ONE

Flowers Amidst the Ashes

The end of the war liberated my mother. Like many other Japanese, for the first time she was able to imagine how she might make a life free from the oppression of the military state. It was a time when everything was in flux, presenting the opportunity to do things that had never been possible. Claiming she knew some English, my mother boldly sought a job at the U.S. General Headquarters, and when an American she met there asked her to date, she took a chance and went out with him. When he later asked her to marry, she decided that she was willing to take on that challenge too and accepted his proposal. My grandparents must have been moved too by the new space that existed in society, because they allowed the American to move into their Tokyo home. The American, who became my father, was also crossing boundaries and stepping into the unknown when he decided to marry a Japanese, have children with her, and live with her family in Japan. We, the children of postwar unions, were simply the products of our parents' revolutionary actions. Some of us were born unwelcomed into the world, while others were seen as flowers amidst the ashes—new life springing forth with hope and promise from the devastated land.

Parents like ours came together in a natural way as man and woman in an unnatural environment created by the forces of war and military occupation. Authorities on both sides tried to keep them apart, or at least keep them from marrying, but they came together anyway and offered each other what they could. For some the encounters were

brief and utilitarian, but others endured and forged relationships that pressured the authorities to enable them to marry and travel freely to the United States as husband and wife and as families.

Norma Field's mother became one of these "war brides," marrying a man from Los Angeles in 1946 at the American consulate in Yokohama when such marriages were rare. A woman I met in San Francisco, Kazue Katz, told me that she was the first of these war brides in Occupied Japan. Her marriage would not have been allowed in California, one of many states that prohibited marriages between whites and "Mongolians" at that time. Kazue described her husband, Frederick H. Katz, as a persistent man who gathered twenty-nine supporting letters, including one from General MacArthur, to persuade the authorities to permit him to marry her. They had to overcome not only family opposition but also social disapproval and a legal system designed to prevent such marriages.

Recognizing that American men wanted to marry women they met during the war, the U.S. Congress passed the War Brides Act in 1945 to enable them to bring their brides home. But this applied only to European brides, not to Asians. Not until 1952 did it became legal for most Americans to marry and take Japanese brides to America. By then, the opposition had forced many couples apart and contributed to thousands of children being abandoned by their fathers, some also by their mothers. Exactly how many is unknown. Japanese officials wanted to publicize the children as a social problem created by the Occupation, but U.S. officials succeeded in crushing such unwanted publicity that would negate the image of a kind and gentle Occupation.

Unlike Kazue's and Norma's parents, my mother and civilian father were more like many others who tried to marry, encountering numerous legal hurdles and hassles and failed attempts at both the ward office in Tokyo and at the U.S. embassy. My parents' experiences were like those of the couple in the *Sayonara* story of the Michener novel and Brando film, in which the Japanese and American lovers have to run the gauntlet to get married. One couple decides a love suicide is better than the forced separation they are faced with, and in the book the Brando character, deciding that maybe the general was right in opposing his marriage, abandons his Japanese sweetheart to find an

American girl back home. But by the time the movie was made in 1957, three years after the book was published, Hollywood, like much of the U.S. government and some of the American public, had decided it was all right for an American like Brando to marry a Japanese woman, though we don't know whether they live happily ever after.

My parents stayed together, though it took until 1951 for their marriage to be legalized. By that time my father had been living in my mother's family home in Tokyo for three years and two children had been born. Nationality laws that made Norma an American because her parents were married made my two older sisters Japanese because my parents were not married. My sisters were registered in my mother's family register as Shigematsus. Since my parents were married at the time of my birth I received an American birth certificate with the name Murphy.

Marriage with an American meant new privileges, such as the use of St. Luke's Hospital in Tsukiji where I was born. I was the third child, and the extra mouth to feed increased my mother's secret journeys across Tokyo. My dad had military purchasing power as a civilian employee of the U.S. Armed Forces. Mom would buy goods at the PX and sell them at Ueno on the black market. She had to do this because food and supplies were scarce and because my father had trouble arriving home on Friday evening with his week's wages. On the way home he encountered not only bars but also people he thought were deserving souls with greater need. My *obaachan* (grandmother) called him *obakasan*, a "wonderful fool." He did manage to arrive home with some of his pay, some of the time, and with my grandfather's income as a Tokyo policeman we were a lot better off than the kids whose fathers abandoned them. Such children were scattered throughout Japan wherever there were Americans, and little is known of their lives except for the few who became famous athletes, musicians, and entertainers.

Tomoko, a girl born the same year as me, had been a baby bearing the looks of the father, whom the child was never to meet. He left before she was born and from her earliest memories the father she knew was a Japanese man her mother had married. She lived a quiet life in her mother's hometown north of Tokyo, growing up in a family surrounded by loving relatives, in an ordinary neighborhood, attending

the local schools, speaking Japanese, and doing just what the other kids did. Rough boys bullied her sometimes, but friends would come to her rescue and protect her from their name-calling and insults. When people would rudely ask her whether she was American she would evade their question, pretending not to hear or making a joke.

Tomoko was adored in her large extended family and surrounded by love. Only occasionally was she torn from her warm feelings of oneness when she would be shocked to realize that she was different—she was the "American" in the family. Her favorite niece once stunned her by announcing to everyone in an innocent childlike manner, "I am Japanese and Tomoko is American." She never looked at her niece again without a twinge of hurt. When she stared at her own reflection in the mirror she was surprised to see that she did look different from others, as if she had never noticed before. But Tomoko wondered why she would always be the "American," when it was only her face and nothing else that made her American. Even when I met her as an adult, she was consumed with dreams in which only her face would appear.

Most of the mixed ancestry kids grew up in obscurity like Tomoko, encountering other problems later in life in marriage and employment discrimination. While some became celebrities, a few became nationally known for their deviance. One was a teenager convicted of several murders who professed hatred not only of women but of his own dark skin. His shocking story of abandonment by both parents and his life of fighting the prejudice and discrimination directed at him exposed the public to the reality of the tragic dimensions of such lives. While his case provoked reflection and perhaps sympathy in some, it also no doubt reinforced fears of the mixed blood kids as illegitimate and mentally disturbed children of prostitutes, further stigmatizing them.

Fortunately, these extreme cases were rare. The postwar era is characterized not only by tragedy but also by the inspiring story of Sawada Miki, the daughter of a noble family married to a man who was once ambassador to the United Nations. Sawada claims that her life changed dramatically one day when an apparently mixed race baby fell into her lap from the overhead luggage compartment when she was traveling on a train. The incident shocked her into action and she dedicated her property and life to establishing and running an or-

phanage, the Elizabeth Saunders Home, where more than a thousand mixed blood children were raised.

Sawada believed that the children needed to be separated from an unforgiving Japanese society and sheltered in her institution. She drew attention to the plight of these children, leading novelist Pearl Buck to establish a foundation in 1964 to help what she called "Amerasians," kids who were born all over Asia, wherever the U.S. military went. Her foundation helped Sawada to buy land in the Amazon area of Brazil and establish the St. Stephen Farm as a utopian place for the Saunders kids to emigrate and settle. Sawada's policy was to seek their futures outside of Japan either in Brazil or through adoption into American families. Although she was able to arrange hundreds of adoptions, only a few children ever made it to Brazil and most mixed blood kids were left to fend for themselves in Japanese society.

Hirano Imao, himself of mixed American and Japanese ancestry, was another advocate in the postwar period. Hirano's philosophy was different from Sawada's, and he focused his energy on integrating the children into Japanese society. Perhaps because he himself had to do so, he believed that they should and could live in Japan rather than seek another place in the world. Hirano helped by legally adopting many kids and offering individual and group support and guidance for them.

Sawada segregated her children because postwar Japan was not a welcoming place for the children who bore the stigma of being fathered by the American conquerors and occupiers. Some claim that the children were a painful reminder of American dominance and Japanese subjugation. Those without the protection of a father or mother's family were especially stigmatized and scapegoated. The Saunders Home children included commuters like those in the family of Suzuki Masako. She would escort cousins to the home for school and then pick them up and return them to their families in Yokohama. These kids lived in two worlds—the home in which they were surrounded by others whose faces were marked by the signs of mixed race and the neighborhood in which they were singled out as different.

While the story of Sawada's children has been told often, stories of those raised out in Japanese society are mostly tales of victimization. Norma's writing gives us a rare look into the world of a girl of the

postwar era living in a Japanese neighborhood while attending school on a U.S. military base. I first encountered Norma in her classic *In the Realm of a Dying Emperor: A Portrait of Japan at Century's End.* In this book, and even more so in her subsequent family story, *From My Grandmother's Bedside: Sketches of Postwar Tokyo*, Norma paints a picture of a life I both knew and never knew. Her portraits of postwar, Occupation Japan and the life of a typical and atypical family living in Tokyo resonated with me so deeply that I began a correspondence with Norma as if I already knew her and she would know me. I have never felt more clearly the power of narrative, in which one person's story can touch others and enable them to bring forth their own story.

In Norma's house and in mine in Suginami-ku, our mothers' American husbands "squeezed into" our family homes. Norma's father stayed until she was in second grade and then "abandoned, or was expelled from, the family," ending an eight-year marriage. Her mother kept herself separated from the rest of the neighborhood after a bout with tuberculosis and the end of her marriage with the American. Norma's world was a mixture of Japanese and American, with sharp dividing lines. She felt that the bus that shuttled her back and forth between her Tokyo neighborhood and her American school was like a "space machine" that she would ride with a sense of wonder. The "chocolate-colored bus" carried her each weekday morning through the streets of Tokyo from her home to the military base and then at three o'clock in the afternoon went back through the gates, retracing the route to drop her off near her "unmistakably native house" where an "unmistakably native woman" would be waiting for her.[1]

Norma reflects on how she explained the native woman to her busmates. "Did I tell them she was the—my—maid? Did I wait until the bus turned in the dust before I crossed the street and passed through the gate?"[2] I too was a child wondering how to deal with such incongruities in the worlds of my home and school. And I wonder how the adults in my life dealt with these obvious differences that others, especially children, noticed all too clearly.

After we moved from Tokyo to Pittsfield, Massachusetts, my Japanese mother stood out wherever we went. Even her name was different, something no one had ever heard and no one could pronounce. The

Christian missionaries tried to call her "Theresa" but my dad got mad and told them they should call her by her name, Toshiko. I was not as bold, and when my classmate's mother asked me what my mother's name was, I told her I didn't know. When she persisted that surely I knew my own mother's name, I insisted that I did not. And when she asked, "Well then what does your dad call her?" I made her laugh and give up the inquisition by cleverly evading her—"He just says, 'Hey you.'" In my Catholic school the nuns taught us about Peter denying Jesus three times, and I wondered if I was just as bad. But how could I explain my mother to my classmates and their mothers? I wanted to be seen as American, but my face was a constant reminder to others that I was something else. My mother was an even stronger sign that we were foreign. How could I explain who she was to people who could not even pronounce her name—who didn't even seem to try?

Just as I knew I was not "a real American," Norma knew that she was not "a real Japanese" from a normal home and so shouldn't ask to play with the neighborhood children. She was stigmatized for having an American father, as was her mother for the relationship with the father and its demise. Norma bore the markers of his genes in her face. She reflected on what children like us may signify to others:

> Many years into my growing up, I thought I had understood the awkward piquancy of biracial children with the formulation, they are nothing if not the embodiment of sex itself; now I modify it to, the biracial offspring of war even more offensive and intriguing because they bear the imprint of sex as domination.[3]

Reading this passage I am reminded of a confusing incident in childhood. My Irish Aunt Margaret, who like several of my dad's siblings had never married or had children, delighted in dressing me up and taking me downtown to show off. One day we were walking down Main Street and a man stopped her and asked about my dad. She told him he was back from Japan and that I was his son, proudly beaming down at me. The big man looked down too and stared, at first with a quizzical expression and then suddenly breaking into a big smile as if he was recalling some fond memories. "I've got some kids over there myself," he boasted. Margaret's smile vanished and her sweet face

became suddenly fierce. She looked him in the eye and said, "Well, my brother's not like that!" She pulled me hard by the hand and we walked away from that man.

My Irish aunts and uncles may not have understood our situation, but they struggled to help overcome the stereotypes and stigmas we faced. They taught us good manners and proper etiquette. They showered the priests and nuns with gifts of stationery from the paper factory where my Aunt Joanna worked, so that we were admitted to the St. Mary's School a year early, receiving a classic Catholic education steeped in tradition and strict discipline. Our aunts bought us only the finest clothes so that on Sunday we would be seen at church looking proper. They took us out to the fanciest restaurants, where we all ordered lobster, the most expensive item on the menu, so that we would not appear or feel small and poor. As we looked at the menu and noticed the prices, they would look at us and say with a smile, "It's okay, you can order the lobster." So even when we didn't want lobster, we ordered lobster.

The racially stigmatized need to work hard to overcome the stigma. By my behavior, I always had to show others how well I was brought up, how even a child like me, so marked by my race, could be a good boy, a smart boy, a credit to his family. I didn't realize at the time that I was also stigmatized by my father's alcoholism. My dad was the only man I knew who didn't drive a car, but I never fathomed what a social misfit he was, though I could sometimes sense it. In many ways, my Japanese mother was seen by society as the more normal one in the marriage, highly respected in the community as a wife for enduring her wayward husband's antics and as a mother for bringing up three respectable "half-breed" kids.

Norma's favorite aunt made sure that she was well brought up, and taught her some English so she could adjust to the American school. While she may have impressed with her manners, Norma's physical appearance would immediately overwhelm all other information received by the senses, rendering her a half-breed child more than anything else. Like my aunt, Norma's hoped that good manners and good grades would compensate for the disadvantages she was given.

Her aunt succeeded to the extent that Norma believed the neighborhood children avoided her because she was superior to them and

not because she was a half-breed. Unlike some others from single mother homes, she still bore the signs of her parents' marriage, in her name and in her privilege of attending the American school. She could speak English, if anyone cared to know. And as if to prove that she really was Japanese she could show off her knowledge of strange kanji characters.

My father tried to convince me that kids disparaged me because they were ignorant. I came from a samurai family, he would tell me over and over, and how many of the snotty-nosed American kids could say that? I suppose his message got through, because I was always secretly proud of being Japanese, somehow balancing the pervasive influences in American society that also made me wish I was as white as my Irish dad.

In her Tokyo neighborhood, Norma stuck out as I did in my Massachusetts town. Many years later, she would marvel at how her grandmother could accompany her to the doctor and sit calmly in the waiting room as if Norma's curly brown hair was invisible, as if she was sitting next to a perfectly ordinary child. Near the end of her grandmother's life, Norma suddenly asked her, "You didn't mind taking a funny-looking kid to the doctor's?" After a long pause, without turning or opening her eyes, she spoke: "You weren't a funny-looking kid. You were a prize kid."[4]

My obaachan prized us too. Perhaps it was because we were her first babies. Unknowingly, she had married a man biologically incapable of fathering children. She had adopted my mother, her younger sister by twenty years, when my mom was five. My mother says that when we were born, Obaachan took control of us, telling my mother that she did not know how to raise children. Unfortunately, this period of mothering lasted only five years before we were all taken from her to our new home in America. Obaachan never recovered from the loss. She told me she cried every day for two years, and all the relatives say that she somehow remained psychologically frozen in time, continuing to live in that golden era when she was the mother of three babies. I am sure those were the happiest years of Obaachan's life.

We were lucky to be so cherished. We were less lucky in trying to figure out whether we were Japanese or American. How do kids make sense of such seeming dichotomies? We identify ourselves with one

side or the other in complex ways. As Norma explains it, "I didn't want to be taken from Japan, but in the public world of school bus and playground, although I identified *with* puny Japanese against gigantic Americans, I didn't want to be identified *as* Japanese. . . . I think I simply and cravenly preferred to be identified with power."[5]

Such conditions breed ambivalence. For some kids like Norma and me there is a natural affiliation with the oppressed, the scorned, the downtrodden. We align ourselves with our weaker selves, loved ones, and minority group against the giants who oppress us. We also wish to escape the scorn and wrath of the oppressors and wish them to see us as one of them, not as one of the enemy.

Norma writes, "As a child, signs of American power and abuse stirred an atavistic anti-Americanism in me, the kind I felt as I rode the bus to the base school and tried madly to eliminate all traces of Japaneseness from my person and my tongue." She desired American things, like "American dresses and bobby socks and fruit cocktail," but her sympathies were with the "downtrodden Japanese."[6]

I am drawn to Norma's story because we have similar origins, yet our lives went in vastly different directions. We were both born in postwar Tokyo but Norma remained there through childhood and adolescence; I was raised in the United States. She came to America to live as an adult, marry an American, have another generation of mixed kids, while I went back to Japan, married a Japanese, and had mixed kids. Though I was raised on the other side of the ocean, I too sympathized with "defeated Japan, little Japan, weak Japan." A Japanese woman I once met who was married to an American asked me why I identified as Japanese. Her children, she told me, identify as American and are not interested in being Asian—worse, they reject it. I think that all children want to be part of the majority, but when they confront a barrier to acceptance, some try to blend in and others identify with the minority. I don't know why I identified with Japan. Perhaps it was loyalty to my mother, who otherwise was all alone. Maybe it was just a way of maintaining dignity by accepting who I was in others' eyes and being proud of it, at least privately in my own world.

Those complex feelings continue in adulthood. Norma writes, "American arrogance stirs up a tenderness for the unluxurious Japa-

nese past that I can't repress, but knowing what it led to strips its innocence and makes nostalgia grotesque."[7] I too move constantly between romantic longings for an ancient Japan and repulsion at the dangerous consequences of nationalism.

For those of us who do not embody the Japanese child or Japanese adult, our views become distorted. We fight against accepting that there is anything uniquely Japanese, because that would exclude us. But we suspect that there is something Japanese, and that ironically we embody it. Norma illuminated this tension, which persists and changes in form over the years:

> The cultivation of essences, the belief that they exist, whether in nature or as artifact or character, is seductive and constraining. Drawn to its deployment in poetry and painting and performance, I long failed to recognize its power to stunt and deceive. Feeling betrayed, I became vigilant, in part out of shame over my blindness, and forbade myself pleasure in things announcing themselves as distinctly Japanese. Now words like "mederu" I find straying into my head. I roll them around on my tongue, still unvoiced.[8]

I too fight this battle. When I wrote "Multiethnic Japan and the Monoethnic Myth,"[9] my first academic paper, a reviewer gave a sharp comment on my first draft, claiming that my essay appeared driven by a personal agenda. I realized with some difficulty and discomfort that the reviewer was right. I was painfully aware that I was often cast outside the realm of "the Japanese" because the narrow conception of "Japanese" excluded people like me. It is not just outsiders who isolate and insulate the Japanese, but the country's own cultural essentialists and neonationalists who make a fetish of the supposed singularity of the national character. I asserted that there is no such thing as essential Japanese qualities. But in reality I am not only excluded, I am also often told by Japanese that they see certain essential Japanese qualities in me. "You are more Japanese than Japanese," these people exclaim. In other words, I have "Japanese essence." Even more confusing, I see these qualities in myself, almost reluctantly, but perhaps joyously? Now I try to capture what is Japanese about us, about me, with words. I permit myself to wear kimono, at least at home, and in public I do a storytelling per-

formance, "The Celtic Samurai." I make miso soup and eat *umeboshi* whenever I feel like it. I think once I almost said "We Japanese."

But should we ever feel too comfortably Japanese we can always rely not only on complete strangers but also on lifelong friends and even on our own family members to remind us that we are something different. Norma's mother boiled her drinking water and dishes until she was ten, as if her father's genes had left her digestive tract different from her own. When Norma struggled with her mother over the use of the air conditioner, her mother told her that "you don't know how humid it gets here," seeming to forget that Norma has spent nearly every summer of her life in Japan.[10] We are aware, sometimes painfully so, that when our family talks about Nihonjin (a Japanese person) they are not including us.

There is something forever American about us, even to our grandmothers, or to our mothers. I still foolishly struggle with Obaachan, though she is 107 as I write, trying to convince her I am Japanese. I show her my Japanese passport—surely this makes me Japanese! She smiles but is not convinced. I am forever her American grandson. Why do I care? This does not make me any less lovable, it is just the way it is. I am her favorite, she tells me, because I came back to Japan to be with her. I insist that I am American *and* Japanese. I am both. But how can she understand that a person can be both American and Japanese? Wasn't her life radically altered by the sharp dividing lines between two peoples who killed those on the other side of the line? Her daughter brought the two sides together by marrying an American, but the children must be either American or Japanese, and to Obaachan we are American.

"Are you Japanese or American?" The question never seems to go away and to me always seems easily answered—"I am Japanese and American." But while we may come to know who we are, this simple and seemingly clear answer does not stop the question from being asked again or being answered for us.

This question acquired a new twist for Norma when she left Japan for college just as the country became caught up in a *konketsuji boomu* of popularity of mixed blood entertainers. Talent scouts descended on schools with large populations of mixed kids to scoop them up for

modeling and acting. Norma left too soon to be told she was lucky to be *haafu* (half Japanese, from English *half*), as mixed people were beautiful, had long legs, and could speak English. Norma did not get to see the singing group "The Golden Haafu" on television popularizing the image of the fashionable mixed blood.

Like all the kids at her American high school in Japan, when she graduated Norma headed to the United States for college. She separated from her protective family and moved to the "fatherland" she had never known. She chose a college not far from where her father had been living for some years with his Scottish-immigrant mother in Los Angeles and met her American relatives for the first time. Norma continued to live in the United States but Japan was a place she would come home to every summer. She would remain close to Japan through her studies, her chosen major of Japanese literature sustaining her. Norma married, had children, and settled down to a life in the Midwest.

As Norma came to her father's land, I returned to my mother's land as a young man. Living with my grandparents in the city of Matsuyama on the island of Shikoku, I learned to speak and write Japanese. I met my Japanese family, some for the first time since childhood. Perhaps because I had grown up deeply romanticizing my connections with Japan, my homecoming involved a transformative development that my father referred to poetically as a "metamorphosis." I was empowered by connecting to ancestral roots, moving beyond my solitary self to a community of others. I found new meaning in my existence, eventually going back to the United States to embark on a new career by entering Harvard University, an unimaginable achievement after years of uninspired and unaccomplished living.

I heard stories like this from others who "returned" to Japan, even from people who were born in the United States. They talk of finding a world of new experiences—anticipated, unexpected, surprising, exhilarating, soothing, disappointing, disturbing. For some individuals it was melodramatic, while for others, such as this young woman, it was an unforgettable, transformative experience.

> I went with my mother to Japan. When we landed at Narita, knowing that we were there, together, gave me goose bumps all over. And

> on the train from the airport we were sitting there holding hands—we never held hands since I was little—just holding hands so tightly. It was one of the most precious moments. That's when I began to see—I'm Japanese too![11]

After the initial exhilaration there is a comforting feeling of familiarity and fitting in. There is also a growing awareness that one is different, seen as different, and treated differently. Many eventually go back to the United States, but I stayed, married a Japanese, had children, and lived and worked completely among Japanese. As truth is truly stranger than fiction, I became a professor at the University of Tokyo, the flagship national university. I lived in a large housing complex for government employees and my children attended the local public schools. I delighted in the dumbfounded looks on people's faces when they found out that I, a mixed blood or a foreigner in their eyes, was a professor at their elite university. Inside, I smiled with glee when in response to their attempted put-down that I surely must be an English instructor, I stunned them again, saying, "No, I am a professor teaching Japanese culture."

Japan has changed in many ways since Norma and I were born there as mixed ancestry children during the Occupation. But as I write now, controversies still rage, such as educators' questions as to whether it is better to segregate or integrate. While dramatic cases of the need for separation capture public attention, such as at the AmerAsian School in Okinawa, the trend is more in the direction of integration. Parents of children of mixed ancestry once sent their kids to international schools if they could afford it, regarding them as safe havens from the prejudice and bullying the children would encounter in the public schools. But now more mixed ancestry kids are getting their education in public schools, even some who could afford the high tuition of international schools. Their choice is reinforced by the generally more welcoming and accepting climate of public schools and Japanese society in general.

The nationality laws that made Norma and me Americans in Japan, and my sisters Japanese, have been stripped of their sexually discriminatory feature and children born into the same circumstances

as we were can now become both Japanese and American. Although individuals are supposed to choose one nationality when they become adults, the Japanese government has been indifferent about enforcing the law. I give talks, write books, and appear on the radio in Japan advocating that children like these and adults like me should be treated the same as any Japanese citizen. If parents are unable or choose not to make their children Japanese citizens, I advocate for the protection of their rights to education and health.

Norma is a scholar whose voice is recognized as unique in its intimate understanding of Japanese and American worldviews. *In the Realm of a Dying Emperor* is an eloquent and insightful depiction of the condition of Japanese society at the time that Hirohito lay dying. She tells stories of her encounters with three extraordinary individuals whose fight for social justice against oppressiveness and conformity illuminate the tensions and constraints of ethnicity, gender, and class in turn-of-the-century Japan.

From My Grandmother's Bedside is Norma's tender family portrait, a touching and evocative reflection on postwar and contemporary Japan painted from childhood memories, mundane concerns, and poignant observations of political and social life as she cares for her slowly dying grandmother. For years Norma returned regularly to Japan, writing of the trials of a transnational family, caring for mother and grandmother living in another country. She refers to these journeys as "artificial homecomings" in which she again had to become daughter, granddaughter, niece in a "process akin to regenerating amputated limbs." Her writing captures the delicate subtleties of lives in the spaces where things come together and are torn apart into dichotomies. They are heartwarming and heartbreaking memories of family life, Japanese and American, delicately captured in sounds, smells, tastes, and sights, from an insider-outsider perspective. The book is an intimate series of portraits of a Tokyo family—a normal family just like mine. At least to me my family has always seemed normal, just another family. Like others, our families are concerned about putting out the garbage, relations with the next-door neighbors, and the price of eggs. In the summer we worry about surviving the heat, in the winter about keeping warm. We worry about growing old and the health care system.

Of course, we have other concerns as well. My grandmother is the same age as Norma's. I read Norma's stories with my grandmother always in mind. I identified with Norma as an adult, traveling back and forth across the Pacific to be with her grandmother, to return to her work and family in America, to bring her family in America to Japan to see her family there, to return to her work in Japan, endlessly back and forth.

Following her grandmother's death, Norma's mother came to live with her and spend her last years together, in a country foreign to her in every way, though she was enveloped in the love of her daughter and her grandchildren. Unlike Norma's grandmother who lingered for years in a semi-invalid state, Norma's mother went quickly one day from a healthy body to a spirit in another realm of existence, disappearing suddenly.

We imagined a similar ending for my obaachan and brought her here to the United States for a trial stay at ninety-nine. We envisioned her dying surrounded by her daughter and grandchildren. But after three months she announced she was returning to Japan. My sister, who doesn't speak Japanese, called me in Tokyo and asked me to find out whether that was what Obaachan really wanted to do. So I asked Obaachan in Japanese, *Dou shitain desu ka?* (What do you want to do?). She replied, *Anata no oneechan no tame ni kaetta hou ga ii to omou* (I think it is better for your sister if I leave). I relayed that answer to my sister in English, and she said, "I want you to ask her what *she* wants to do." So I tried again, and Obaachan said, *Oneechan no dannasama no tame ni kaetta hou ga ii to omou* (I think it is better for your sister's husband if I go back to Japan). After going back and forth a few more times, we gave up and realized that Obaachan, a woman born in Meiji Japan, just could not answer the question in the way my sister wanted.[12]

Our transnational family lives are full of painful separations, heart wrenching at times. Families are torn apart, some unable to come back together because of financial constraints or constraints of the heart. Many cross the great ocean never to return.

It is Christmas 2010. I am in California. A song comes on the radio, "I'll be home for Christmas." Home. Am I home now? Am I home in

Japan? Am I ever home? I think of Edward Said, the Palestinian-born literary theorist and passionate advocate for Palestinian rights. Said's memoir, *Out of Place*, moved me deeply.[13] Am I too always out of place? Is Norma out of place? Are we like Said, with our Western education and our dual heritage, forever trying to bridge the gap between the Western world where we have lived as adolescents and adults to the Eastern worlds where we were born and raised?

Some people never return home. I did not know Said, but I was touched by a conversation with Farhat Ziadeh, an aging Palestinian living in Seattle, about wanting to go home. He was in his seventies and felt drawn to spend his last days where he spent his first days. But he knew that he would not, reminding me of a compelling line used in a book title from my younger days, "You can't go home again." I repeatedly discover that this is true. Some say we want to go home as we approach death—we want to die where we were born, where we were children. I don't know if this is true. My mother does not want to go back to die in Japan. Growing up in a militaristic, emperor-worshiping, devastated, impoverished Japan was too much for my mother. For her, home is now America, and that is where she will die. I wonder if Said died peacefully in New York; was it his home? Or had he accepted being homeless?

Some say if we get to choose a last meal it would be like our first meals, food from childhood, soul foods, comfort foods. I would choose miso soup, rice, an *umeboshi* plum. Like Norma, I long for those distinctive Japanese tastes of *shiso*, *sansho*, and *myoga* when I am in the United States.

When I was a child I dreamed that there was a place for me, a home, a place where I fit in. Not where I was in Massachusetts. I imagined the magical place for me was Japan, the place where I was born. Though I had no memories I was certain that Japan was a place where everyone was like me and everyone liked me. It was a place where no one would ever call me a "Jap" and no one would ever hate me, a safe place, a place I could call home.

That was just a dream, I realized later. True, no one called me a Jap, but they had other names for me in Japan. I was more of an outsider there than I was in white communities of America. Finding a home

is hard for some of us. Are we destined to be always "out of place"? Perhaps, but as a child, I dreamed of home.

The song ends, "I'll be home for Christmas, if only in my dreams." For some of us, that is the only way we will be home. But if home is where the heart is, I am always at home. When I was a child I asked my obaachan, "Where is God?" I wanted to see him. She pointed to her heart and smiled, "God is here." Is home also there? Does a world of fluid identities and borders represent a rich otherworldliness that erases the divisive binary on which dehumanization of others depends? Is home for some people a metaphysical and material position of displacement that one should embrace without romanticizing or denying its loneliness and pain? I think of my place in the world as more than just a state of mind or the ability to travel freely to and establish a sense of belonging in any given place, but as anchored in struggle and social movement. Mine is a paradoxical condition that develops out of being at home with a lack of home or total belonging, which brings a freedom from loyalty and subordination to specific ideologies, cultures, systems, worlds—homelessness as home.