

New Statesman

Cranes at Dusk is also informative and, in parts, saddening, with the bitterest blow to the fictional family kept to the end. Hisako Matsubara was born and educated in Japan but lives in Cologne and writes in German, so her account of Kyoto in 1945 is directed at Western readers, who are rightly assumed to need explanations of mores and attitudes before and after national defeat. Horrifying rumours from Hiroshima and Nagasaki reach the bereaved inhabitants of the silk weavers' quarter. When the Emperor's unprecedented radio broadcast is announced, famished civilians sharpen bamboo staves, expecting to be called upon to fight to the death, only to be stunned by news of capitulation. General MacArthur lands at Tokyo airport, with an insulting lack of military pomp, and, by degrees, the 'hairy monsters' of the American Occupation become 'honoured victors', a source of chewing gum and chocolate, and a threat to the reputation of local girls.

At school, ten-year-old Saya notes the official repudiation of Shinto, the faith her father serves as a priest, and is herself drawn to the Christian church, by curiosity, the chance of English lessons and the prospect of some respite from traditional subordination. 'A girl who gets beaten [by boys] is never quite blameless.' The old order is represented by her mother, a perfectionist devotee of *ikebana* and the tea ceremony, who has been trained, like *bonsai*, with authoritarian rigour and bewails the heretical open-mindedness of her enlightened husband. Indeed, the Guji is so noble and his wife so neurotic, and the depiction of Saya's friends and enemies so partisan from first to last, that the narrative has the psychological simplicity and single vision of a children's story, albeit an exceptionally sensitive and well-written one.