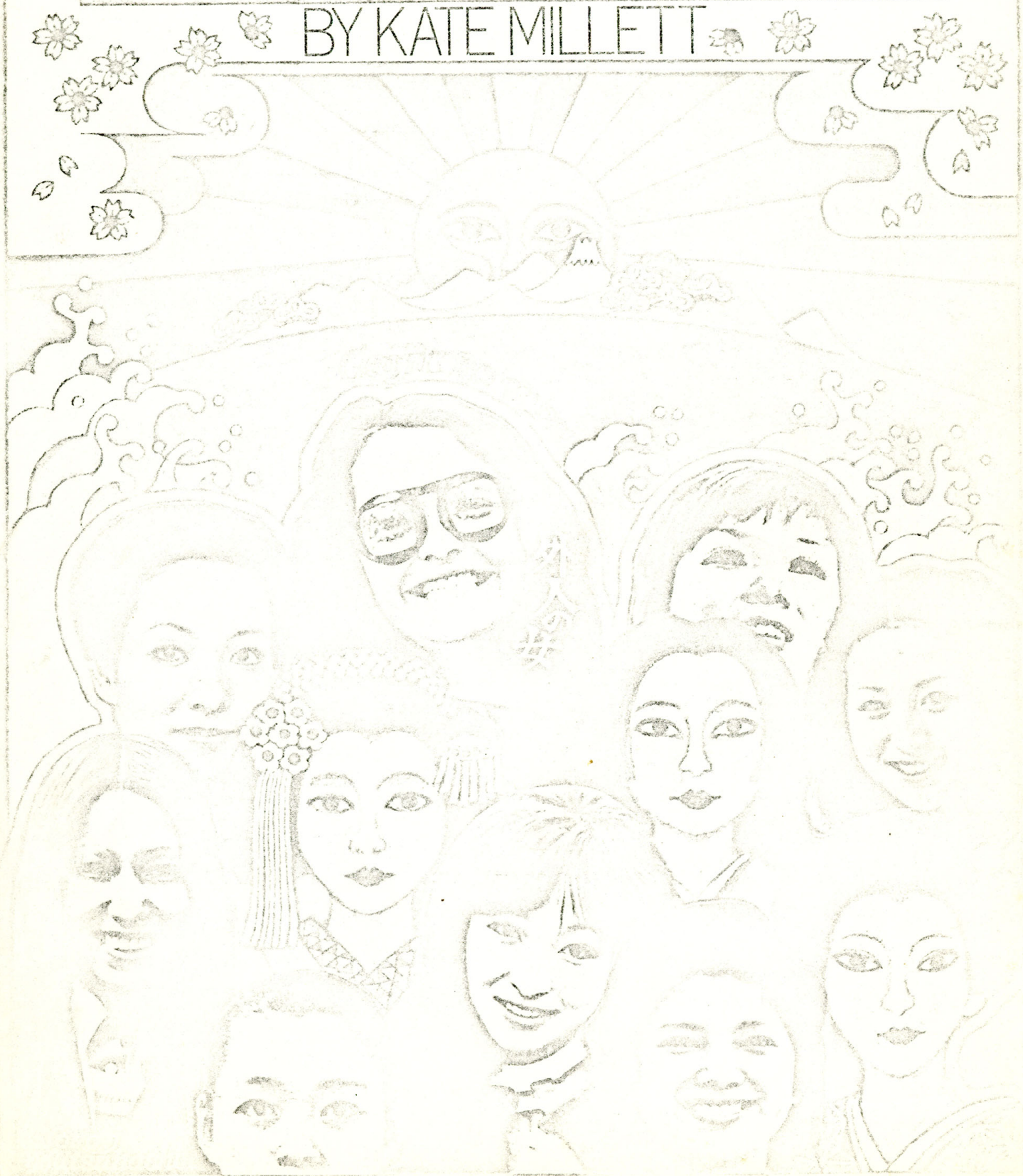


A PERSONAL DISCOVERY

非常に私的な発見

BY KATE MILLETT

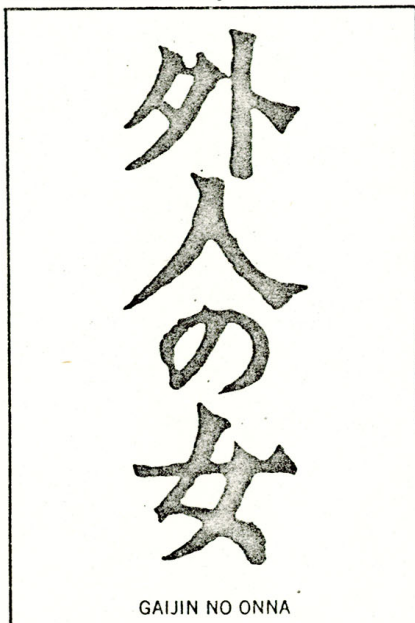


Of course I haven't been in Japan for a long time. And you have changed. You are younger now, those of you who are building a Women's Movement there. You are different from the women I knew. My friends there did not see much hope, were often bitter. I remember one of them exploding in a restaurant in Shinjuku—one of those delightful intimate places where you have your own *tatami* room—and "spoiling" a fine dinner for a young man, a Canadian *nisei*, who had the nerve to praise Japanese women in the vein that was fashionable then to Western young men and to the Occupation forces: Japanese women were so gentle, he maintained, so subtle, so erotic, so feminine, so humble, so unfailingly pleasing to men; so subservient, in short. "This is no country to be a woman!" she had shouted, furious, despairing, "and it will never change." I suspect that is changing now. And that you are making it change. The Japan I knew is gone now, and I cannot regret its passing. And yet the two years I spent among you gave me so much.

They were good years, those two years in Japan, years in which I found myself as a sculptor and a person. They were also years in which I underwent that curious transformation which in revolutionary lingo we refer to as having one's "consciousness" raised. As a white American suddenly finding myself in a monoracial society where the assumed hue and feature of humanity was that of a race not my own, I underwent something of the alienation which my black compatriots have been forced to endure for centuries in racist America. And when I returned home in 1963, the civil rights movement was at its height—a hope held forth to all of us that the great shadow of our past injustice might be lifted. It beckoned me toward the expectation of a real America at last, and I joined it.

Japan also raised my consciousness as a woman. There I was

called a *gaijin*, meaning "foreigner." (The word was important since it was my chief identity in Japan and was even stamped upon my laundry. I use several variations of the word here. A *gaijin no onna* is a foreign woman, a *furui gaijin* is "an old hand," a foreigner who has lived in Japan a long while. A *hen na gaijin* is a "rotten apple," the kind who gives the others a bad name.) Two years of being a *gaijin no onna*—whereby I was given a tentative immunity from the habit-



ual contempt with which women are treated in Japan, a fraudulent security, a limbo of permissive ambiguity, a false exemption something like being a "white nigger" or an African prince in Alabama—taught me a great deal about what it is to be a woman in societies more openly sexist than my own. Because the exception made in my case, the elaborate display of Western courtesies—Japanese men delighted to show that they had seen the movies, knew that women had doors opened for them over here, cigarettes lighted, customs they must have found silly, yet were delighted to exhibit as cosmopolitan, sophisticated—all that could dissipate at any moment and my passport to consideration expire without any warning. At any moment I could be shunted back to the end of the line on ceremonial

occasions, given the last turn for the bath, shoved aside in the subway, ridiculed and humiliated in an argument. Because while the West has for centuries disguised its system of male dominance under those hypocritical little civilities toward women which we call "chivalry," the Japanese have never bothered to whitewash the hard reality of male power.

And of course I was aware that the token equality I was accorded with men was not only conditional, but even a betrayal of the women who served us on their knees at the feasts where I was permitted to sit up and chat with the men; a *gaijin*, an artist, an equal through the special dispensation of my race. The same race as the G.I., the conqueror, the racist. Enjoying myself in male company, not "woman as nigger" but "up with the white folks," of course I relished my position at first: flattered, set above my fellow woman, singled out for consideration, encouraged to express myself on intellectual topics, be taken seriously, interviewed. Because of course it is more fun to join in the conversation than it is to scuttle back and forth from the kitchen to present a dish upon one's knees, then to disappear like a servant though you might be the wife of the grand fellow who is playing host tonight to these profound thinkers, and the foreign lady. I relished my position as long as my conscience would permit me, that is, until my growing realization that the woman who waited upon me with bowed head was after all my sister began to ruin the taste of my sake and contaminate the flavor of the sashimi.

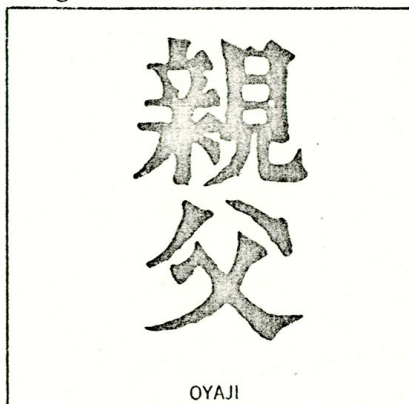
Because of course it couldn't go on forever; I had to wake from my dream, grow realistic about the very spurious character of my privilege, and become ashamed of my complicity in the humiliation of my own kind. But for the absurd and accidental business of being a

This is an adaptation of a special preface written for the Japanese edition of *Sexual Politics*. (Published in the United States by Doubleday and Avon.)

gaijin there went I—pitter-patter-ing down a corridor to the peremptory cry of “Oi,” “more this,” “more that,” the arrogant clap of hands, the calm assumption of innate and unquestioned superiority as *Pappa-san* or *oyaji* settled his mass comfortably in the light summer kimono, aware he was born to be master of all he surveyed. Wasn't he even now demonstrating it to me tediously by the ideograms which his fingers trace upon the tabletop that women were born for the subordination of the broom, subject to men by heaven's decree; gleefully informing me what Confucius had said, what the Buddha had said, what Prime Minister Sato had said when he beat his wife, or what Tanaka said just yesterday at a sake-bar in Shinjiku that was so terribly funny. And so forth. My daily and smoldering sense of outrage boils under the fire of his jovial insult. Does he imagine I am a man that he says such disparaging things about women to my face? But of course I am expected to laugh at it all, be a “good sport,” pretend that his bullying humor is not what it is in fact: namely, a form of intimidation, curtailment, imprisonment. And inevitably, my self-confidence and sense of worth evaporate as I listen, learning my “place”—as our Southerners used to say of their servants. Yes, even servants coddled as I am, through some arbitrary and special dispensation allowed to sit with their masters at table. To visit geisha houses. To spend nights on the town at Shinjiku or Rappongi drinking till dawn.

Because of course it is still lots of fun to be the only woman with this freedom, this absolute independence which I experienced as an American woman living alone in Japan, luxuriating in a studio of my own, a whole house to myself in a country so densely overcrowded. For all the bitter loneliness of those first months when I had no friends, knew little or no spoken Japanese, and when lost in the streets, became, for the first

time in my life, a functioning illiterate, unable even to interpret the characters on the street signs so that I might at least discover *where* I was lost and take my bearings—for all that, it was fun because it was always an adventure. And what an adventure, to go as I had to a foreign country, so very foreign a country, intending to live for a year with a mere \$900 (I wept at the consulate when they refused my entry because my bank account was too small: they were nonplussed, so I rigged the figures), living in what was real and some-



times dire poverty (when there is nothing to eat you drink water)—always in search of that inner strength I had never been able to find in New York, the lack of it leaving me prey to every impulse of folly—the swamps of alcoholism or drugs, promiscuity, all the bear traps I saw my young fellow artists disappearing into in that brutal city. So it was an adventure—in solitude, loneliness, self-sufficiency—poised on the blade of the knife, learning to live wholly on one's inner resources, as a human being and as an artist. Learning to live by, for, and through one's work. It was an adventure in independence which the circumstances of their lives permit few women ever to know—Japanese or American. And it was glorious.

There were times when it was torture. After six months in Japan I was penniless. The monthly stipend permitted me by my savings had shrunk from one hundred dollars to eighty then sixty, then thirty. The bankers at that great mon-

ey temple, the Daiici Ginko, were as meticulously courteous as ever: but it was a front—I was broke. I would have to give up and go home. And I had not succeeded, not broken through to Japan yet either. Around me the wall of race and language stood solid as a ring of brass, an impassable barrier I was unable to cross. At this juncture, through the kindness of Professors Hayashi and Iijima, I was offered a part-time job teaching literature at Waseda University. The salary was a pittance, scarcely more than my own dwindling savings had afforded me. But it was a connection to society, and a way to stay on and keep on fighting for entry into this Japan, this world of people and places, temples and paintings which I had come to love.

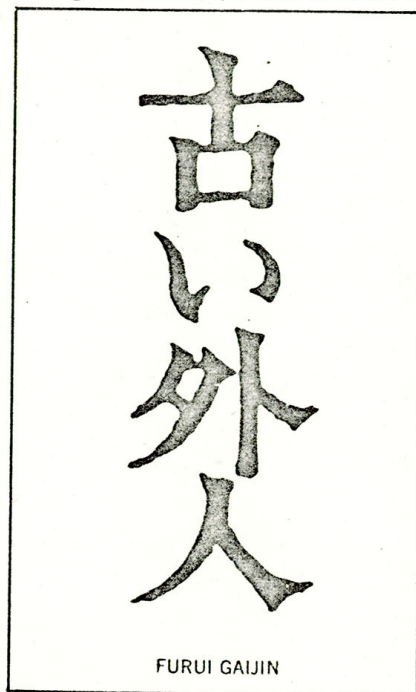
As an American from a multinational and (however hideously we have bungled it) a multiracial society, I naïvely imagined that one had only to hang on and learn the language and one could join, become part of the place. But of course Japan is a closed society. A *gaijin* never joins. Even a *furui gaijin* never joins; we linger like spurned lovers about the golden door, able to gaze on the riches and beauty and warmth inside. But never able to cross the threshold. I came to hate the very word *gaijin*, the perpetual snicker of condescension with which it is pronounced, hate it the way an American black hates the word “nigger.” Because the *gaijin* is one forever excluded from Japanese life, his nose eternally pressed to the window, prevented from coming inside. Except on the terms of what I secretly labeled “the guided tour,” that consummate hospitality toward visitors in which the Japanese excel. But the “guided tour” has its price: in obligation, the impossible sense of being beholden which the foreigner must feel, like a suppurated ulcer, weighing him down with gifts, dinner parties, introductions, outings, every conceivable mark of kindness, which, in his enforced men-

dicancy makes him grateful, then more grateful, then overcome with a gratitude which must at last become the most intolerable shame. Unless, of course, he is some species of con man. And they are not wanting, the *hen na gaijin*. I have watched a few of them operate, brash young men who exploited the generosity around them; telling themselves that since nobody ever treats you this good at home, these people must be simple. And acting upon this principle, they behave like an army out to pillage.

I took the job at Waseda and I stayed. I made friends. Slowly, with difficulty, hesitancy, misunderstanding. Friends dearer and dearer with each month. Art friends like Tono Yoshiaki, that delightfully cocky and entertaining critic; or Shimizu, my beautifully indolent and hedonistic dealer; or Takiguchi, beloved and saintly old youth of the avant-garde. *Sensei*, I always call him, using the term in its full and terrible dignity: the master, the teacher, the sage.

But it was the women who saw me through: Katsura Yukiko who found me a studio, introduced me to my dealer, prodded him to give me an exhibition, supervised my progress from the kindly distance of the telephone, giving me a splendid farewell when I left. Benevolent as she was, Katsura was always distant. Full of gifts and kindness, able to solve every need from the first moment I stumbled into her studio on a busy working day to interrupt her with my needs, having no recommendation, merely the impertinence of exploiting an address the painter Kanemitsu had handed me one night in the Cedar Bar in New York. But Katsura, the perfect patron, had other fish to fry. She was there like a fairy godmother whenever I needed the specific, but the indeterminate and homely needs of companionship were filled by younger women artists. Without them I would have starved, gone mad, perished. Because they were in my boat, or seemed to be.

Yet apart from the problems of sustenance and artistic survival in a society which did not then and very probably does not now encourage or even condone the serious woman artist, they had also the problem of being Japanese women. Which I didn't have. Through them I learned what it was to be without my splendid foreign freedoms, a real woman in



Japan. I learned through watching one friend sacrifice her art to her family, a sculptor doing commercial work on the side to support an entire clan who treated her as an upper servant. After a great bash of self-assertion and high-flying aesthetics with me in our neighborhood pub, she would be forced to climb through a window so that Uncle, a dragon whom she fed and clothed, would not raise hell that she was out late, was out by herself, was enjoying a few moments of freedom. Here was a woman of 40 (the idea boggled my mind) still as subject to surveillance as a 14-year-old girl. I had never heard of an artist living with her or his parents. In America the first thing we did upon hearing the call of the wild in Bohemia was to leave home, get to New York, take our own studio, sleep around, and keep whatever hours we chose—women as well

as men. But not my friend, still a virgin at 40, who had never lived away from home except for one brief period in a rooming house where the landlord tried to rape her. From this woman I learned the limitations of life in Japan.

And from another friend I learned its sorrows. A talented poet as well as a draftsman, this woman did live alone. But her independence was tinsel. Her sexual freedom amounted to a chaste little pallet or a destructive love affair with a fellow teacher, let us say, at the grammar school where she earned a living. He would be married, and when the affair came to light it would be she who would be fired. Just as it was her brother who was permitted to attend the Japanese schools when they returned to Japan from England during the war, their father forced to relinquish his research in the West to repatriate his family. A son was worth repatriation; the Emperor's schools could accept him and purge him of the taint of English and foreign manners. But a daughter was not worth the effort, might as well be lodged with the resident *gaijin* nuns and left to acquire her native tongue through a painful effort which left her forever a bit distant, perhaps even a bit freer than the women around her, but bitter in her alienation, half-aware of the greater freedoms of the West, that other culture in which she schizophrenically participated yet could never recross the sea to join. Her friends go, a few brave spirits among the women artists, and she watches them, goes to Yokohama, and waves good-bye as they set sail, just as she watches the foreigners come, enlisted continuously to entertain them because of her perfect and musical English. But she is alone, isolated, walled in by the family she visits every Sunday, the prosperous brother and his children, the mother who is a little sorry she never married, must shorten her kimono sleeves, forget the *omiaï* photos of her stunning beauty. (continued on page 113)

A LETTER TO WOMEN IN JAPAN
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 59

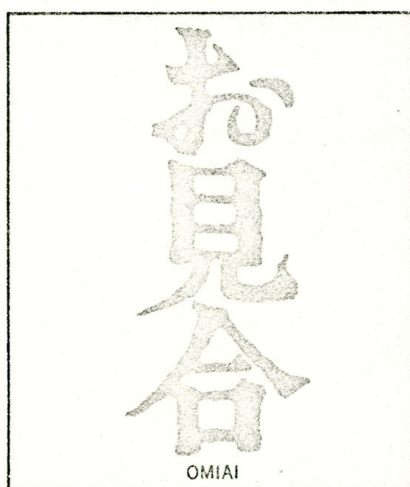
She has her independence, but at what price in the curtailment of hopes and ambitions? She is good enough to be admired by a passing British poet, or a few benevolent Japanese art critics, but never sure enough of her work somehow to push it, produce much, insist upon its quality. This lovely woman each year a little older in her lovely room, the exquisite and haunting sensuality of her beauty and her suppressed sexuality a bit dimmer, a bit more forlorn.

Yes, I mention sex and sex lives, not only because it was one of the freedoms most forbidden to Japanese women (indeed the very climate for men as well as women closely resembled my impression of what is meant by the word "Victorian": a clandestine license for men, a double standard, and chastity or great secretiveness enjoined upon women unless they were to undergo scandal and considerable impertinent ridicule or abuse)—I mention it because it is the Muse. Because the artist or creative person thrives upon this freedom of association: the excitement, the energy of love and love affairs.

These are single women, what of the married ones? Well, nothing—or almost nothing. You saw them out of the periphery of your vision; they did a little art work, yes, but they had no time to pursue it very far. Or they had sacrificed it to their children, their families, their husbands' more important ambitions. Like that really nice young fellow who sees to it that his wife does the bulk of the work involved in making his graphics while he takes all the credit. His genius, she is convinced—indeed, she might go crazy if she stopped being convinced of it even for a moment—is greater than hers. Many wives used to paint too, but now they work as waitresses to support their Leonardos. No, you see very little of wives.

But of course I knew one utterly atypical case in Yoshiko, Fumio

Yoshimura's wife. "It's the craziest marriage in the world," all their friends assured me before I was introduced to them. "There is something the matter with Yoshimura; he's an egalitarian; he goes shopping—brings a little basket and rides his bike to market; can you imagine anything more ridiculous?" The storyteller whoops in laughter just as the neighbors must. I try to find it funny but can only find it charming. Just as I must find the two of them charming when I meet them, both so young-feeling, like students still in love. And both so remarkably good-



looking and happy. I liked them instantly, even found something familiar in them, nearly American, in their gaiety, their ease with each other, their open affection. Like a pair of undergraduates at one of our universities, they seemed so airy, so delighted with each other and their life. But already they were planning to leave. Would I like to take their studio? They are going to America. "Tell us about the art world in New York. Fumio is leaving in a few months; where should he stay; what museums should he see; whom should he meet?"

Yoshiko will follow as soon as her contract runs out, the job she has designing bags and shoes for a leather factory. She is well paid and indispensable to them, a rare thing for a woman here. But as soon as Fumio has found a place to live she'll join him in America. It will be wonderful. They have

saved 10 years for this; Fumio is convinced it is the place they should go—for her sake. I try to temper their enthusiasm, but must finally agree she would probably blossom there—they are right to leave. Because it is hard for her here. Hard for him too, those long nights staying up to finish the drawings he does for NHK television's course in spoken English: "John and Jane go out walking; see the cup and spoon," etc. But it is all worth it; America is a place where a woman artist like Yoshiko would be free. Of course she will paint again there: he is convinced of her talent, even convinced that it is greater than his own. And he adores her as they all adore her, the prettiest girl in the art school, the liveliest and most promising in that first class of women permitted finally, after how many centuries, to receive an equal education in the Fine Arts. Thanks, paradoxically enough, to the Yankee Occupation which also gave them the vote, the right to property and divorce, civil rights, and the freedom to fall in love and neck on the grass at Ueno Park.

Sure I'd take their studio, my own landlord is in the process of evicting me in favor of his son and the new bride they have located through computer matchmaking. Fumio and Yoshiko would give me the big studio and move over into the little house next door until they leave for New York. We would all talk English which would prepare them for the great moment. During the two months before Fumio left for the Promised Land, the three of us were together continuously. It was as if we were in love, a friendship of such compelling charm that I developed a kidney condition because we drank so much tea and chattered so incessantly I neglected to go to the toilet. And when the time came for Fumio to leave, Yoshiko and I saw him off bravely; it would be just a little while before she would go over too; meanwhile we would have a lot of parties, go to concerts (Yoko Ono and John Cage

are here, there's something going on every night), keep up our spirits, and have a grand time as independent females. But then something went wrong. Yoshiko doesn't want to go anywhere: she is listless, she is feeling unwell, she isn't interested in anything. She has a strange pain in her stomach. We tease her (because there are a lot of us now, a whole tribe of friends I have found and brought together). We tease her that it is silly, she is lovesick, she misses Fumio too much. No, she is ill; probably nothing at all, but she must see a doctor, walk over to the neighborhood *sensei* who invites us to dinner so often in order to expound his theories on philosophy. It is only a little growth, something innocuous. She will have to have a minor operation. But now the word is that they are calling in a cousin who is a surgeon; it is all suddenly very serious. Then within a dizzying space of 18 hours it may be cancer. Fumio is on the phone from America saying he will fly back immediately. I hear it and groan for all the money it means, the years of savings washed away in one airline ticket. But if it is cancer, if they must operate, he must come, the little voice saying stoically 10,000 miles away "*Boku kaerimasu*"—"I'm coming back," like that, the whole poignant dream of their escape blasted in her danger.

Watching some toast burn in my toaster, I hear him sobbing from the hospital phone: he has watched the operation; she is riddled with cancer. It must have been growing inside her for two years. There is no hope, she will surely die. And then the nights I spend alone pacing the studio floor, the stove out, the place freezing in February, waiting for the word that she is dead. Because she must die, and we know it. Waiting only for the call from the hospital that it is over. The phone rings. It is our friend Yo-Chan: Yoshiko is not dead but dying, the family have asked if I want to be there? I have never watched someone die; I am

not sure. But that they ask me, the honor of it really that they want me there, the wall between me and Japan melted finally, gone utterly; I am part of a family here. And one of my two greatest friends is dying tonight—damn right I'll be there. Frightened at the mystery while her breathing rings out like an engine under the oxygen tent, each breath more painful and hideous, a parody of life; they are keeping her alive with machinery. For days



she has endured the most unthinkable pain and is now in coma, sedated. The drugs will weaken her heart and in a very short time Yoshiko will cease. The breath still comes in howling stentorian snorts, then slowing, then stopping for a moment of thunderous silence. I sob, unable to carry out the samurai stoicism I have promised myself I would maintain, keeping face, doing it their way. Like Obāchan's utterly wooden "*Shikatanagai*"—"it can't be helped"—when I pounded my fist on the side of the door that first day and wept and bellowed that no, Yoshiko was too young, too gifted, too beautiful, too loved, too precious

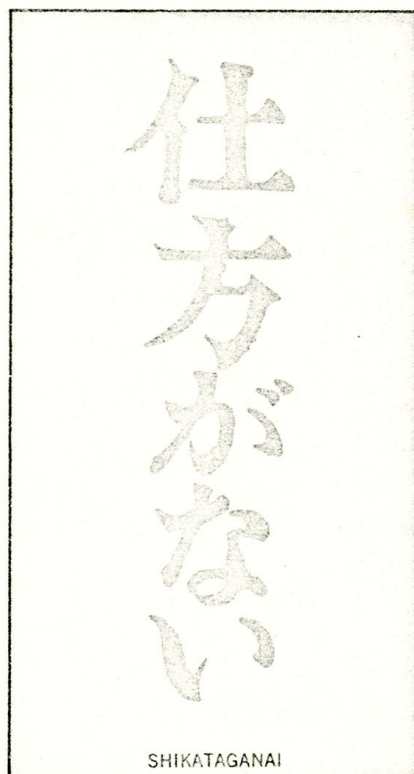
to Fumio, to all of us, to me, to die; no, goddamn it, no. "*Shikatanagai*," Obāchan, Fumio's mother, repeated as full of grief herself, but teaching me the wisdom of her kind, its strength in age after a lifetime of renunciation. And now the breathing again, more self-evidently hopeless, but yes, still coming. Like starting an engine in freezing weather when there's an emergency; the rush of the cab as I hurried here. To stand in perplexed and numbed self-consciousness, trying to be one of them and trying not to cry as we wait silently in a circle around the bed. It is impossible to look at Fumio at all. And when I look for Yoshiko the bed seems to contain only her lovely face and the pain. She has no body left; that wonderful slimness, that buoyancy is carved, rotted and carved, full of the white cells of her death. Coming now in those terrible breaths which are not breaths but the amplifications of machinery. And now the sound halts and comes to an end. We wait on in the final quiet for it to begin again, stunned now that it has finished at last. I am contrite at ever having wished this mockery of breathing to stop, because now yes now it is stopped.

There are tears then from the others as well, a resigned impossible pain. Suddenly I am past tears, I am furious. My irrational rage pounding Yo-chan's friendly chest, his intelligent face bemused looking down on me while I beat on him—this good young architect who had telephoned me—choking and sobbing while I strike him in the hallway. The hallway where I have gone so that I will not smash the window of the hospital room they have been so civilized as to permit Fumio to live in all these days as her lover, never leaving the bedside of her suffering. But I am another love and an angry one, furious at the universe, the world, Japan, her country and culture—for killing her. Because I know that in a sense, Yoshiko's is not a natural death. I have learned this in the nights waiting up to

hear this news, carefully remembering, studying even who she is, was, would have been, could have been until she sickened—and it was not that recently, now I come to think of it—she has been wearing out for years. First with the classmates who expected her to quit painting in Fumio's favor to have a baby; boring her at reunions with their diapers and their recriminations, then with all the mutual friends who berate and mock her, cover her with guilt. Because Fumio does not behave like her master, but instead helps with the chores, heaping coals of fire on both their heads by insinuating that he is tied to her apron strings, is not getting ahead in the world, is not lord of his house, is uxorious, infatuated with his wife—the one they all wanted to marry of course—but that unaggressive one Yoshimura got her. And is silly enough to believe in her, insist she maintain her independence when she weakens and would retreat into wife and motherhood. Because she is weakening now, she is letting the painting slip for the job: "Fumio should paint, the designing is practical; I am forgetting how to paint. I haven't done a canvas in years." "But of course the designing is only a means to get to America," Fumio assures me. "There she will paint of course; we have our savings, neither of us will have to work. Anyway, it's illegal," he grins. But what is Yoshiko doing out in the washhouse on her one day off, why is she washing the clothes by hand when the laundry is only five minutes away and she told me herself they do fine work and charge little. She giggles when we question her: she likes washing. "But surely you have better things to do—paint, read, go swimming; it is your holiday, you are cooped up in that factory all week." "No, I should do the washing, I can do his things better than the laundry." We are uneasy listening to her, sensing the abandonment of self in the remark which is not affection but compliance with a lifetime pres-

sure toward that very sort of self-effacement Yoshiko is usually so witty at ridiculing.

The cancer was two years old when they found it. So the weakening is no recent thing at all. It is a slow dying inside, a death of the heart, a surrender of hope. Yoshiko did not only die of cancer; she died of everything. In a way, I believe she died of Japan. And cancer is not simply a mystery. Though it is that as well. It does not arrive from



nowhere, it is not precipitated by nothing at all.

It may be that Yoshiko was merely unlucky and her death a senseless waste which bore no relation to her life. But perhaps people die when they do not want to live, die through the depredations of disease which stalk them when they tire, when they weaken, when they don't want to go on because they are exhausted. People die when life "gets to them," enervates them, burdens them. And the terrible irony—the cheat that makes me want to rage and break windows, that makes me pound poor Yo-chan on the chest in a hospital corridor—is that it "got to" Yoshiko just before her "getaway," just a month before her escape from a society which

was calmly but rigidly opposed to her every aspiration, a society which had finally, with that indomitable assurance it came finally to have for me as well, that inexorable certainness—had worn away her resistance, broken her spirit. It was already too late for America.

The fact that America was a sham, too, was something I didn't realize yet, eager to see my country again, unrealistic about what it offered women until I had spent three months just trying to find employment (if you don't type, don't bother to apply). My own wonderful America could not even permit me a subsistence because I was female. It was a painful awakening. And then I remembered Japan, which though it had permitted me to get a job, find friends, and even to discover my destiny as an artist, had also taught me how despised women really can be in a society which is not, like ours here in America, given to an insidious hypocrisy about status or opportunity. And then I found the Women's Movement and helped to build it. Waiting, I suppose, always waiting in some corner of myself, as I know Fumio waits, for the day it would reach Japan.

And now what is of interest to all of us is the birth of a new feminist movement among Japanese women. With all my heart I reach out to these sisters, embrace them, and look forward to loving them as I have loved the friends I describe here, remembered again as I remember Yoshiko and the bright possibility which might have been her life, but wasn't. Remembering Japan today I remember paintings and parties, landscapes and friends, a vital period in my own growth; but most keenly I remember Yoshiko and the night she died. Such things must not happen again.

Kate Millett is a sculptor, a filmmaker and the author of "Sexual Politics," one of the basic works of the Women's Liberation Movement.

