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## *Reviews of Books*

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### **Lawrence Rogers (Ed. and Trans.) *Tokyo Stories: A Literary Stroll***

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*Tokyo Stories* appears to be a labour of love on the part of its translator and editor, Lawrence Rogers. The subtitle, ‘a literary stroll’, gives the notion that the collection offers a leisurely ramble through the neighbourhoods of Tokyo via works by a broad range of Japanese prose-writers. Divided into four quarters—Central Tokyo, Shitamachi, West of the Palace and the South End—there is from the outset an idiosyncratic feel to the editing of the book that is not offset by the introduction, which at sixty-eight pages in length (of a two hundred and sixty-seven page book) is the longest single piece of writing presented. Only after making it through the minor thesis of the introduction, does it then become apparent that the editor will not only be tour guide but constant companion as each story is prefaced by a short introduction of its own. The information in these short introductions, while not superfluous, would have been better placed in the general introduction, where there is ample space.

That said, *Tokyo Stories*—the stories themselves—provides an exemplary introduction to the recent past of Tokyo. Combined with the various cityscapes it presents, it offers a substantial selection of some of the key Japanese writers of the twentieth century. For the uninitiated, the newcomer to Japanese literature hoping to sample a broad range of its works, the collection is a boon. By way of a travel guide (and it is classified under literature and travel) it is likely to leave the more literal reader slightly bewildered as the stories selected are more often than not psychological portraits cast against the backdrop of Tokyo. For that, through the range of the collection as a whole, the reader is given various insights into the inhabitants of Tokyo and its effect upon them, so as to be able to assemble something of a psychological profile of Tokyo itself. *Tokyo Stories* leaves the image of a resilient city that is built of and on ruins. There is a mostly subdued physical and psychological violence to the place, coupled with an almost anarchic liberalism that runs through the interior, sexual and social lives of its inhabitants. Complete anarchy is held at bay, for the most part, by an internal strength and self-respect that allows for various freedoms and accepts the weight of history (personal and otherwise) but does not seek out self-destruction. When contrasted to recent American fiction (DeLillo, Frazen and others), this resilience and fortitude is even more striking.

*Tokyo Stories* opens with Kajii Motojirō’s ‘Mire.’ ‘Mire’ traces the path of its narrator, anxiety-ridden Keikichi, from Ochanomizu to Hongō, from Ochanomizu to the Ginza, and finally from Owari-chō to Yuuraku-chō, as he rushes about the streets of Tokyo after a money order, contemplating his past and his present as an unsuccessful writer. ‘Mire’ brings to mind the pathologies of Knut Hansen’s *Hunger* and Rilke’s *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. Motojirō draws in a short-space a fascinating depiction of paranoia and dispossession brought on through isolation. Keikichi appears at odds with self and surrounds alike, as the story neatly skirts the border of comedy and tragedy:

As we were talking I felt my friend's face become strangely distant. And what I was saying seemed to have nothing to do with the point I was trying to make. I even had the feeling that the person I was talking to was someone else, not my friend. And I was certain he sensed that I was a bit strange. He was not inhospitable, but I wondered if he himself was afraid to mention this strangeness and so sat there saying nothing about it. However, I didn't feel I could just ask him, isn't there something odd about me? I didn't so much fear that he would say "Now that you mention it, you are odd," as that my asking him if I were odd would amount to acknowledgment on my part of strangeness. Were I to make that acknowledgment, it would be the end of everything. The fear of that was there. It was in my mind, yet my mouth was chattering away.

For all of this, by the end of the story, Keikichi asserts, 'I was myself again, fully alive' before pointedly returning to the isolation of his lodgings. Keikichi's experience, with its perversely amusing example of a psyche deranged by isolation and poverty, is an extreme version of the general psychology presented in *Tokyo Stories*. In Yumeno's 'Terrifying Tokyo', the narrator, a bumbling yokel, faces the privations of Tokyo as an outsider only to flee indignant and confused never to return, while in *Jacob's Tokyo Ladder* Hino employs *ostranite* as the familiar streets of Tokyo become strange to the narrator faced by a premonition of his own death. *Jacob's Tokyo Ladder* is a remarkable work of poise and precision. Hino pares back the narrator's monologue, with the sharp edge of the detailed descriptions of streetscapes. The effect is of an overall muted and subtle spellbinding, as the spectre of his death takes shape against the well-drawn streets of the Otemachi district. While the reference in the story to Chirico seems a little clumsy, perhaps overly postmodern, the story does achieve the same curious coupling of sharp lines with a dreamlike consciousness as in a de Chirico.

The dreamlike and the surreal are never far from many of the stories selected by Rogers. While stories such as Motojirō's and Hino's dip into the inner workings of their narrator's often confused psyches, Saegusa's 'Firefly Tavern' and Irokawa's 'Sparrows' deftly cross the border from psycho-drama into the surreal, creating short fictions of immense power. Of the two 'Firefly' is the less ambitious, tracing out a shared experience of loneliness and futility against the forced sociability of (as Rogers points out in his short introductions) 'hashigo-zake, "ladder drinking"' or 'pub crawling.' Saegusa crafts a simple tale of a night out into a peculiar odyssey at the heart of which is the unexpressed loneliness of each character. It is a loneliness that extends from an inability to communicate with each other. Saegusa submerges the isolation of each character under a barrage of well-tuned dialogue (she has a keen ear, keenly translated, for the quotidian ebb and flow of drunken chit-chat and ribbing). Delving into an almost David Lynch-like strange highway, the characters undertake a fruitless quest to see fireflies and then each witness the miraculous disappearance of the tavern where they had spent much of the night drinking. When faced with the quasi-magical disappearance at the centre of the tale, the characters' failure to respond with the wonder or fear the situation demands, underscores a lack of authenticity in their ability to relate. 'Firefly Tavern' is a quietly existential tale that cuts through the banality of everyday relations with a well-honed sense of the possible wonder of the world. It subtly critiques and demands more than the sad inauthenticity of its characters, and bears witness to the malleable relation of experience and expression.

Irokawa's 'Sparrows' is altogether less subtle and far removed from the sense of actuality washed in dream of 'The Firefly Tavern.' Put simply it is a masterly piece of surrealism that warps reality and the reader's expectations with an admirably sure hand. Beginning as a reminiscence of an elderly man, 'Sparrows' quickly develops into a detailed account and journey into obsession, obsession shared and a family's internal tensions and conflicts. Central to it all is that key token of the Modern, the train. Jumping between reminiscence and reverie, the narration of 'Sparrows'

verges from a child's enthusiasm for locomotives to a crazed and violent adult consciousness of locomotion. As with many of the stories in *Tokyo Stories*, the narrator slips into a paranoid relation to the world. 'Sparrows' is outstanding in taking such paranoia deep into the psychotic. Psychosis follows psychosis, as the narrator physically and psychologically engages in a contest with the inbound and outbound trains:

The engineer, his face familiar, stared straight ahead. Another train followed immediately on the heels of the one that had passed before me. There was no longer time to distinguish one train from another. Trains came from my left and right, as though a dam had burst. Nowhere was there an empty track. I realized now I was engulfed in the rush hour.

Irokawa manages to create a harrowing portrait of psychological trauma, masterfully teasing out its origins in the narrator's experience of wartime Tokyo and his troubled relationship with his father. The full power of 'Sparrows' emerges in the final images where the title of the piece is explained. It is a story that juggles a complex psychological portrait, the fascination of dream and psychosis, and a sense of the fragility of the human in contest with an inhuman modernity.

Within *Tokyo Stories* there are numerous examples of less exorbitant portrayals of the city and its inhabitants. Ineko's gently wrought 'Elegy' is a clear and simple depiction of the life of a young woman, proudly employed by Maruzen, and the minor intrigues of her friend's love life and early death. Ineko examines the inability to know another's emotional life with great tact and care. At the centre of the piece is an account of the 1923 Tokyo earthquake which offsets the story of the young woman's life rubbing shoulders with the intellectuals and agitators of 1920s Tokyo at Maruzen on the one hand and the account of her friend's seemingly imprudent and loveless marriage and subsequent demise on the other. 'Elegy' and Michiko Ikeda's 'An Unclaimed Body' alike give lucid descriptions of Tokyo's cityscape without giving way to either symbolism or surrealism. 'An Unclaimed Body' is a meandering tale of a young woman's existence in the doss houses of San'ya over many years, thread around her acquaintance with an aged former prostitute, Hideko. The characterization of Hideko and the portrayal of the narrator's uneasy relationship with her offer insights into the contesting demands of charity and survival. While something of a grotesque throughout the story, Hideko finally engenders pathos and a sense of the need for friendship and community, even one as difficult and contradictory as that experienced by the narrator with Hideko.

Of all the stories collected, Yukio Mishima's study of pride and corruption in 'Fireworks' and the genteel ruminations on a childhood spent in Shinjuku in Sōseki Natsume's 'From Behind the Study Door' are possibly the two most remarkable. Through implication and suggestion, Mishima creates a masterful tale of extortion. Unlike several of the stories in the collection, Mishima has the gift of allowing the reader's imagination to fill in the detail; to possibly more disastrous ends than if they were simply stated (or overstated). The selection from Natsume's *Gurasu-to no uchi* reminded me of the gentility of a Borges' tale. There is a sense that the spirit behind the eye that narrates the piece is a large one, at ease with the world and the past, and able to encompass each with its gentle gaze. Natsume's depiction of pre-twentieth century Tokyo and environs is a calm and skillful revelry of lost places:

Time has its power. Last year on a walk toward Takata I found myself passing through the area and saw that my old home had been torn down and that a new rooming house was being built in its place. And a pawnbroker stood nearby now. A spare fence enclosed the front of the pawnbroker's and shrubbery had been planted behind it. Three pine trees had been pruned so severely they looked almost deformed, which made me feel I had seen them before.

The most striking of the stories in the collection is the final tale of a woman's not quite solitary existence in a high-rise in Shinagawa. Mayumi Inabi's 'Morning Comes Twice A Day' reads as a long prose-poem. It tells the story of a woman's devotion to her pet cat and by doing so unravels a remarkable portrayal of the loneliness of modern city life and the many possibilities of community, love and friendship. As with other stories in the collection, there is a somnambulism to the narrative, here captured by the image of the apartment floating silently above the city, offering both reprieve and imprisonment. Inabi's is a story of broad and empty blue skies, of living akilter to the world outside and finding solace in a deeply felt care for another. It is a tale, beautiful for its simplicity and for bearing witness to the vulnerability of the human amid the masses and the dream life that sustains it.

There are glitches in *Tokyo Stories*. The various introductions are more of a hindrance than an aid, and are best skipped for the stories themselves. There is also a sense at times that the translation tends to level out the variance in and range of voice and style of the authors to a mildly fusty English. While the collection gives a fairly even distribution of stories published from one end of the twentieth-century to the other, there are some glaring exclusions, Haruki Murakami and Banana Yoshimoto to name two. Nevertheless, it is a fascinating read and will give newcomer and stalwart alike a varied and greatly enjoyable ride through Tokyo and the minds that have inhabited it.