

April 15, 1992 (Vol. 7, no. 16)

Dear Colleague:

I have just read a short story called "Sleep" (New Yorker, March 30, 1992). It has to do with a thirty-year old woman, her husband, who is a dentist, and their young son. It reads well, and I am carried along by such facts as that the man has coffee and toast for breakfast, the boy has milk and cornflakes, the woman can't see the difference between Mozart and Haydn--her husband's favorite composers, they occasionally have sex after lunch, she swims in the public gym in the afternoons and reads "Anna Karenina" when she can't sleep. Ok. Until the shock at the end. Author--Haruki Murakami (translated from the Japanese by Jay Rubin). Nothing in this story, so full of commonplace observations and events, prepares me for the fact that it is by a Japanese author, written in Japanese, for Japanese readers. Nothing, except that the woman prepares miso soup and beef stirfry for dinner and drives a Civic. Here is a neat example of modern placelessness. And what about the identity of the woman? In what sense is she Japanese?

It may be that we now have to go to the ends of the earth for cultural shock. A further unpleasant thought: cultural shock is still possible but it is more often than not unpleasant. The following cultural practices are a shock to my bland middle-class sensibility.

Moslems at prayer--rank upon rank of male bottoms thrust aggressively into the face of Allah.

Rock concert on library mall, Madison. Rock combines the violence of raw sex with the unlimited power of technology--primal scream wedded to the roar of jet engines. I can just see shy Keats cowering in the stacks.

The traditional Chinese funeral is, alas, returning to Deng's China. To me, it captures everything distasteful about the old China--status consciousness, superstition, vainglory, power play, false emotion, contemptible worldliness (paper ingots for the dead) at the door of eternity. (See "Chinese way of death," in Natural History, December, 1988).

Well, I can see that I am cosmopolitan in my dislikes! To end on a positive note, the world will be a more harmonious place if each ethnic group feels honor-bound to say something bad about its own culture. I would exempt White liberals from this exercise, for they have already done more than their fair share of breast-beating.

Best wishes,

