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YVONNE BLOMER

Natsukashii – *time and place*

natsukashii is a Japanese word that means dear (old); fondly-remembered; beloved; missed; nostalgic¹

While my son is at music therapy, clanging bells for Jingle Bells because #christmasinapril arrived with this morning's snow, I walk the dog.

Imagine having a dog's nose.

For two years, in my twenties, I lived in Japan. I went with my then-new husband who has now been my partner for 26 years. Words we picked up while living there have remained a part of our life's vocabulary. *Natsukashii* is one of them. A nostalgia for the past, or for a fond moment from the past. I come across a street or a little old shop I've not seen in years and think to myself, ah, *natsukashii*, lengthening that final "ee" sound to express the pure joy of longing that has filled me.

I recently saw an image of all the threads of neurons from nose to brain in a dog's muzzle. My dog could stand in one spot all day and map the place's history and his part in it, through scent. As for me, this city is all sense too, sights and sound and memory. A cacophony of construction that over the last eight years has utterly altered the city from low-rise apartments and quaint European or Colonial British architecture to high end high-rises – not too high, mind you, and busy narrow streets with dedicated bike lanes and inhabitants living and working in the downtown core with their clicking boots, long black coats, and fancy dogs yapping at me and mine.

The dog and I walk from Johnston Street up to Cook Street, right and past Yates, then View, to Fort, where we turn left and are on the shady side of the street. Here there is a Yoga Lab, a cluster of little shops in what is called Harris Green. The shop fronts right out of Olde England and the wares they are selling handmade and crafted. *Wic* is the Anglo-Saxon word for this kind of village area, or artisan settlement of long ago. The word *wic* holds *natsukashii* in it too.

My son has special needs and is neurodiverse. In a way, he has a kind of other sense too, powerful as the dog's nose but maybe a blend of typical senses, a form of synaesthesia where he'll notice things that I might not. For example, he'll notice the way the light hits the sides of

¹ Sourced from www.japanesetest4you.com.

buildings; also he'll notice patterns, and high-pitched sounds. Perhaps in his noticing he sees those superb moments from his own past, and revels in them.

The dog and I pause outside J&J Wonton Noodle House, so he can track history with his nose. My husband and I used to go to this noodle house all the time, but we haven't been for years. Why do we stop going to certain places that were hangouts in the past, I wonder, as the dog moves to sniff the base of a cherry tree. I can clearly recall going for noodles with my son when he was in a highchair and introducing him to broth, bok choy, noodles, and some gluten-made meat replacement. Over time, perhaps, we just get busy or no longer think to dine downtown when we live far enough out of the city centre that we might decide to go north instead of south (or east instead of west, I've no idea of directions) to eat out. Perhaps we leave places we love, like J&J Noodles, so we can induce nostalgia for them.

As I walk, I think about Rebecca Solnit who has written about walking and cities and how she might note these street names, named for men, colonists, or landmarks from the past, such as this street we are on now, named because it runs all the way to Wharf Street in the city harbour, and was the start of Fort Victoria.

I pause to check the time; I can't wander too deep into thoughts and be late to pick my son up from music. Once the phone is in my hand, the world comes with it. Some news headline on war in Ukraine. I was about to ponder, my dog sniffing and me too, in my way – the old antique shops, Sally Bun, the Fort St. Cycles (now e-bikes galore), the Mosaic apartment buildings, and the longing—LONGING—to be my twenty-something self again.

But I learn from my phone that in Ukraine an elderly couple committed suicide so their daughter and grandchildren could flee. They were too aged and infirm to go, and she had promised to stay with them. There's no easing pain. The nostalgia for my past self is hampered by the future that was coming and is now upon us all. Walking as we are through pandemic, climate change, wars still and again. This is not the open road and heart-longing I want.

I hold my hand out as if I can reach through time to feel the texture of history on the sides of these buildings. Scent of spring sends a shiver up my spine, the scent unearthed beneath the frigid air. I pause to look in the window of Idar Jewellers thinking I could get my husband and I new wedding rings. Neither of us wears ours—mine gives me a rash and his no longer fits—all these years on.

My sense of time is as layered as time and change are on these very city streets. As the dog and I walk toward Quadra Street where we will turn right to head back to the Royal Conservatory, housed in an old Catholic church, it begins to snow. Snow brings the future to the present I am living in because snow in April in Victoria is anomalous enough to be called climate change. And somehow Russia attacking Ukraine is not anomalous; it has always been there, a possibility like all the other horrors going on, always sitting under the surface of human history.

It's raining now. Slush on the sidewalk.

Last night I taught the last class in a series on Poetry of Witness. Back in February, the students and I discussed a class on this topic, so by the time we began the class, Russia had attacked Ukraine. Poetry can't cure these human dilemmas, but it is something—a release valve, one of the students said. Yes. Our voices raised to capture this time and to speak out against injustice. Horror, even.

Nostalgia is another kind of sensory experience. *Natsukashii* captures many feelings and sensations in the same way that *umami* is a combination of tastes. I have a strong nostalgic taste-sound-smell as I pass these old shops on Fort Street. Again, as I pick up the pace, I say *natsukashii* with a tinge of sorrow, longing and remembering and smelling and sensing and wanting all at once. Even as I walk the dog back to my son's music school, I can be nostalgic about walking the dog. How the mind picks up on familiar moments and relives them. A renovated brick wall comes to mind, how the arches from what was once a window are reused mid-wall recalling the former shape in the new shape. Like pentimento, too, in painting.

All my past lives are overlaid on the one I'm living now. As I walk, I long sometimes for another life, where April 12 means sun and bird song, sparrows, and nuthatches in trees. Where shops open their doors to let in the spring breeze. Where maybe I live in the Mosaic, top floor of course, put makeup on every morning, clip clop in cool shoes to the Gallery I run—there is a sweet space for rent right back there in Harris Green—and somehow this is exactly as cool as I imagine it, and somehow, I am walking this same beloved dog and in Ukraine there is no war. Putin was never born. Where would that leave my son, I wonder haltingly. But in this other life, humans have figured shit out. We did not put ourselves at the top; we weren't in charge of deciding who is sentient, who not.

A man passes the dog and me. His black army boots and way of walking push me even further back, to a high school crush and a boy with a mohawk. The man is smoking (the boy did too). A now rare scent. The dog circles me, walks closer.

We are nearly at the car in the parking lot at music; time is getting on. Somewhere nearby the sound of a metal bar as it clangs to cement, a hard-hatted man yells, a machine revs. In this part of town, near the downtown homeless shelter, we enter the living rooms and bedrooms of the vulnerable people who sleep on the street.

Here the dog can barely walk a step without his nose down to take the human world in. And my mind casts forward leaving the joyous longing of the past, for a moment, while a dystopian future fills my head, my son alone without me in it. I fear that future for all the reasons those with climate anxiety fear it, and I fear the future for my son, and wonder what supports will be in place for him and who will look after him when I'm gone. Who once cared for each person here, on the street, many of whom have mental health challenges and neurodiversities. A homeless woman stumbles across my path, seagulls cast shadows overhead, the dog flinches and I stroke his ears. We both shake ourselves out, slough off the fears.

My meanderings bring me back to Christmas in April. My explorations of the Fort Street and my time living in Japan, both linger and dissipate as I climb the stairs to get my son, whose *Little*

Drummer Boy sounds thrum through the walls. He has his own sense of *natsukashii* and his own fears for the future, and what might be the next plan.

These faint shadows, our collective sliding-doors, and the possible futures, and the present overwhelm with their strong scents, the grey wet light. It's hard to stay in the whimsy of nostalgia for the past without the longing for the possible futures. But somehow even that feeling, that longing to be longing holds the faint aroma of *natsukashii*.

YVONNE BLOMER's *The Last Show on Earth* (Caitlin Press, 2022) explores grief, love, and climate change. In 2022, she had a #2bookyear with *Book of Places: 10th Anniversary Edition* also being released. Yvonne has edited five anthologies, most recently: *Hologram: Homage to PK Page*. She is the past poet laureate of Victoria, BC, and was 2022-2023 Arc Poetry Magazine poet-in-residence. Yvonne teaches on Zoom and lives on the territories of the Lək'wəŋən (Lekwungen) people.