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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

In Japan, Concerns Blossom

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Tokyo

IT'S autumn, and the people on the Chuo Line are all bundled up, just as they are in the spring. When I was a student, a friend from Hokkaido, in the north, told me she couldn't stand the winter cold in Tokyo. Although the temperature is lower in northern Japan, in Tokyo there is no moisture in the winter air; the dry winds bounce off the buildings, picking up speed until they seem to cut into your skin, making the cold intolerable.

When I was in elementary school in the mid-1960s, there were still paddy fields and vegetable patches on the outskirts of Tokyo. On frosty winter mornings spears of frozen grass crunched under my shoes as I walked to school, and it often snowed. Winters were harsher than they are now, but the face of spring was more clearly defined, boldly announcing its arrival. Summers were so hot and humid that even if I sat perfectly still the sweat rolled down my forehead, and when I walked through the rank grass on my way to the air-conditioned library, bugs used to jump up from the weeds around my feet.

I liked summer back then. But since the 1980s, the trees and grass have disappeared. The earth is now covered with asphalt and buildings, and the smell of parking lots mingled with oppressively hot gusts of air blown out from apartment air-conditioners hangs over the city; it seems this depressing heat will never go away. The ginkgo trees don't turn yellow until December. In place of the snow that used to fall in winter, the dry, cold blasts of wind come back, followed almost immediately by the unbearable heat of summer.

It's said that the suicide rate rises as the number of trees decreases. For some reason, only cherry trees seem to increase year by year. Many are of the type called somei-yoshino. A while ago I read that somei-yoshino is a cultivar that was artificially bred about a century ago and has since spread throughout the country.

If the conditions are the same, all the flowers on trees of this type bloom at once, and several days later, with no regrets for the brevity of their lives, the blossoms all fall together; thus embodying nationalistic ideology, they came to be regarded as a symbol of Japan even though they don't appear in ancient literary works or paintings. The flowers bloom at the same time because the trees are clones, bred from cuttings.

From March through May, the progress of the "cherry blossom front" is reported nightly on the weather report as it makes its way north through the archipelago. The TV meteorologist, who usually looks worried as she explains the lines that show the ominous movements of high and low pressure areas, becomes oddly cheerful when the topic switches to the "cherry blossom front," and she announces enthusiastically, "In just two weeks the cherries in the Kanto area will be in full bloom!"

Because of climate change, the weather always betrays our expectations, making us wonder if the earth isn't

in its last days. Yet the “cherry blossom front” always follows the same course from south to north, which gives us a sense of relief. There are scores of varieties of cherry trees; if types other than somei-yoshino were planted, the “cherry blossom front” wouldn’t be so predictable, and the weather report would cause more anxiety, I thought one day last spring as I left the train station and walked down the street lined with cherry trees. Beneath the trees people were sitting, eating box lunches and drinking sake or beer.

When I looked up, the somei-yoshino cherries were in full bloom, blanketing the sky; in the chill air, they looked like snow. Perhaps these white blossoms are the ghosts of snowflakes that no longer fall.

Yoko Tawada is the author of “The Naked Eye” and “Facing the Bridge.” This essay was translated by Margaret Mitsutani from the Japanese.

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