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essentials

BOOKS

Green Tea To Go - Leza Lowitz (Printed Matter Press, 2004 Paperback: ¥1,500)

SOMETIMES the unnoticed actions are the ones which end up mattering most. A girlfriend gets on a plane. A widow steals shoes. A wife spends a night in a hotel down the road.

In *Green Tea to Go*, the debut collection of short stories by local resident Leza Lowitz, it is these small acts of rebellion that breathe definition into the lives of her characters.

The wife's name is Yuriko. Her past is of revolutionary politics, passionate love, and a tragic death. Now she conducts herself through lunch packing and house cleaning. Wracked by nostalgia, this Japanese Mrs. Dalloway struggles to balance the world before her eyes with the world behind them. To regain her sense of self, Yuriko (unlike Virginia Woolf's Clarissa) finally takes a stand, in a quiet way.

Lowitz believes that "transformation is possible at any moment," and this comes through in many of the narratives in *Green Tea to Go*. The tension the reader feels, though, when faced with each small rebellion, sits in the question: is it enough? Lowitz's stories, while not always happy, end tinged with hope. Whether we

like or relate to the characters is not important, only that we understand what they do.

Sentimentality is another thread uniting an otherwise diverse collection. An artist deals with the death of his father. An old woman fights to save a small house in a big city. Two Berkeley High School alumni are reunited on a train platform in Tokyo.

The artist is a sculptor who sneaks into a gallery to set up his exhibition in the middle of the night. The process unlocks his grief over his father's death, and becomes an act of homage, which in turn grows into a contemplation on fatherhood — and the past circles into the present as each piece of art is finally, delicately placed.

Those familiar with the language know that the Japanese term *natsukashii* contains more heart than its English equivalent of nostalgia. This untranslatable potency permeates *Green Tea To Go*. The author describes the space where we find many of her tales as the "radical rift between the constant transformation of change and a past that's always on the verge of being gone."



Leza Lowitz with her dog Asuka.

We see this in small places too: characters that live by fish markets, the passing mention of the *hinoki* wood of a Noh stage, the appearance of an old-fashioned balance scale shop. Lowitz calls these "temples to the obsolete" and most Tokyoites know them well. The author is quick to remind us that these places manifest in both our outer and inner worlds: "we all have those kinds of shrines in ourselves."

The reader will find Tokyo in the physical landscape of this collection, but while undeniably a product of the author's experiences in Japan, it is not the cultural component that drives the narratives of *Green Tea to Go*, but the human one.

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