

A GIRL AND AN EMPEROR

Cranes at Dusk

by Hisako Matsubara

translated by Leila Vennewitz

(The Dial Press/Doubleday, 320 pp., \$15.95)

An expatriate novelist typically writes in his own language about foreign experience. Yet there is nothing typical about Hisako Matsubara, who grew up in Kyoto the daughter of a Shinto priest, became a priest herself, and five years after a move to Germany (her husband is a German scientist) was writing her own column in *Die Zeit*. In *Cranes at Dusk*, the second of her novels to be translated from German into English, she is writing in a late-acquired language about remembered Japanese experience, and it is not easy to sort out the kinds of foreignness one feels, and delights in, as her reader. The novel is at least partly autobiographical—the story of Saya, the ten-year-old daughter of a Kyoto priest who watches her country adjust (sadly, comically, heroically, but above all quickly) to its defeat in World War II. Saya learns too, in the face of personal grief, to begin to love life again, in the affirmative Shinto tradition of her father.

What gives *Cranes at Dusk* its curious foreign cast is the sense that it has been written by at least two people. It is

to—the surrender it declared.

Once she is introduced, Saya—because she is a child, and yet a precocious one—becomes an ideal vehicle for illustrating the naiveté of the Japanese in meeting their conquerors. Noting an American woman's lacquered fingernails, Saya wonders whether they naturally grew in red; her little brother Bo asks a Christian pastor why he is wearing a "bib." But the adults have their own childlike theories about the race they call "the hairy ones." A pawnbroker claims that the men with red hair and green eyes are the fiercest in battle, and the area warden offers this definition of the new form of government: "Democracy is . . . well, it's . . . the way Americans live . . . strong, rich, self-confident." Even Saya's teacher, Mrs. Nakarai, who transforms almost overnight from a cruel and fervent disciple of the emperor to a fawning partisan of the one Christian girl in the class, and indeed of all things Western, misapprehends the meaning of the new buzzword, "freedom." Its ideogram in Japanese unites "self" and "relationship," and Mrs. Nakarai concludes: "A person who relates everything to himself . . . is free."

The novel is replete with such telling cultural details; the shock of General

a novel so episodic and fragmentary, bound more by poetic motifs than plot development, that Saya does not emerge as the certain protagonist for many pages. Often I had to remind myself that these highly Japanese effects (skillfully translated by Leila Vennewitz) were not translated from the Japanese. Yet just as often it seemed that only a Westerner who happened to live in Japan as a child could have understood so well which facts of Japanese life need be explicated for Western readers. I suspect many Japanese would find the opening pages of the novel—in which the Kyoto silk weavers' quarter listens in horrified disbelief to the emperor's announcement of surrender on the public address system—about as predictable as we would find a description of some average American citizens' reactions to Pearl Harbor. But Matsubara allows us, her Western readers, to share another shock: for the Japanese, hearing the divine emperor's human, high-pitched voice for the first time was a separate event from—indeed, an added blow

MacArthur's wearing sunglasses (reserved only for the blind in Japan), or of the emperor's appearing in a newspaper photograph with one leg placed a few inches before the other, "contrary to accepted custom. One could actually sense that a new era had dawned." We even hear the clamor of tin cans in the wind as a distinctly postwar phenomenon: they are hung to frighten away sparrows while sweet potatoes, precious in a time of food shortage, are dried on the rooftops.

And yet it is Saya's personal struggle to love and be loved by both of her parents that makes *Cranes at Dusk* more than sensitive sociology, and lends it shape and pathos. Her father, the Shinto high priest or Guji, is revered by everyone but his bitter and disillusioned wife. One can easily deduce that in the Guji's wide search for truth (he is an expert on the I Ching, a study that led him to predict Japan's defeat, and despite his quarrels with Christianity encourages Saya to take English and Bible lessons), he represents the flexibility of the new Japan. Saya's mother can be seen to symbolize the rigidity of the old Japan—of her beloved tea ceremony, for instance, no longer a peaceful and unpretentious art. Yet both parents' characters are drawn with some white

space around them, room for complexities unspoken but implied. And Saya's attempt to learn from her soft-spoken father, without antagonizing a mother who seeks relentlessly to turn her against him, indicates a torment that belongs not only to children; in fiction as well as life, it is the sort of problem that "builds character."

Just as the Guji is beginning to seem a little too perfect—he even corrects birdsongs, exhorting a nightingale to "practice more"—we learn that he has failed in his I Ching predictions to foresee a death in the family. Saya pays her respects at the gravestone, and when she is drenched in the rain a Buddhist monk lends her his robe. She "puts on" the knowledge of death—for to the Japanese, Buddhism rather than Shinto is the consolation for death. It is a touching scene, excelled only by the final one. The Guji, like the crane of a Japanese fairy tale who transports a child to the land where the sun never sets, carries Saya off on his back: "She could feel the pulse beating under his skin."

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Mary Jo Salter's book of poems, *Henry Purcell in Japan*, has recently been published by Knopf.

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