

THE RETURN

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Let me begin by saying that I am one of those naturally wary people who considers the verb “return” a kind of insidious threat. I am no fan of ritualized reunions, of going back for the sake of going back, old times and all that – the very idea has been known to send me running to the other side of the country in search of more than one stiff drink. On the whole, I don’t know why, I often disappoint myself (as well as others) with my abiding mistrust of any sort of nostalgia. That said, of course, I’m a novelist, and no matter what I do, I can’t seem to stop returning to places – and experiences – in my mind.

In 1986, when I was twenty-one, I lived in Tokyo for four months, boarding with a Japanese family and working for an American company. At the time, I thought I wanted to be a businessman. I was by then a member of Harvard’s East Asian Studies Department, with almost three years of Japanese language study under my belt, and the author of reams of undergraduate essays devoted to every aspect of Japanese culture, from the spiritual iconography of zen gardens to the ways of the Yakuza to the economics of the Kobe beef industry. This was the 1980s, one must remember, and the Japanese economy was still considered a miracle.

I’ll say this for my intrepid, youthful self on my first journey to the Far East: I put my heart into it, touched and tasted everything I could and pined nobly for the rest. I spoke the language and, a couple of times, even dreamed in it. I had “adventures” – a few of which turned up (surprise!) in my first novel *Bicycle Days*, published when I was twenty-four. Who knows? Had I not gone to Japan in 1986, had I stayed home and majored in English literature as I’d intended to do, I might indeed have become an investment

banker, an outcome that perhaps would have proved a more severe blow to the health of the U.S. economy than to the history of the novel. In which case, having never gone to Japan in the first place, I could never have returned as I did nineteen years later, to do research for another novel set in Japan. That novel, now completed, is called *The Commoner*, and besides being a story about three generations of women suffocating within the sealed glass bubble of the Japanese imperial family, it is also inevitably, I suppose, the story of its author's return to a land that he was never able to forget.

Between those two trips – in 1986 and 2005 – lay quite a few layers of history, both national (the collapse of the Japanese economy; the investiture – through marriage – of a new empress and crown princess) and personal (I lived in Europe for a time; I became a husband and then a father; I wrote two more novels, neither of which had anything to do with Japan). Somewhere along the way, a relative of mine returned from a visit to Japan and recounted to me in vivid detail a private lunch she'd had with the Empress – who seemed to her, behind her smile and her grace, a deeply tragic figure. And a brilliant, poised young woman who had been two years ahead of me at Harvard (I never met her), finally, after rejecting him three times, agreed to marry the Japanese Crown Prince – thus, in a sense, ending her life. And, despite myself, I continued to read articles, essays, and books about the country that I had once been in love with but then had rejected (for the usual defensive reason – namely, that I felt she had rejected me first). And the new Crown Princess began to suffer from severe depression and, after giving birth to a girl (who will never be allowed to inherit the throne), one or possibly two nervous breakdowns. And the Empress, who had been the first commoner (a privileged but regular citizen) ever to marry into the 1500-year-old Japanese imperial family, grew older and seemingly more surrounded by silence than ever, drowned by silence, and I could not help but begin to wonder how she perceived her artificial world and hidden life, what her silent voice sounded

like inside her own head, what she remembered of her childhood – back when, long ago, she had been a girl like any other.

In 2005, as I've said, I returned to Japan. I went alone, without my wife or son. I stayed in a hotel in Shinjuku that was as new and gleaming and soulless as anything in a science fiction movie. I had lunches with a couple of influential people in the Court hierarchy – from whom, politely, I learned little that I didn't already know. I sensed in them a protective, wary curiosity, and a pervading hope that my project not come to fruition. This was not surprising. Nothing like the novel that I'd already begun to write had ever been published in Japan, let alone by a foreigner. In Japan, more than in any other country I've ever been in, one is not supposed to write about the people in the glass bubble; that is why they are in the glass bubble. It does not matter if one is making them up out of one's imagination, because in some fundamental sense, the real people who live in the imperial palace are already fictions, ancient mythical creations of the nation.

By the time of my “research” trip, I had been conducting my own intense study of the imperial family for about a year – only to run up against the wall of silence (and the literal moat and stone ramparts) that surrounds Japan's oldest and most arcane institution. Past that absolute dividing line, perhaps only a handful of people in the world know anything about what really goes on inside the palace, or in the hearts and minds of its most august inhabitants. Consequently, my meetings with people from the Court involved few questions and even fewer answers. Their real value, for me as a novelist, was in the opportunity to observe, in my own foreigner's way, the layers of remove between those who run the system and those who are run by it. It was months later, and with a jolt of surprise, that I realized that two of the people with whom I'd had lunch in Tokyo – both intimates of the real Empress – had, in much changed form, become the odd inspirations for important characters in my novel.

The rest of my time was spent wandering, looking, staring. It was cedar pollen season, and thousands of people on the streets of Tokyo were wearing white surgical masks over their noses and mouths, hoping to block out impurities and differences that would agitate them or make them ill. Tokyo seemed ever larger to me, too large, a behemoth, a planet once seen from afar in a book. In truth, it was a lonely, unsettling trip. And it was only over time, after I'd returned home and thrown myself back into the writing of my novel, that I came to understand that, paradoxically, the sense of brooding dislocation I had experienced in returning to Japan had made me infinitely more sympathetic to my imperial protagonists, for they, too, would always be strangers in their own land.

This is the thing about returning; the thing, it seems, that I've always dreaded and tried to avoid, yet ended up pursuing anyway. By stubbornly, needfully going back, we are asking to be relieved of our strangeness, when strangeness is the whole point. Embrace me, tell me the old stories again, we say by making the trip at all. And arms may indeed embrace us, and stories may get told. But in the end they won't keep us, and we can't stay. We must go off again, back to the place where we live now, and find some way of telling those stories in our own language, as the people we have become.

John Burnham Schwartz
Brooklyn, NY
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