

Two Novels About Vulnerability

Reviewed by PAULETTE COULTER

The Vulnerables, by Sigrid Nunez. Riverhead Books, 2023.

Before the Coffee Gets Cold: A Novel, by Toshikazu Kawaguchi. Translated by Geoffrey Trousselot. Hanover Square Press, 2020.

The novels *The Vulnerables*, by Sigrid Nunez, and *Before the coffee gets cold: a novel*, by Toshikazu Kawaguchi, have a number of fundamental similarities, especially their depictions of human vulnerability, despite many interesting differences.

The settings are distinctly different. Nunez's novel is set in a New York City apartment during the lockdown for the COVID-19 epidemic. Kawaguchi's novel is set in a 2015 (though very old) Tokyo coffee shop.

Nunez's novel is narrated in the first person by a female writer, which makes for some confusion as the reader wonders sometimes who is narrating: Nunez or her narrator? The I's sometimes seem crossed. On the other hand, Kawaguchi's narrator is a third-person, non-interfering, reasonably objective voice.

For this reviewer, New York City may be as much a foreign country as Japan. The narrator is housesitting for a friend, has given up her own apartment for a physician visiting New York when the epidemic occurs, is taking care of a pet macaw, while the first friend and her husband have moved to their country home for the duration of the COVID lockdown. While some people in Japan may also have country homes, in Kawaguchi's story, their country home is simply their home.

Nunez has a number of other characters: several female friends all named after flowers and the young man who is also supposed to be housesitting and caring for the same city apartment and macaw. None of the woman's friends is named hydrangea, for

Nunez/narrator discourses on this flower and the fact that it represents aging and old age. She also describes hydrangeas' color variations but does not account for that variation. The latter is actually quite simple: the acidity and alkalinity of the soil affect the coloration. Acid soils often produce blue flowers while alkaline soils result in pink flowers.

While Nunez's narrator cares for the macaw reasonably well, the bird is much more attached to the young man who was supposed to be housesitting. The narrator calls this young man "Vetch." She watches the interaction of the young man and the bird and realizes some deeper bond exists between them. The young man believes the macaw's wings should not be clipped; neither should people's metaphorical ones.

Under the influence of marijuana (still illegal in New York at the time), conversations and a semi-friendship develop between the narrator and Vetch. They learn of each other's inhibitions, the young man's differences with his parents, his ability to see through the superficiality of their always-agreeable conversation, his departure from college, his time spent in a psychiatric facility. Eventually the young man takes the macaw to live with him in a large warehouse where the bird can essentially live free. Maybe the young man may too. The narrator is disappointed, but the apartment owner is aware of the situation, and the physician is soon to leave the narrator's place.

Fear of contamination and infection accompanies the narrator on her daily walks in the city, and one day a bicyclist deliberately spits at her during her walk. She is able to take such walks, however, and also has a secure place to live.

For many people, the COVID experience increased fears and made us aware of our vulnerabilities. During lockdown, most people were restricted to home, and communication was limited to phone, online, and other media. Nearly everyone felt vulnerable. Would we get COVID? Would we live? Would we die? Would we have money for food and rent if we could not work? Would we be okay? Humans are vulnerable under ordinary circumstances.

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The humans in *The Vulnerables*, though, seem to be people who own condos and country homes. They are people of status with college educations. The young man's father has not even turned off his credit cards.

In Kawaguchi's novel, the lives of the characters in *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* are entwined through their visits to a coffee shop in Tokyo. This is not part of a trendy coffee-shop chain, but a separate, standalone entity, an old building tucked between others. It is, however, the subject of an urban legend that people are able to time travel from this site.

To be able to do that, people must obey a set of absolute rules, beginning with occupying "*that chair*," a chair occupied by a woman in a white dress who sits there all day and all night, reading a book and drinking coffee. Anyone who wishes to sit there must wait for her daily trip to the rest room. The remainder of the rules are equally stringent: The time traveler must remain in *that chair* for the entire trip, may only meet others who have visited the coffee house, and must accomplish their mission in the time before their cup of very special coffee has gone cold.

Despite these and other rules, among the most severe of which may be that the trip cannot change the present, a number of vulnerable persons attempt this journey. They include a woman who has not yet told her departing love that she loves him, another whose husband has written her a letter but never given it to her, a third who wishes to speak to her younger sister after the latter has died, and a mother who knows that she will die giving birth to her child.

While this sounds preposterous (but didn't COVID?), each of the four people returns safe and sound. They do not change the present, but, having experienced deep emotion, change themselves.

The changing of the self, of encountering something of oneself formerly unknown, changes not everything, but one's understanding, which may be the greater share of human experience. We are all vulnerable, whether we live in New York or in Tokyo and whether we like it or not, in fact and in fiction. We can change the world,

especially our own world, despite COVID, despite personal tragedy, if we change ourselves.