with them --- a much treasured memory from their youth. However, as the on-going story progresses, the sisters are led to face the unpalatable truth, already evident to Yusuke and the readers: that the romantic hero is none other than Taro who, after acquiring the cottage in Oiwake, had gone on to anonymously buy the Karuizawa estate so that Yoko and her husband may enjoy their summers in Karuizawa as they did in their childhood. Moreover, the sisters are further led to the discovery that Taro has ultimately bestowed the Karuizawa estate on Fumiko, unbeknownst even to Fumiko herself.

It is at this point, near the end of the novel, that Fumiko's simple role as the narrator of the story becomes suspect. In a tête-à-tête with the youngest of the Saegusa sisters, Yusuke learns of one crucial fact Fumiko left out from her story, about her secret relationship with Taro before his departure to the U.S. Fumiko's pity toward the destitute orphan had turned into passionate love as Taro reached manhood and before she was quite aware of it herself. This last revelation solves the mystery about Taro's final gift to her before he bids farewell to Japan. The land is not restored to the rightful owner as was the case in *Wuthering Heights*. It is handed over to a former maid who has now entered the mainstream Japanese society. The entire novel is thus revealed in retrospect to be a story of love in not just one but two overlapping triangular relationships.

## **Appendix**

Literary and Historical Background of the Original Title, *Honkaku Shosetsu*

*A Real Novel's* original title in Japanese is *Honkaku Shosetsu*. It is a strange title even in the original language. *Honkaku* literally means *real, authentic, or orthodox*; and *shosetsu* means *novel*. When these two words are put together in Japanese, however, they acquire a very particular meaning. The term *honkaku shosetsu* was used within the history of modern literature to designate what came to be regarded as an ideal type of novel, namely, the nineteenth-century Western novels by such great writers as Stendhal, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Dickens, and the Brontes. The term also designated Japanese novels that strive to attain that ideal type. As is evident from this definition, it is a legacy from a time in the history of the world when Europe represented the Ideal and the Universal.

When Japan opened its doors to the West in 1868, the country escaped being colonized but did not escape the common fate that befell many of the non-Western countries, colonized or otherwise. It came to regard whatever the West represented as having a higher, universal value and began zealously to emulate the West. This emulation naturally extended to the domain of the arts, and the Japanese novelists began writing modern novels in their own language following Western models, sometimes directly reworking the original material into the Japanese context.

In the ensuing years, however, it gradually became apparent that many Japanese novels diverged from the Western models in predictable ways. Instead of manifest works of fiction where the author constructs a fictive world as its creator, many novels remained within the personal realm of the author, describing the events of his everyday life through the eyes of a thinly veiled narrator. These novels eventually came to be labeled *shi-shosetsu*, meaning *personal novels* or *I-novels*, and some writers and critics began to claim the need to assert the *shi-shosetsu* as Japan's national brand of novel. According to the proponents of the *shi-shosetsu*, the manifestly fictive and tightly constructed novels failed to convey a sense of reality and degenerated into pure entertainment.

The term *honkaku shosetsu* first came into use in the 1920s to counter such a claim. The proponents of *honkaku shosetsu* argued that *shi-shosetsu* was too easy a form of literature, lacking not only in structure but also in social and historical dimensions. Moreover, many novelists felt that Japan had not yet produced a single *honkaku shosetsu* worthy of its name and, accordingly, continued to feel the need to learn from Western novels, and made it their mission to come up with a true *honkaku shosetsu*.

Needless to say, such debates have become obsolete as the nineteenth century Eurocentric notion of what a novel ought to be became obsolete. A new understanding of literature, generated by what is often referred to as multiculturalism, has become pervasive in which no single form of literature,

however dominant, is regarded as an ideal. The Japanese writers and critics no longer use the term *honkaku shosetsu* as a standard, either to disparage or to uphold. The novelists of the new generation are often even ignorant of the term. Nonetheless, many Japanese are still left with a feeling that their literature never came up with a full-length novel that is manifestly fictive and that combines both the power of construction and the power of reality.

*Honkaku Shosetsu* is an attempt to write such a *honkaku shosetsu* and to address those lingering feelings. It is obviously an anachronistic attempt, yet it does not claim, like previous attempts, that the nineteenth-century Western novels ought to be the model for all novels. Through its title, *Honkaku Shosetsu* reminds the readers of the path that modern Japanese literature had to traverse and the historical necessity there was for such a term as *honkaku shosetsu* to come into existence. Through its title, *Honkaku Shosetsu* makes it explicit that it is in fact a literary experiment that asks the same questions that Japanese writers have kept asking for the past hundred years --- questions the writers in the West had less need to ask, because they were exempt from the historical trauma arising from the necessity for a radical transformation of their languages: How can there be an apparently fictive, tightly structured novel that is as absorbing as it is real in the Japanese language? How can such a novel incorporate social and historical dimensions and not degenerate into pure entertainment? And more specifically, what happens to a nineteenth-century novel set in the desolate moors of Yorkshire when it is shifted to late-twentieth-century Japan, dense with small houses?

\*\*\*\*\*