Stillness and Tides

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When she lived at the field station in Mexico, she'd take visitors on trips to the estuary. They'd follow the hand-painted sign of a mermaid to a women's oyster cooperative at the water's edge, where the Sea of Cortez converged with Sonoran Desert sand. She remembers what she felt each time she saw the sea become visible from the washboard sand-road. A fierce cerulean ribbon slipped just under the horizon line.

She will not write down the last line of Kawabata Yasunari's *Snow County* because it's not something one can excerpt. To experience the line, to have the line suddenly pour into the body in a vertiginous inversion of distance and size, there is no shortcut; one must read the book. Each conversation, each acute, flickering image speaks to the next, carves out a place of encounter. It is an ice cave that you must press your naked mind against to melt your way inside.

After they'd stretched their limbs from the bumpy ride over dunes, they'd walk to the wrack line. She'd use a turritella shell to draw a map in the sand. Explain that estuaries played vital roles: stabilizing shoreland, providing foraging and nesting habitats for migratory birds, nurseries for fish and invertebrates. Their vulnerability to human impacts.

She seemed like she was talking but really she was noticing. When people first arrived, they usually didn't pay much attention to the scrawled sand map, or they joked that there was nothing much to see—it seemed a starker, empty landscape, one "full of mud." She liked watching this process; she knew it took some time for the estuary to seep into them.

In a lecture at The University of Hawaii, titled "The Existence and Discovery of Beauty," Kawabata speaks of walking to the terrace of the Kahala Hilton Hotel in the morning and seeing the hundreds of glasses, placed upside down on the table, sparkling with the sun of the tropics. She likes what scholar Makoto Ueda says about this moment in *Modern Japanese Writers:* "We can see now why Kawabata was so impressed by the sparkling glasses...Their beauty was evanescent; it would disappear the moment the sun rose higher or the observer moved a little. The glasses themselves were transparent... and breakable. Furthermore, they were described by Kawabata as sparkling like stars, which are located at an unattainable distance."

Lately, she's been thinking about fragile things. Breakages and landscapes, both internal and external. About stillness and tides.

What she loves is the stillness inside Kawabata's work. When she reads his books, there's a space that opens inside her—a stillness that is sentient.

She remembers reading the opening scene of *Snow Country.* How a misted-over window becomes a mirror for a young woman's floating eye, reflected from across the train compartment. Reading that page, she saw the image so clearly, it was as if the book itself was looking back at her. In that moment, the intensity between her internal world and external world—which was usually never balanced—suddenly *is.*

In other words, when she reached toward that space, it reached back.

After she'd drawn the estuary map and given the lecture, she'd head to the mudflats. They'd walk until the group began to grow quiet. Sometimes they'd have to walk quite far. When they stopped, she'd show them how to read the sand. The divots that were the mouth-prints of feeding stingrays. A circular, grainy collar of grit that was, in fact, the eggs of a moon snail. What had before looked like holes in the mud were openings to the intricate burrows of fiddler crabs.

It didn't happen every time. But sometimes when someone reached toward the estuary, she saw it reaching back.

In Estero Morúa, each tide, read twice a day, is a story. Signatures are made and partially erased. Bird tracks, olive snails, the small deaths that the tide licks at and returns. Every trace speaks both to its own ephemerality (the tide's twice-daily erasure) and a larger cosmic pageantry. Tides change because of the gravity of celestial bodies that exist entirely beyond the earth's atmosphere.

She loves thinking about spaces like this. Such contrasts of scale, their juxtapositions! As Robert Anthony Siegel says of Kawabata's work: "The individual in Kawabata is a collection of shifting memories and intersecting longings, rather than a sharply defined entity with an independent existence. The boundaries between past and present, self and other, dream and reality, are always in flux in Kawabata's world."

Kawabata's biography is problematic: he was known for constantly rewriting, changing titles, adding to already "finished" work. In other words, his work is a palimpsest like an estuary is a palimpsest.

Each trip to the estuary was always a revelation. It was never the same.

She watched how people moved through time in that landscape. Stripping off shoes and tying the shoelaces to hang around the neck. Hands searching for ghost shrimp burrows. Dragging a finger along the olive snail trail until she hears the shouting. “I found it! I found the snail!” and a splashing mad rush to show her the wet and glittering oval.

Kawabata tells us, “Cosmic time is the same for everyone, but human time differs with each person. Time flows in the same way for all human beings; every human being flows through time in a different way.”

When fiddler crabs are studied in the laboratory, their change in coloration still mimics the time of the tide’s ebb and flow.

Time in bodies made blurry with sunlight.
Time in a landscape where bodies are hourglasses.
But that’s not it, exactly. All bodies are hourglasses.
What she means is all bodies are finite. But she’s learned that landscapes—estuaries like this one—can be finite too.

Kawabata is considered a master of concision. He captured what was perishable and indescribable through the simplest syntax, the most streamlined prose. By paring language to its most essential, Kawabata invited a reader to use their imagination.

The short story *Canaries*, for example, is composed as a letter a man writes to his former mistress. His wife has died and he is tormented by what to do with the canaries his mistress had given to him since it was his wife that cared for them. He recalls what his mistress told him when she gifted him the birds: “Perhaps it’s odd to give living creatures as a souvenir, but our memories, too, are alive.”

The story isn’t even a page. And yet, it’s alive with nuances and troubled passions. It’s as much about what isn’t there as what is: not its brevity but its spareness and specificity that ignites the imagination.

The estuary, too, is a landscape of living memories.
Of imagination.

Her family would camp in Estero Morúa when she was a child. She and her siblings used to collect pumice that had washed up in the wrack lines. Venus clam shells, small nubs of bleached emerald coral, triggerfish bones, seaweeds.

The pumice, carved, became effigies (hybrid fish creatures, ghosts). The round opercula of turban snails: coins. Spiral shells: turret towers where furiously plotting prisoners were kept. They gleaned and collected, and out of these foundational forms, cities, then worlds were born.

So much became metaphor. What she learned from a carapace: the veneers of a changing self. And its fragility. What she learned from an empty shell: sanctuary.

Now she wonders: did dreaming her way into and from that landscape allow her to dream her way into other landscapes? Into her own future?

What if we recognize the fragility of a landscape only because we have experienced it before in a story? A painting? What if we recognize the fragility of a story only because we have experienced it before in a landscape?

In Kawabata’s story, *Glass*, a grown man realizes that the story he is reading is an event he’s actually lived. Written by a sick child—now grown—that had been helped by his wife (then a girl) at the glass factory they had all worked at. The event, long forgotten, submerged, had suddenly reappeared.

If childhood is a potent map for futures, what happens when those spaces are degraded or are no longer accessible to those that would be moved by its forms?

One afternoon while tide pooling, she and her siblings had found a pygmy octopus hiding within the closed halves of a cockle shell. They put it in the bucket with some small crabs they’d caught. They were young; they’d never seen anything like it. Materializing and dissipating like living smoke.

They left it in the bucket that night.
In the morning, a scrap of tentacle floated near the surface.
The crabs had eaten the octopus while they’d been sleeping.
The feeling was so sickening, all of them remember that moment to this day. Decades later.

Now she thinks of what she learned at a young age from that landscape.
Questions of form, difference, otherness.
Tenderness. Wonder. Harm.

In *Snow Country*, mirrors appear—often in shifting forms. The misted-over train window allows a human face and the dim, external landscape to merge and float together on one semitransparent plane.

In the estuary, one learns that one doesn’t always see what one is looking at.
Truths are concealed and revealed. Truths shift; they can be clear or nuanced.
Some are beyond articulation.
(She thinks of her body floating in the darkness of the sea, the glow her limbs left in the water.)

Some truths have to be studied, given time and attention before becoming evident.
One has to practice seeing, sensing, feeling.
This happens in the ice cave, too.

In this letter, she has tried to do what Kawabata did. As Tsuruta explains, “Kawabata selects two things, one from man and one from nature, and lets them collide in a most extraordinary fashion. What emerges from this contrast is a weirdly beautiful scene.”

Desert-sea landscapes. Snow-filled landscapes.
Estero Morúa. Kawabata Yasunari.

Her friend is making plaster casts of estuary mud. Using the metaphor of the palimpsest to explore the signatures and traces, she explains: “We explore these landscapes as river mouths, and how these body corporeal, ecological, historical, and political attributes, and stand as metaphor for creative exchange. A river’s mouth expresses the essence of polyvocality—that is the mixing of voices and languages, both human and non-human. It is our intention to re-listen and re-blend the voices and dialects of humans, animals, plants, waters, and minerals. This is not to say all voices will be in harmony in terms of register and/or desire. But perhaps as in Latour’s notion of ecological politics and democracy, sustainable futures can only arise from letting the world speak again, together.”

Why are you sitting here, holding these fragments?
Because she does not believe she is the only one the estuary is trying to speak to.

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a fierce cerulean ribbon

(hybrid fish creatures, ghosts)

but our memories, too, are alive

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