

the village

# VOICE

## CRANES AT DUSK

By Hisako Matsubara

Translated by Leila Vennewitz  
Dial, \$15.95

That a skilled chronicler of Japan's Americanization should live and publish in Germany is not so unusual considering the number of contemporary novelists exiled or estranged from their native lands. Even so, Hisako Matsubara is notably well traveled. Born and schooled in Japan, she did graduate work at—of all places—Penn State before settling in Cologne, where she got a good enough handle on the language to write eight books in German, three of them novels. *Cranes at Dusk* is the latest, the second Matsubara work to be translated for American readers, and the lone sample available to us now that the exquisite *Samurai*, a best-seller in Europe issued here in 1980, is out of print.

Matsubara's Japan is torn between a set of values it has outgrown and another it's not yet ready for; her characters resemble those silent-film comedians who straddle an ice floe that has just split down the middle, the pieces pulling in opposite directions. The result is a dance—at once frightening and antic—on the lip of disaster. In *Samurai*, set at the turn of the century, a young man turns down a cushy corporate job which his father finds unworthy of a self-reliant samurai and winds up in America sentenced to immigrant servitude, parted for life from his young bride, who lar-

guishes in doomed expectation of his triumphant return.

In *Cranes at Dusk*, Westernization comes in the troubled wake of World War II. The citizens of Kyoto, mysteriously spared the fate of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, assemble around a loudspeaker for an unprecedented broadcast by Hirohito, bracing themselves for the command to "die in beauty." Instead, in a "strange long-winded speech," the emperor admonishes them to accept the "unbearable," a euphemism for surrender and, to their enormous relief, survival. The subsequent months bring many curiosities, such as chewing gum and cheese and the "honored victors" themselves—big-nosed, white-skinned, hirsute, and tirelessly grinning—along with severe shortages of food, fuel, and clothing, worsened by the emperor's troops, filling the streets in "the threadbare uniforms they wore because most of them had nothing better to put on."

All this is viewed through the eyes of Saya, the 10-year-old daughter of a Shinto priest, or Guji, whom she idolizes and from whom she inherits a distaste for pieties, suddenly abundant as Japan shifts gears. American propaganda clots the airwaves with homilies extolling the virtues of Christian Democracy; pieties are further dispensed by Saya's hated teacher, Mrs. Nakarai, a hypocrite who recites the daily loyalty oath as if it were a romantic poem until defeat abruptly awakens in her a passion for independence—in a single reflex, she yanks the emperor's portrait off the wall and demonstrates the ideograms for "freedom . . . which, when read singly, mean 'self' and 'relationship.' A person who relates everything he does to himself, not to the Tenno or to the nation, is free, spiritually free." Saya sees through this sham, but falls under the sway of American missionaries whose church she attends for lessons in English and the Bible.

If the new system is not to be trusted, neither is the old, and Matsubara shows how the monomania responsible for Pearl Harbor trickles into the punctilios of charming ancestral practices like *ikebanaital* and the tea ceremony, both obsessions of Saya's rigidly traditional mother. She tries to mold her daughter into the model

Japanese woman—docile, self-effacing, and subservient—though she herself is miserable in her marriage to free-thinking Guji.

Saya precociously realizes that her parents' conflict spells out the choice she must eventually make between two irreconcilable ways of life. We are left in little doubt about her decision, largely because *Cranes at Dusk* has the ring of autobiography, an impression reinforced by Matsubara's tendency to summarize characters rather than flesh them out, and to examine the past with too forward-looking an eye, particularly in her adumbrations of Saya's feminism. Matsubara is also guilty of cheating on perspective. At times, the narrative sounds intentionally naive, as if the author has calculatedly slipped back into childhood (in one climactic scene, for example, Saya catches her mother secretly gobbling rice when there isn't enough to go around).

Matsubara amply compensates with keen irony, directed at even the adored Guji, so involved in the mysteries of the *I-Ching* that he ignores the illness consuming Saya's infant brother Bo; striking images (the ceiling of the Christian church is likened to "a sky that was tied together at the top with a string"); and a fine comic touch, especially effective in the Kyotans' earnest efforts to make sense of the bewildering habits of their conquerors, who clump around their homes in shoes because they are "afraid their feet smell bad," and "heat their houses so much that the beams and wooden posts start to crack." Matsubara hasn't achieved quite enough distance from the experiences recorded in *Cranes at Dusk*, but this is a pardonable defect, for she richly evokes through them an epochal moment of Japanese history. —Sam Tanenhaus