

My Year of Dirt and Water: Journal of a Zen Monk's Wife in Japan

Tracy Franz

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One of the first things Tracy Franz learns as a *yakimono deshi*, an apprentice of traditional Japanese pottery, is that “it is the nothingness in the middle that determines the true size of the vessel.” Her memoir, *My Year of Dirt and Water*, expands this tenet over the calendar year Franz and her spouse spend separated in Japan when he enters a Zen monastery to train as a priest.

Although Franz had lived in Japan roughly four years prior to her spouse, Koun, entering the monastery, a year apart in this familiar foreign country is an entirely different proposition. Without Koun, Franz’s attention is drawn to the space in her life and the ways that space is variously empty or altered by routine, obligation, relationship, practice, and memory.

Throughout the memoir, Franz matches restraint with reflexiveness, crafting a narrative equally filled with the luminous particular and the telling omission. Death and impermanence—Zen’s secret heart—are very present. As the year unfolds, absence becomes a type of expansiveness as Franz identifies and learns the texture and shape of her loneliness. While being out of context becomes a pleasure for her, it also draws her attention to the subtle differences between refusal, acceptance, and letting go.

As a traveler, Franz’s reconciliation between her homes in the US and Japan plays an important role in her self-awareness; she does not objectify or tokenize either place. She always homes her experience in the personal, and as such, “the familiar becomes foreign; the foreign becomes familiar.”

My Year of Dirt and Water incorporates Zen, pottery, living abroad, and Franz’s past and present with skillful delicacy, connecting these elements as if by analogy. Traversing territory defined by lack, *My Year of Dirt and Water* offers the singular pleasure of a story that “obscures but is not obscured.”

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (July/August 2018)

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