

A black and white photograph of a forest path. The path is covered in fallen leaves and is flanked by large, gnarled tree roots that rise from the ground. The trees are dense, and the lighting is dappled, creating a sense of depth and texture. The overall mood is serene and natural.

**Nagoya Writes!**

**Connect!**

**May 2006**

# Nagoya Writes!

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*Sarah Mulvey and Brian Cullen*

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## **Nagoya Writes!**

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The Nagoya Writes! Group hosts Open Readings, Writing Workshops and other events. For more information on those events and for submissions information, please check our websites:

Print Edition: <http://home.att.ne.jp/wave/NagoyaWrites/>

Online Edition: <http://web.mac.com/eschaal/iWeb/Site/NagoyaWrites/index.html>

The Nagoya Writes! Group also has a Yahoo mailing list called “nagoyawrites” and you can subscribe to it by sending an email to [nagoyawrites-subscribe@yahoogroups.com](mailto:nagoyawrites-subscribe@yahoogroups.com).



# Message from the Editors

*Sarah Mulvey and Brian Cullen*

We are delighted to present the first online issue of Nagoya Writes! In fitting with our first foray into cyberspace, the theme of our inaugural issue is “Connect”. All of the contributors have incorporated the theme in their own unique way. While some writers made direct reference to the computer and the fact that we do indeed live in a connected world because of its existence, others alluded to the theme in more indirect ways that you will soon discover.

We believe that this new online publishing forum will complement the existing print version of Nagoya Writes! As the online version can be put together and sent out into cyberspace rather quickly, writers in the Nagoya area will hopefully be motivated to get their prose and poetry out of the bedroom and onto the Net. We are able to do this so quickly thanks to Ernie Schaal and his computer expertise. Without his assistance, “Connect” would still be in the planning stages.

While we did receive quite a mosaic of prose and poetry, there was one vital ingredient we felt was lacking. We live, work, and create our written masterpieces here in Japan. Naturally, our writing often makes reference to this fact. Our written musings sometimes delve into, and perhaps even dwell upon that which is different or negative. We would like to encourage more Japanese writers into the fold as we are, indeed, in Japan. Having a more audible Japanese voice would be fitting for a journal that has the city of Nagoya in its name. We hope to see more Japanese submissions in future issues. Thanks to all the writers who submitted their work. While all the submissions we received were interesting, well-written, and offered original ways of touching on the theme, we would like to acknowledge the feature poem, Poetry Connection (to Deborah), by Yuka Urushibata, and the feature story, Literary Criticism by Dave Stone.

Ms. Urushibata’s poem reminds us that, as writers, we can capture the essence of a moment, as if in amber, simply by putting pen to paper. An event, and its unique meaning, will reverberate days, weeks, even years after it has occurred because a writer took the time to note its significance. The connection made between two people, across language barriers and cultural differences, was captured and will be held indefinitely for all to enjoy because of the poet’s awareness of that particular moment in her life.

Mr. Stone’s submission stood out for its wit as well as for its content. As writers, there is a little bit of the critic in all of us. The need to critique by the reader sometimes overrides and even ignores the core of what the writer was intending to get across. Sometimes the critic needs to be silenced, if only for a moment, to let the sheer appreciation of the hard work and thought that went into a piece of prose or poetry stand out.

That’s all, just a brief moment.

Then of course, the critic can come back, full force, thesaurus and opinion in hand. As much as writers need and crave the appreciation, we do need the criticism too. For now, read on, and enjoy the numerous brief moments brought to you by some very talented writers.

We think you will be pleased with the final result.

# Featured Story

## Literary Criticism

by Dave Stone

So anyway, did I tell you about the time I met David Mitchell? At the time, I didn't know who he was, and he was pretty modest: no mention of Booker shortlisting or whatever. But he said he was making a living as a novelist, so I commented at the time that he must be doing pretty damn well.

I met him when I was visiting my folks. Turns out Mitchell lived in the same town, though he was just about to move to Ireland. Probably for tax reasons: loads of writers seem to end up there. Or it could be the beer. That'd be reason enough for me. I met him through one of those synchronistic twists that appear in his books. Yeah, that's right, the ones you think are so contrived. But what had happened was that we'd met this Japanese woman in the park. That was coincidence enough: a Japanese woman living out in the boonies. But she said there was another Japanese in town and they were meeting the next day. Would we like to come along? Sure, we said.

So we end up in a back garden; three Japanese women, a bunch of kids, and three husbands, each of whom fancies himself as a writer. Our host had spent ages researching a film script about Boudicca which he was planning to pitch. Then boom! Along comes a Boudicca film, and he's stuffed. A familiar feeling, for sure. So he's working in a pizza joint, though I later discover his parents run the town's electrical appliance shop. Two years later he's running an Internet café. How's that for connected, eh?

Mitchell tells us about his first two novels. I'm a little suspicious of what sounds highly gimmicky. To be brutally honest, what he describes sounds like the sort of thing I've always tried myself, and you've never spared me the criticism I so richly deserve. But I'm intrigued. He's taught in Japan; his wife has the same name as mine, and when he was a kid he read books in the series that I wrote for. (He never read any of mine, though, the bastard).

So it takes me quite a while to get hold of *Ghostwritten*. And the first thing that hits me is that the photo on the inner flap looks nothing like the guy I remember meeting.

It gets worse. My folks send me a clipping from the local paper about Mitchell, and there's another photo. It looks nothing like the one in the book, nor like the man I met. What's going on? Is he just one of those people who has so many subtle facets to his appearance that no photo can capture a likeness? I've known people like that. Used to think it was true of me, which was why I always preferred to be videoed than photographed. Or is there some darker meaning: Was the David Mitchell I met one of a syndicate of ghostwriters?

It would fit his books. They're as tricky and pretentious as I had feared. But they are also well written, in a variety of dazzlingly executed prose styles. The description of modern Japan is touch-and-feel true, and beautiful to boot. It's only when you dig beneath the skins of the Japanese characters that the truth fades. At a depth of a few millimeters they transform into Brits. Either an understandable failure to achieve a truly incisive understanding of the Japanese psyche, or a deliberate way of taking the 'exotic' and making it feel close and comprehensible to a primarily British audience.

Then, back in Japan, I learn that a film-maker friend has been in discussion with Mitchell's people with a view to filming one of his novels. Synchronicity, they call it. I suppose Mitchell's point is that it's just life.

But anyway, Mitchell's books, with their quirky correspondences, and structural devices that felt so close to things I'd wanted to try, get me itching to write once more. I have a couple of ideas, so I sit up one evening and decide to write a story. But as I sit there, running through my head all the possibilities, reflecting on imagery and metaphor, I find my imagination taking me further than I had expected to go. Rather than merely confined within the borders of the story itself, I journey beyond its completion, speculating on its reception.

I am talking with a literary confidante of mine. I trust her judgment, which is why I have asked her — in my head, at any rate — to read the story and comment on it. She is obviously troubled.

"What's it really about?" she asks.

"Literature," I reply. It isn't often I am able to answer a question with a single word. I am quite proud of myself.

"What kind of an answer is that? Is this some more of that self-reflexive postmodern claptrap? That's all old hat, you know. What's your *point* here?"

I start to say "But what about David Mitch..." but cleverly cut myself off and wind the conversation back a second or two to seem a little less gauche.

"Actually, it wasn't really supposed to be self-reflexive. I dislike that sort of thing as much as you do. No, this was about literature in a much more traditional sense. I was trying to establish the value of literature — what it's worth in a philosophical sense."

"And?"

"Well, you know that so much modern literary thinking seems to harp on the idea of the self."

"Of course — that's all we can really know."

"But that's exactly my point: the whole attraction of literature is that it gives the lie to that idea. It holds out the promise of transcending the straitjacket of the self."

"How's that? Since Art is the purest expression of self, I'd say that you can't escape."

"The thing about Art that no one seems to remember much nowadays is that it's nothing if it isn't communicated to someone other than its creator. I sometimes think that there are people out there who've solved the *Zen koan*, who think that like the sound of a tree falling in an empty forest, Art is at its most perfect at the very moment of its creation, *before* it is actually received by anyone else."

(Have you ever noticed how much more eloquent you are in those conversations rehearsed and recited in your imagination? The conversations which, like such Perfect Art, involve no audience, and thus, perhaps, no communication.)

"There's a lot to be said for that idea," my colleague obligingly observes. "It's certainly useful in distinguishing Art from mere entertainment. On the other hand, the fact that your story wasn't very entertaining doesn't automatically make it great Art."

"Thank *you!*"

“No, don’t take it badly. You still haven’t explained what the point was that you were making. There was all that stuff about the hermit setting up his shack in the town square. That just seemed like a wacky scene out of a Jodorowsky movie. It didn’t seem to be connected with the story.”

“It *was* the story! It was the hub around which everything else revolved. You see I don’t believe any of that stuff about Art being immaculate. At least, I don’t believe it of literature, which is the only branch of art I feel I can really participate in any way. I was trying to say that an artist insulated from his or her audience isn’t really an artist at all. Art only happens when it is seen, heard or read. Literature offers the promise that there is more to existence than the self. It offers us contact.”

“So you think that literature is all about the universal experiences? That by showing that some experiences are shared we can recognize that we share the human condition with others?”

“Well yes, but there’s more to it than that. I think that what makes great literature so special is not just that it manages to evoke the universal, but that it can universalize the particular.”

“What is that supposed to mean? That isn’t what you were driving at with the scene where everyone eats that roasted coyote?”

“I suppose so, though I wasn’t really happy with that. What I mean is that great literature presents something that is particular, that is not within our experience, and which is therefore not universal, but it *makes* it universal by virtue of it appearing in literature. It *becomes* a shared experience. Literature in itself — never mind accurately representing the human condition — creates its own shared experiences, which therefore *become* a part of the human condition!”

“Oh. So that was what you were trying to say. I can’t say I really agree with you. I think it’s just another case of a writer privileging the act of writing.”

“That’s exactly what it isn’t! I’m saying that writers need readers. That literature isn’t literature without a reader. Even that it’s the *reader* who makes something great literature.”

“Or bad literature.”

“That’s true. It means that there’s no such thing as great literature throughout history, because perceptions may change. But on the other hand there’s bound to be a momentum, as the shared experience of literature created by one generation of readers is passed on to the next, and *that’s* why we can still regard Shakespeare, for example, as great literature; because enough readers say it is.”

“I thought that was just inertia: the dead weight of tradition.”

“It is inertia. Inertia is a property which maintains movement. It only inhibits movement when a body isn’t actually moving.”

“You semi-educated scientific pedant, you!”

After this the discussion breaks down even more, and the whole scene fragments into a set of apparently disconnected images and much use of the fast forward and rewind buttons.



I sit there, pencil poised. And then I think to myself, why bother writing the story? Why go through the whole business of elaborating the setting, the plot, the characters — and their names! (never my strong point, especially in recent years when they all seem to be taken from Israeli politicians) — and then flinging them together into a seamless, symbol-laden semiotic tapestry of fiction? Why not just skip the whole tedious business, seek out my literary confidante, and just tell her the point I am trying to make straight out?

That is more like it. I throw down my pencil, stuff *Cloud Atlas* in my pocket and head off to Misfits.

The above is a work of fiction: even the bits that are true. Furthermore, Dave Stone would like to pre-empt all those readers who think he just ripped off Borges, by saying “I just ripped off Borges”. So there.

# Featured Poetry

## Poetry Connection (To Deborah)

*by Yuka Urushibata*

In New York,  
I dreamed of meeting a real person  
who would connect myself  
to the depth of poetry.  
You were a poet, college teacher, and scholar  
who taught people how to be a poet.  
“You need three things—  
Firstly talent. Secondly working very hard  
every day and thirdly—  
(This was what I missed hearing,  
so I asked you again after the class.)  
—sense of business.”  
You were the first person who said to me  
at the private conference,  
“You should start publishing your poems.”  
I repeated, “But I am a foreigner.”  
Then, your eyes, your sea,  
suddenly tilted forward toward me  
and then spilt your words—  
“It doesn’t matter”  
That sounded unexpectedly bulky—  
I have never seen such big serene  
light-blue sea in human eyes,  
storing-silenced, otherwise,  
marginalized voices.  
I was sorry since I was testing  
if your sea was really turbulent enough  
as a matter for a foreigner.

Back in Japan,  
I confirmed the weight of your words  
—“Keep in touch”  
as if a human could feel the volume  
of the sea itself—  
*YOUR SEA* of poetry connection  
is spreading and trying to connect further—  
You still put me in the mailing list—  
From Butterfly Princess  
Readings Spring 2006 kicks off  
February 27<sup>th</sup>!!  
Every week your words have reached  
me in Japan,

me squarely a Japanese,  
me who speaks only Japanese  
24 hours a day now,  
me who hides real emotions  
and feigns a sociable Japanese woman,  
me who decays in *this* second language—  
*(How schizophrenic to live  
in the English speaking memory  
in such a monolingual country!)*  
Here is no more POETS HOUSE,  
no more Emily Dickinson,  
Jean Valentine, John Ashbery,  
no more poetry lovers—

*However—*

*Can you see your poetry connection  
boundlessly splash upon me in Japan  
and make me write poetry—  
like this?*

*(2006/03/03)*

# Stories

## The Old Cracked Hill

*by J. Agguner*

“You have no soul,” muttered Hot Daryl as he threw a boot at the dusty old television. He was known only to himself (and now also to us), as “Hot Daryl”. He lived alone at the top of what was called “The Old Cracked Hill” by the people in the town below. The television fell off the workbench it had been sitting on, the weight of the thrown boot too much for it to handle. Oily, mean, drunk, and profound, Hot Daryl knew the world only through that small, cheap TV, which was older than his old high-school jacket, which hung in the closet. It got worn only on occasions that were special to no one else but Hot Daryl, all alone, except for a dog (which doesn’t count), at the top of The Old Cracked Hill.

The television, having rolled with a crash across the floor, its case cracked and littering powdery bits of glass resembling snow across the floor, was now resting partially in a large dog dish filled with bits of old ham and the leftover bread of Hot Daryl’s dinner.

The dog, now sniffing at Daryl’s television and licking mayonnaise off the remnants of screen, was named Peaches by a woman who once fancied Hot Daryl for an entire summer before suddenly bolting from a hamburger shop (and from Hot Daryl) without a word. She hitchhiked all the way to the Atlantic, found her way across its expanse, and started a new life overseas with a famous and highly cultured German painter and his dog, neither of whose names I can recall. The woman’s nickname, if it matters, was Skinny Kelly, a moniker she managed, over time, to outgrow. What did matter to Skinny Kelly was that her new life was far away from Hot Daryl. That summer that they had spent together had Skinny Kelly referring to Daryl as “Crazy Daryl” and sometimes “Old Dumb Daryl” for various well-earned reasons. What also mattered to Skinny Kelly was that the famous and highly cultured German painter’s dog was a purebred. It was a German shepherd, of course. If Kelly only knew, even she, who fled Crazy Daryl across an ocean, would be surprised at the horrible plight of Peaches while under his care.

Peaches is a mixed breed that resembles a Collie and was given to the then skinny Kelly by a man who happened to be giving away new puppies in front of the supermarket. He dispensed of his four-legged wares from out of the back of a rusted green van. She’d said ‘no thank you’ at first, but Peaches was such a darling little puppy and the man, who was very persistent, liked Skinny Kelly and was happy to keep their conversation going. Later, Skinny Kelly and the dog man would end up sleeping together two and a half times, according to some widely accepted accounting methods. Luckily, Hot, Crazy, and Old Dumb Daryl never found out.

The corner of the workbench where the old TV used to be looks naked now. It’s the only part of the house that isn’t covered in junk. The wallpaper in this room really doesn’t look too bad, which is what Daryl is thinking as he drifts in and out of consciousness. Then, staring at the corner of the workbench where the TV used to be, his imagination begins to fill in the void left by the now broken TV.

The old TV was to be the TV that he and Kelly would have to watch until they ‘saved up’ for something bigger. to look at. They had been at that young age when love came first and anything could be ‘saved up’ for. Soon enough Kelly realized that if love for them was anything like saving up, then love be damned, and that bastard at the bank could go to hell, too.

The exact moment at which a person drifts off to heaven is a hard one to determine, is what Daryl is thinking. He looks over at the clock and tries to remember whether it’s a couple of minutes fast or a couple of minutes slow, and in that position, falls asleep, in his chair, in his house, at the top of The Old Cracked Hill...

There’s a program on TV, one with a lot of comedians and people who look like doctors. That famous robot that can climb steps is standing next to two smiling girls in bikinis, and a Japanese man in a suit cuts a large ribbon with a pair of huge golden scissors. He then shakes hands with two other men who look at each other and smile largely. One is wearing a blue suit, the other is a doctor, or at least dressed like one, and he is holding a cute, white rabbit by the ears. With large frozen smiles, the three of them pose stiffly for a few minutes while the rabbit kicks and photographers take pictures of them in front of even more rabbits. One of the comedians makes a joke while holding tightly onto his squirming rabbit.

“We’ve built a robot that can pet rabbits!” the man announces, and the two smiling girls in bikinis whoop and cheer and clap their hands stiffly as the new robot rises dramatically from a hole in the floor. It isn’t holding a rabbit. The comedians act surprised while still holding firmly onto their own rabbits. The robot is blue and has a torpedo-shaped head. Everyone is clapping and cheering, and the comedians make more jokes and hold more rabbits and dramatic music plays in the background.

Daryl is mesmerized by this sexy new vision of the future. His eyes follow the young bikini girls and comedians as they don protective goggles and huddle with a small group of engineers behind a sheet of protective glass. The press is advised to stand back, but of course they remain in their assigned seats. Instead, of protective glass, they hide behind clear, plastic sheets.

The camera pans to the faces of the comedians who look amazed because the robot is walking on its own toward the rabbits. The music builds as the thing advances on the cage, and the fluffy creatures look through the bars with wide pink eyes.

Daryl, who thinks he’s dying, is ecstatic. Peaches barks like mad because Daryl is convulsing in his chair, but Daryl is too wrapped up in his post-death celebration of sexy bikinis, suspense, and technology to pay attention. The robot is nearly at the cage, and the cuter bikini girl, the one Hot Daryl has decided to fancy, is on camera now introducing the ‘Pleasure Meter’ digital display that will measure the rabbit’s level of pleasure or discomfort as it is being petted, according to the sensors in the robot’s fingers.

Suddenly, still meters away from the cage, the robot’s thick arm shoots forward like a hydraulic piston with a loud hiss and metallic clunk, and the robot’s big blue fist shears the top off of the wooden pen, scattering a mess of wood and chicken wire over the clean, white stage. The rabbits, too frightened to attempt an escape, cower at the bottom of the cage under the shadow of the robot’s groping hand.

Some moments pass while the rabbits move deftly around the thick, clumsy fingers. One of the engineers informs the audience and the press that the fingers on the hand, padded

with fine, durable synthetic materials, are far superior to human fingers for the purpose of petting rabbits, especially cute white ones. One of the smiling bikini girls, the one Hot Daryl wouldn't mind getting a bone together with, holds a toy robot key chain, made entirely of the same synthetic materials, and a comedian makes a really funny joke and kicks another comedian, who, in turn, grabs his bottom. The audience roars.

Finally, the robot grabs hold of one of the rabbits, a black one with gray spots. The smiling bikini girls complain that it isn't cute enough. The comedian makes a joke, and the Pleasure Meter registers a reading of severe discomfort before the rabbit wriggles free and drops back into the cage.

Suddenly, the screen cuts to old clipped-together footage of robots climbing up stairs, robotic legs helping people walk, robot dogs, and robot soldiers, ninja robot movie actors and sexy sex robots for having sex with, and Daryl begins to roll over in his chair and moan while Peaches barks furiously. Daryl shakes spasmodically as sexy sex robots serve a drink to a man in a lounge chair who looks a lot like Daryl, who decides that he'd better start saving up for some robots. The robot with the long black hair and a maid's uniform leads the drunken man who looks more and more like Daryl into the bedroom, which is cluttered with junk, just like Daryl's.

The digital 'Pleasure Meter' display is jumping now, registering sheer unmitigated delight as the bunny rabbits chew on the fine synthetic materials of the robot's still-groping fingers before an engineer shoos them away. A comedian makes a joke and begins punching his own head for the pleasure of the audience while another robot is shown climbing stairs in Hot Daryl's old high school jacket.

The bikini girl that Hot Daryl has said that he wouldn't kick out of bed joins the sexy sex robots in Daryl's bedroom for some sexy hot sex, and whew... is it ever sexy and hot! Unfortunately, it ends in tears as all of the sex robots and bikini girls fade away until only Skinny Kelly is left.

The 'Pleasure Meter' suddenly crashes to a new low as Daryl gazes into her big green eyes.

"Did you ever do it with that guy with the dogs?" he asks, but before she can answer, Daryl wakes up to the smell of Peaches' hot breath as the dog licks his face.

"Go on, git!" hisses Hot Daryl, as he shoos the dog away. He looks at the empty space on his workbench and decides to start saving up for a new TV. The first rays of the morning sun filter in through the yellow windows and fall on Hot Daryl, as, once again, he falls fast asleep in his chair, in his house, at the top of The Old Cracked Hill.

# Toad Stranglers and Floating Eyeballs

(excerpt from novel in progress)

by Tom Bauerle

“Think what it would mean,” Justin said as he studied the dark waters beneath the Eyeball Bridge, “to actually see a ghost, to catch him white-handed, with his winding sheet down around his knees, so to speak.”

All three were in their early twenties. They stood on one side of a metal two-lane bridge, at the junction of a gravel roadway and a whispering country stream. Cornfields and meadows stretched away on either side of them. The hot summer night smelled of pasture and running river. Frogs jumped and belched below. An occasional firefly sparked in and out of the river reeds. The three friends paused whenever it was convenient to take long swallows from the cold cans of beer they held in their hands.

Girlie Joy began to remember similar nights from years past. Her face went slack for a moment while dark things long buried in her subconscious welled up to the surface. She torpedoed the memories before they had a chance to surface, tossed down a depth charge of beer to finish them off for good. She searched frantically among the flotsam for something safe to grab hold of. She treaded water desperately for a moment before an inflatable thought bumped up against her.

How many small little happenings, she wondered, how many coincidences, synchronicities coming together precisely so, at exactly the right time, how many had it taken to bring the three of them together again? After years apart, what blind chance, karmic fate, diabolical conspiracy, heavenly dispensation of serendipity had conducted them from faraway cities and a war on the other side of the world, to right here, right now, to be standing together this night on August 9th 1971, in the middle of a bridge at a haunted crossroads; three people who had never imagined they would ever meet again?

Girlie Joy shook herself, cleared her head by tapping the side of it with the heel of her hand. With a great effort she refocused her eyes on Justin’s face. “What would it mean? To see one? Have either of you ever seen a ghost?”

“Yes,” said Justin.

“No,” said Nate. “Sometimes I feel like one, though. Boo.”

“At least, I think so,” Justin continued. “Maybe lots of times. And this place was one of the weirdest ones. I was sure I saw the ghost eyes oogling up at me from beneath the water. The story says that around nineteen-fifty or so, a young guy was riding his motorcycle down this very road on a rainy night.”

Nate sniffed cautiously at the air. “Storm’s coming,” he said. “Going to be a real toad strangler before dawn.”

“Road was muddy and slick with rain,” Justin went on. “But the rider didn’t seem to notice. He had the big bike wide open, full throttle.” He pointed down the moonlit road. “Lost control as he hit that turn, just about there, just before this bridge.”

Girlie Joy stood squarely in the middle of the bridge, refusing to look into the water for what she knew was coming next. “What’s a ‘toe straggler’?” she asked, turning toward Nate in an attempt to change the subject.

The night was clear and full of stars. A gentle breeze broke up the scorched air that had been sun cooked all afternoon and moved it down the road. The moon was a fat crescent that tilted its horns to the east like a nervous bull about to charge the horizon. They were surrounded by fields full of corn that rustled with hidden movement.

The three had been friends in high school. They shone in the moonlight in stark contrast to one another. Justin Everson was of average height; his body squat and powerful from his high school and college wrestling days. His hair was dark, his skin pale. His blue eyes seemed out of place; they glinted too brightly to fit the rest of his face. Sometimes Girlie Joy looked into those eyes and felt herself falling through trapdoors. Justin had recently dropped out of college to come back home and take a good-paying job at the local truck factory. Now, however, he found he bitterly despised the mindless drudgery of assembly line work. He wanted to make his life better, but he had no idea how to make it happen.

Nathan Ruskin was a head taller than the other two. His long angular face jutted out beneath a head of sandy colored hair, the same color as the earth he worked on his father's farm. When Nate was eighteen, he had been brought down by a sniper's bullet in Viet Nam. He hadn't returned from Asia until just a few months ago and refused to talk about what he'd been doing there or where exactly he'd done it. Nate was a godsend to the local recreational past times of gossip and conjecture, as almost every one of the local town folk had a different theory on what he'd been up to over there, some of them quite brilliant in their scope of detail and conviction of argument. Most people agreed Nate had come back more than a mite peculiar in character, but couldn't reach any consensus as to which direction or what degree. Now he spent most of his time helping his father keep the family farm running, only slightly hampered by the limp in his left leg.

Girlie Joy McJames had a name that, among other things, she never forgave her father for. Her face was sunburned and freckled. She had hair the brazen red color that marks so many of the Germans and Celts who settled the northern Indiana prairie lands. The rumor was that her IQ was somewhere in the upper stratosphere, but she denied it whenever the topic came up in conversation. After a particularly nasty divorce, she now worked in a restaurant downtown and spent her evenings taking classes at the local college on any subject that looked interesting. She never had any specific degree in mind; she just liked learning and knowing things.

"That's toad strangler, not toe straggler," Nate replied. "A toad strangler is when it rains like doomsday. Not even the toads and frogs can out hop the rising waters. They all croak in the great deluge. It's a hundred times worse than a snake suffocator."

"Some say he drove off the bridge on purpose," Justin broke in, taking Girlie Joy's hand in his and attempting to lead her to the iron railing at the side of the bridge. "They say he killed himself over the unrequited love of a beautiful woman."

"I'm fine right where I am," said Girlie Joy. She turned her gaze away from where Justin was pointing at the riverbank below, but it didn't help. The other side of the bridge was just as dark. She threw her head back and studied the stars instead.

"A toad strangler," Nate continued, "is when you empty out all the milk bottles, thermos jugs and cooking pots in the house and fill them full of dirt so that years after the flood hits you can show your grandchildren what dry used to look like."



“Some say it was an accident,” said Justin. “But in any case, he went over this railing at full speed and crashed into the water below. And when they pulled him out of the creek, he was stone cold dead, even though there wasn’t a mark on his body.”

Nate pointed below the bridge where something small had just jumped and splashed. “A toad strangler is when the fish spend their life savings on umbrellas and water wings and take off hitch-hiking for the desert.”

Girlie Joy still refused to look below the bridge, keeping her eyes fixed firmly overhead. Justin stepped in front of her, standing on his tip-toes, trying to get within her field of vision. “Except for one small thing,” he said, drawing his face close to hers, his voice taking on the sepulchral tones of a horror movie narrator. “When they looked at his face, they saw that both his eyeballs were missing from their sockets. They searched the stream for days, but they never found his eyes. Maybe the fish ate them. Maybe they just popped right out when he hit. But, they say that if you come here on the right night, especially when there’s a bright moon like this one, and you look into the water where he fell, his eyes will float to the surface and stare back at you.”

“And,” Nate concluded, “there’s going to be one hell of a toad strangler before morning, mark my words.”

“Hey, you spilled my beer!” Girlie Joy took a step backwards away from Justin and found her back pressed against the railing on the side of the bridge. “I’m not looking down there. You just want me to do the scared little girl thing so you can hug and comfort me and cop a feel.”

“There they are!” said Justin, stepping forward and tugging Girlie Joy’s shoulder, turning her slowly toward the water. “I can see them! Over there! Shining in the moonlight and looking straight up at us. Look! Look! . . . and how the hell do you know it’s going to rain, anyway, Nate? There’s not a cloud in the sky.”

“It’s probably just some white stones in the river bed,” said Girlie Joy slamming her eyes closed before the dark water below came into view.

“I’m a farmer,” Nate answered with a smug expression on his face.

“And what the hell is that supposed to mean?” asked Justin.

“It means,” Girlie Joy said from the midst of her self-imposed darkness, “that he works with the elements every day of his life, so he’s probably more aware of natural phenomena than you or I. The aborigines in Australia, for instance, when they are traveling through the desert, can smell water ten miles away . . .”

“Wait,” said Justin pointing into the darkness below. “He’s really there. He’s there, for real.”

“Get outta here. There’s nothing there,” said Girlie Joy, taking a peek, much against her better judgment. “Wait,” she said. “What is that? Are those rocks? They really do look like eyes. What the hell is that?”

“All right, then,” said Nate. He downed the last dregs of his beer, reached through an open window of the car, to withdraw a flashlight from the back seat, and walked to the far end of the bridge. “If there’s ghostly eyeballs in the creek,” he said, stepping down the embankment, “then I’m going to go down there and give them the evil eye right back. I’m going to pluck them up, hold them in my hand and engage them in the greatest staring contest of all time. First one to blinks loses, and I don’t aim to lose.”

“I mean it,” said Justin. “He’s there. Not just the eyes. The whole biker. Who is that down there?”

They could hear the uneven splashing as Nate hobbled in the water below. “Come for me, ye haunted orbs!” he yelled. “I’ll make eyeball soup outa ya.” The splashing sounds stopped abruptly. There was a moment of quiet as each of them inhaled sharply.

“Jesus,” shouted Nate. “There’s a guy down here!” He directed the flash light beam into the darkness ahead of him. The other two watched from above as the tiny circle of light flicked across ripples of running water, the rocky sides of the creek bed, and came to rest on the half submerged face of a young man.

The face surrounding the eyeballs was the cold empty white of cracked eggshells. The eyes were wide open and staring at the sky above. “Jesus,” Nathan said. “He’s all busted up. I think he’s dead. We better call the police or something!”

“What is he doing there?” asked Justin. “I mean that story was from back in the 50’s. Who the hell is that guy?”

“He’s a different guy, ya moron,” said Nate. “I mean he’s got to be. There can’t be any connection between the two, can there? But either way, he’s just as dead.”

Everything faded from Girlie Joy’s vision except the whiteness of those eyes, the still pale skin, the glowing small white circle of the flashlight beam. She exhaled, shuddered, felt things icing up deep inside. She’d never before seen eyes that didn’t blink. That was the most unnerving of all. The eyes in the broken face remained focused on something high overhead and far away. “What’s he looking at?” Girlie Joy asked. Without meaning to she followed his gaze upward. “Look,” she said, after her eyes refocused to the darkness, “the stars are going out.”

Overhead the stars were being devoured by a cover of clouds creeping in from the west. The three watched as constellations were unmade: scuttling scorpions, tragic queens and love sick maidens, brave hunters, slithering dragons, bears and dippers (big and small), swallowed whole by the approaching storm. A wind sprang up, caressed them gently, then forcefully. Then it grew violent like a betrayed lover, shoved and abused them and moaned urgently in their ears before it screamed off to flatten the tops of the corn in the fields beyond.

The frogs stopped singing. The three only had time to race to Justin’s car, Nate hobbling painfully behind, before the deluge slapped against their windshield and blew them toward the city and the Berry Street Police Station.

## Disconnected at a Party

*by Linda Donan*

The year was 1974, not the best of years to be an American in Afghanistan. Just one year before, the U.S. Consul General had been assassinated, and now all the restaurants in Kabul that sold edible pizza, (there was one) or ice cream in somewhat sanitary bowls, (there were two) had marines as customers for those occasions when they ventured forth from the sanctuary of the American compound. It was in the compound where the only good potable water in the whole country was available for drinking, for swimming in, and for running through the buildings' many air conditioning systems. I, being a product of the peacenik sixties and a newly arrived Peace Corps volunteer, had nothing to do with marines. However, I did drink the clean water.

The recent coup had Uncle Daoud converting the Shah's "deported" nephew's lapis lazuli toilet seats into cash for such republican efforts as education and highways. The highways were to be built not by one superpower (who would then pull Massoud's strings) but rather by three countries; Russia, Germany and the USA. In this way, that wily man Massoud would be able to pull everybody else's strings. The only Russians I met were fat ladies in the bazaar with babushka headscarves who never ceased to amaze me with their haggling skills. I, being part of the education effort, a high school teacher with a \$75 US a month salary, felt too rich in that low-income country to do much haggling. Well, that, and the fact that I also felt sorry for the dust covered hungry peddlers. Or was it really just my bashfulness and poor grasp of the language that held me back?

The Germans seemed to be mostly in the west, the Russians in the north, and the Americans in the south. I hadn't met many Germans. Once, in front of a famous western hotel, I was stopped dead at the sight of a strikingly lovely lady with long silky legs (something no one saw in this Muslim country where even foreign women wore long dress-like blouses over longer trousers). The mini-skirted lady wearing break-your-ankle high heels was tottering elegantly along, pulled by two razor thin Afghan hounds, one on each hand. She spoke to the dogs in German.

I murmured to my friend; "She must be a really rich German tourist!"

My friend, a long-term A.I.D. official whispered; "No, not a tourist. She's the 'play-thing' of 'X' (a wealthy German diplomat). Oh, and by the way, she's not a woman."

I, a naïve Missouri farm girl of twenty-four, didn't quite know what he meant, but I turned my head and watched 'her' saunter away, as did every head of every gender on the street.

The Americans were not all as green as me. I was on my way to a party with many of them who studied Farsi and Pashtu in the Peace Corps training center. I was in tow of the A.I.D. guy whose name I hardly knew but whose aid I certainly did need in order to find my way to the party. It was a complex route and I'm a simple person.

On the main street I saw the American Peace Corps doctor drunkenly show his disdain for the whining beggars by tossing a handful of coins into a shit and urine filled sewer. The beggars leapt after the coins without hesitation, so great their need. Crossing through the crowded "spice" bazaar, a salesman approached us, his 'wares' encased in hypodermic syringes brandished in each hand.

“Heroin, opium?” he repeated again and again. I cowered and was led by the hand down a side street by my aid, whose name I was still trying to recall.

In the shadows I saw an Afghan woman in full chador veil, a rare sight on a public street. She was clearly in the later stages of pregnancy, and before my amazed young eyes, the man she was arguing with raised his foot and gave her large belly a violent kick. I stopped in shock and horror at her scream, but my aid dragged me in the other direction, urging; “Don’t look back. Hurry.” I hurried.

We soon made our way into the wealthier area of new Kabul. All around us were tall, stone walls, and on every street corner a young soldier brandished a machine gun. I was beginning to feel serious and disabling culture shock. The aid was pulling me doggedly. A little boy picked up a stone from the street and hurled it clumsily in my direction.

“Why?” I gasped.

“You are a woman not under chador, not behind walls,” was the nameless aid’s reply as we turned once more and pounded on a gate of the surrounding wall of a fine old home. No servant guard came, so we tried the latch, and in true American style the door opened at our push. It was evening and quite dark inside the walls, so I watched my feet on the path. That is when I saw him. The man lying on the ground in front of me was in a fetal heap and moaning softly, an almost animal growl.

“Look, someone’s hurt here.” I called to my aid, and he came back to where I was bending down over the elderly man.

“An American?” I asked.

The aid replied, moving past the human form on the ground; “No, an Afghan I think. Leave him. It’s none of our business. The party is in there.”

He tugged me towards the lit open door.

“But we can’t just leave him here in the dark garden. He’s sick.” I hesitated on the path.

“He’s poor, hungry, come to beg. Just leave him alone and he’ll go away. Come on.” I hesitated some more and he tugged me by the arm.

My few moments over the prone man, whose form had been barely visible in the dim evening light, didn’t offer me enough of a connection to refuse the tug of the aid, but as soon as we were greeted at the party, I reported to the host;

“There’s an old Afghan man inside your garden. He seems to be ill. He seems really sick. We should call an ambulance or something...”

The host laughed; “Oh, the new Peace Corps volunteer, still full of the do-gooder enthusiasm. Come on, forget the poor tonight, it’s a party.”

I had to insist; “No, really. I think he’s seriously ill.”

The host wasn’t going to let me dampen his party; “Hey, don’t worry, be happy. Get some of that pipe going around and relax.”

He settled me into a heap of floor pillows and motioned for the hookah to be passed in my direction as he left. It took its circuitous time around the perimeter of the large floor table where so many volunteers drowsily took a hit as it passed.

A volunteer from my own Farsi class sunk to the pillows beside me with a glassy eyed greeting and I began to explain to him about the old man in the garden. He leaned back against the wall and fell asleep with his mouth open before I had finished my concerned

comments. The guy beyond him nodded a greeting over his body and explained my colleague's unconsciousness with the two words;

“Hash oil.”

The stranger was cute and I leaned towards him introducing myself and was starting to tell him about the old man in the garden when the pipe reached him. He became so interested in loading it with a chunk of hash that I knew the conversation would soon be one-way. I gave up any hope of flirtation much less any offer of help with my problem in the garden.

This was so typical of parties here. No dancing, no games, no conversation, no flirtation; just smoking until you fell unconscious, sleeping it off then rising to smoke again. Why were all the old volunteers so different from me? Why was I the only one bored at hash parties? My frustration increased and as the pipe made its way towards me. I had two conflicting thoughts: If I smoke this, I will do nothing at all about the man moaning in the garden. If I don't smoke it, I will be alienating myself from everyone. I couldn't lose my connection with these people, they were my only community. I needed their help. The old man also needed their help. If no one helped me, would I have enough Farsi ability and enough courage to get help for the man by myself?

Face it, I thought, if you went for help, you'd never be able to find your way back alone. You weren't paying sufficient attention when you were literally pulled here by the guy you just met in the A.I.D. library. Until someone kindly leads you back to the dorm you are here or lost in a city where men kick women and kids throw stones. I took the pipe. In the morning as we headed out, the old man was still there. He was dead.

# The Restaurant

by Reed Gage

“What a view it must be today!” exclaims Patrick with his usual youth-like exuberance. He was obviously high from being in the company of Michiko and Kayako, his cute and devoted young Yoga students, who had followed him after class to the local Hisayadori Starbucks to try out their broken English and try on some American (actually Canadian) culture.

“Yeah!” We three exclaimed. I was with them as I had reserved this Sunday afternoon to meet Patrick at Starbucks to catch up on things. Patrick has been a friend of mine since we met at the Sahaj Marg Meditation Class on Sunday mornings several years ago.

But, back to the restaurant story. “We need a place where we can scope out this view,” I echo. “It’s so crisp and windy today, we can probably see all the way to Mie if we can get high enough in the air.”

“I know a place,” pipes in Michiko. “Twin Towers has a place on the 18th floor, a nice place.”

“Okay, let’s go.” we chorus.

It’s a brisk and windy jaunt from Hisayadori, the three of us on foot with Kayako accompanying us on her bicycle. We ditch the bike in front of a corner bank, cross the street, and jump on the Twin Towers’ elevator to floor eighteen.

Two restaurants are in view. One is a coffee shop — jam-packed. People are lined up outside like they do in Japan when a place has some merit or at least when people are made to believe it has some merit. The alternative for us is the fancy place next door. NOBODY in there. A bored looking lady in a black suit and wearing glasses is guarding the entrance from behind a tall and foreboding podium. And just behind her, some seven or eight well-dressed *arubaito-san* are trying to look professional but with obviously not enough to do.

“*Sho sho o machi kudasai*,” comes that familiar mantra heard in Japan, which translates as; “We have to make you wait. A restaurant is not a restaurant if you don’t have to wait. And a waiter is not a waiter unless you are made to wait for him or her”.

So, we wait.

The Japanese girls nod in polite approval as Patrick and I deal with our cultural differences thinking; “This is bullshit, They have twenty-five empty tables in there with eight idle waiters standing by. What are we waiting for?”

We struggle with suppressing the next succession of thoughts, most of which begin with; “Fuck this”.

Kayako starts to twitch as if feeling some kind of guilt or something. Is this a Japanese genetic thing? Or is it a behavior learned in the Edo period when the *Samurai* beat the farmers?

“What is it Kayako?” I ask.

“Well we just want to drink coffee and watch the view. But it is such a nice restaurant — maybe we have to order something.” She’s still twitching a bit, clearly uncomfortable with the idea of ignoring protocol.

“Shut up!” Patrick and I are screaming to her telepathically but she doesn’t hear.

“Wait!” I call out to her as she starts toward the maitre’d, or whatever you call those well-dressed people. Perhaps a better title would be restaurant police. But Kayako is off and soon returns with a flushed look on her face.

She reports back to us. “We can’t just drink tea or coffee here, we have to order something.”

“Fine, we’ll order something then,” I respond.

“But it maybe expensive.” Kayako has stopped twitching and now merely looks pained.

“*So ne*,” agrees Michiko.

And Patrick and I realize we are up against not only a feminine conspiracy but a major cultural wall as well. Why do *gaijin* guys like Asian women anyway? Can’t we find enough sexual dimorphism amongst our own race? Apparently not.

“*FINE — we will order something*”. Both Patrick and I are losing it and the girls are looking fretful.

“We’ll pay for it,” we add. We want to see the view before the sun sets on the whole thing.

It is only after Kayako approaches the lady at the podium and politely apologizes for us being customers at such a fine and fancy establishment that we are finally ushered inside. Jesus Christ!

What we ordered, how we decided on it, and our interactions with the waiters is a whole other story in itself.

We did see the view, and it was beautiful. The sun was setting on the lazy Nagoya River while dark bluish-purple shades played over the Mie Mountains. Looking out over the little gray rooftops on the houses of old Nagoya on the west side made us we feel as if we were Kings and Queens floating high above everything. We could have been on a small airplane or floating in a hot air balloon. Where we were was in the comfort of this plush restaurant, a truly relaxing experience. Patrick and I sat back deeply in the soft luxury of the leather chairs. We looked knowingly to each other, another telepathic thought being transmitted; “...*sometimes it is good to just go with the flow.*”

# The North-Side Story

*by Roy Hernandez*

It was a long time ago that I was a boy growing up in the North-Side barrio of Houston, Texas. I was actually born in Victoria, Texas, a small town of ranches and crops of corn and sugarcane. Oh hell, there isn't much to say about Victoria except that in my time it was a small place and the best of the most that I can remember are the fields of corn and sugarcane growing. Well, there might have been other things growing just as well, but I guess I just paid attention to the big tall things; the corn and the sugarcane. Big and tall, which reminds me of the Woolworths store, standing in the middle of our small downtown.

Of course you couldn't miss the railroad track that ran smack center through the downtown area, coming through for pick-ups of cotton processed at the cotton gin. Yeah, they had those fields for the Negroes to pick cotton by the gunny sac just to earn a poor man's wage. They even had their children helping out just to make a living for the day. The wages, of course, came from the white man.

Well, it isn't what I would call even and fair but those were the times and for sure the times would one day change, and change they did. I reflect sometimes on my days growing up in Victoria, Texas, those days before change. Victoria was a kind of sad, lonely, desolate place inhabited by Whites, Mexicans and Negroes, all living their own version of harmony. I never really saw any type of abuses during my childhood years. There was this harmony, a kind of connection. At such a young age, I couldn't see that what really connected these races of humans together was their dependency on each others' needs. That is where I think it all connected, in the dependency of humans upon one another, regardless of colour, although this was much in contrast to the rules of segregation that existed at the time. Those rules existed in spite of the laws of the "Great Democracy" and its Constitution in which the White man said something along the lines of all men being created equal in a land created for the people by the people, one nation under God. But, segregation, well, that's the way it was back then.

There was a Native American Shaman who lived in the wooded area nearby. Grandmother was dying of colon cancer and we went to visit him at least once a week. He was a thrilling Apache Indian that spoke of the future events to come. He told us of huge towers with billowing clouds of smoke and debris falling in New York City in the new millennium. He said this would be the war of the extraterrestrials with the American government. In his vision, the extraterrestrials would fully integrate into society. We would all be connected.

One evening, we had stayed at the Shaman's place until very late into the night. Grandmother wanted to go home but the Shaman said the moon was in just the right position, and that the stars were all in the right places, in perfect synchronicity with the moon. He told us that we should all go with him to see the miracle that was going to take place that night. We climbed into the high ranges until we reached a large crater in the ground. The Shaman built a small fire and took out his peace pipe, passing it around so each of us could take a turn puffing on the smoke. Then in the bony remains of a human skull, the cranium, he burnt some incense, fanning the heady fumes with an eagle feather towards the opening of the crater. He had told us that within the crater was an extraterrestrial crystal and that only at certain times the miracle happened. He said it helped in guiding the alien vehicles to earth.



As we watched and waited, suddenly a great flash of light in prism rays shot out of the depths of the crater. It was both a breathtaking and very frightening sight. As the light radiated outward, a crow appeared near the light and then flew right next to its glow. A coyote then walked its way toward this light, this miracle light. Both animals, the crow and the coyote, connected to each other by the glowing rays, transformed into human form. And then they spoke.

To be continued...

# Narcolepsy and Birds

*by Rachel Price*

“When you were born, the Cedar Waxwings swarmed the house.” Your mother will say these words when you ask her about the day you were born. Your mother will swim up through the years of Prozac and housewifery then. There will be times when you become worried that your mother has left you completely, evacuated before the lease was up, so you will ask her about when you were babies. You will watch her struggle up through the murk. You will see her surface in her eye sockets then and she will speak with a clarity reserved for the past. “You were born in December,” she will say, “and you would not look good in Bloodstones like me so I bought you a blue topaz instead.” While she tells you the story of when you were born, you must pay attention to how much this time in the air takes from her. You must notice this and you must not abuse it. You must do this for both your sakes. Firstly, because your mother will need more rest than others and also because you will see yourself in her in these rare lucid moments and it will cause you to shiver and wonder at the destiny waiting to shake its way up through your genes; You wonder if you will grow up to be tired.

The Cedar Waxwings will go extinct one May and you will dream over and over that your chest has gone Moroccan; that your lungs have filled with beads that rattle you awake in the night. You will think that it is the memory of your grandmother’s consumption whispering up through your lungs. You should go to the doctor but do not tell him the reason for your suspicions. He will find a spot on your lungs and tell you that you have been exposed to TB but not contracted it. He will put you on medication for a year just to make sure. You will spend a few years exhausted; worried that you will dream another illness into existence.

All your life you will have a strange relationship with birds and snakes. You will walk too early; at the end of your eighth month, and your terrified mother will dub you “the duck.” She will say over and over again that your little brain was not ready yet for the responsibility of mobility; that if you had wandered outside when it was raining, you would have drowned. Really, it will be a miracle that you live through that first year. Your mother will already be fading in and out by then and twice she will doze off and lose track of you. Both times, upon waking, she will find you, her ambling girl-child, next to the same cotton-mouth. You will know it by it being old and fat. Both times when she shows up on the scene, she goes stock still; willing herself to stone, to rock. She will be afraid to breathe even, lest she anger the thing. Really, she needn’t worry. It will just lazily uncurl and crawl away.

When you are two, your father will have to save you from a flock of gray geese. They will swarm out of the pond toward where you are playing on the grass; you will say later that they were like targeted missiles with bright orange feet. You will forever remember them honking their malicious intent through prickly mouths. Your father will still be young and quick at this point and he will scoop you up at the last moment to save you. He will be furious and you will not be able to breathe while he holds you and kicks at the flock. Your parents will keep you away from ponds until you can defend yourself and eventually quit buying you parakeets since they just fly into the side of the cage until they die anyway.

You will be just a shade away from a baby when the Waxwings die out and from this you know that you are to have no home, even when you own one. You will wander. Farther and farther you will circle away from your sleeping mother until finally you will no longer be able to hear her ever-even breathing. Away from her, the radius blurs and your travels loose their shape. It will feel as though you have been wandering since before cutting your first tooth. This is obviously not true. This is you feeling hollow and sorry for yourself and your fear of sleep and your anger at your tired mother will not help you.

You will know on the day that you walk up to inspect what you think is a miraculously viney tree-branch only to find yourself looking dead into the eyes of two intertwined, black, snakes, that you will soon anchor yourself to another even if you do not call him home.

You will know him by the shape of his mouth. You will marry him and plant things. Your daughter will be born in May and you will be surprised to find that her coloring is different from your own. At first you think that she is just jaundiced. You lay her in the sun but she stays that way. Accept this difference and trade in all of your topaz for an emerald. She will love you for this some day after she forgives you.

In your daughter's room you will hang a picture of your father: a country doctor, a Methodist; widow's—peaked, smooth skinned, and severe. On the other side you will hang your husband's father: An Irish iron-worker, a Catholic; His skin will wear the badge of the windblown and you will know him in life by his limp. He will have shattered his leg in April. "The building went out from under him like a bird bone," they will say. It will be a legend that you hear often on the street that you will live on but not call home; how even in those months after the fall, the months when he had to hobble close to earth, he never missed a parish fish fry or lost a singing contest. After he dies, these legends will cause you to picture him forever on crutches, singing the songs of the island that bore him.

Your daughter will be too silent in her crib. She will look up at you wide-eyed from her nest asking you for something that you cannot know. She will not cry and you will become anxious. You will dream of going into her room to find pillow feathers flying everywhere. The windows are closed and still the pillows will be deflated. The feathers will hesitate in a constellation near the ceiling refusing to acknowledge you. In the dream they will be playing a secret game, remembering their former glory, how they were once part of wing.

In some dreams the feathers will belong to those orange-footed geese by the pond but you are not as quick as your father, and these feathers, though they lack beaks, are prickly-teethed, threatening to fall on your daughter unless you leave. In others they will be the Waxwing's feathers but they will not know that they are dead. They refuse to acknowledge the gravity that pulled every last one of them down while you still walk upright. "We will fall and cut you," they chirp. You will dream of parakeets slamming themselves into the windows outside your daughter's room until it rains glass. "We will fall until you fall with us."

You will wake up calling for your mother and it is at this moment that you remember the way she knew about dreams. This is where you will circle back and remember her; where you finally allow yourself a genesis and a pattern. For only she will ever know about the shadows that crouch when the fever's in your bed frame and the whispers in the farmhouse that your grandmother did not really die. She will have braved them more than most. You will remember that she who slept most slept lightest when your dozing terrors rubbed into sobs. You will realize then that the measure of all other faces will always be hers, blurred through tears and ever-waking. You must remember her as you walk into your baby's room to these two portraits glaring at each other over the crib; these two patriarchs who will not let the differences of the past lie down and finally rest. You will move them out into the hall because the baby cannot sleep.

# The Grey Samurai

By Ernest Schaal

It was raining that Monday morning when Tanaka-san came into my office with his diskette. Before then, I didn't know that the "Grey Samurai" worked at our company. I didn't even know that the "Grey Samurai" existed.

Tanaka-san was the head of the Finance Section. Normally, he valued his free time as much as I did, but he had spent all weekend working on a file on his laptop. He came to my office to have that file transferred to our computer network.

Our company policy stated that all files made off-site needed to be checked for viruses by my section before they could be loaded onto the network. Tanaka-san was following company policy.

"It has a virus," I said in an informal Japanese. The Japanese language has various levels of formality, from the honorific form used with superiors, to the formal form used with strangers, to the informal form used between friends, to the abrupt form used with children and pets. I used the informal form because we had been friends for years.

Our friendship began because we both loved computers and because we both stood out as being different in a very homogeneous company. I stood out because I was the only white foreigner that worked there. He stood out because, although born of Japanese parents, he was raised in London and spoke English better than he spoke Japanese. In addition, he stood out because he was married to a foreigner, a Chinese woman whom he had met as a student in England.

Initially, we were considered outsiders, but over time we were accepted. Eventually, we became section leaders. Our promotions were partly due to our talent, but also partly due to a seniority system common in many Japanese companies.

Tanaka-san took the news of the virus calmly, but I could see that he felt violated.

"I guess that means my laptop is infected, too."

"Probably."

"This isn't a good start to a new week."

"Yeah, it looks like it's one of those Mondays that the Carpenters sang about."

"I wonder how I got it. I'm pretty careful about those types of things."

"I'll check."

It took me only thirty minutes to find the cause of the virus. His twelve-year-old daughter Yoko-chan, who has great computer skills, liked using his laptop without his permission and disabled the firewall protection. Somehow, in doing so, she also disabled the anti-virus protection. The virus came attached to a message about her favorite vocal group, *Morning Musume*.

I wrote a short statement reminding people of the current policy and setting forth a sanitized version of what happened. No names were used.

Because of this incident, the president suggested a complete audit of all our computers. During that audit, we found out that Toshio Sasaki of the Finance Section was posting messages from work to the soc.culture.japan newsgroup. He used the name "Grey Samurai."

Newsgroups are discussion groups on the Internet among people who share a common interest. Soc.culture.japan was a newsgroup in English about “Everything Japanese, except the Japanese language.”

While our policy allowed the use of newsgroups for business, it did not allow the use of personal lifestyle newsgroups such as soc.culture.japan. That’s the reason why we blocked such newsgroups from the network.

While newsgroups could be read using email, they could also be read using a website. He had read and posted messages via a popular website.

I knew a little about soc.culture.japan before this. When I had first thought of coming to Japan, I sometimes checked it to find out about Japanese culture. I stopped checking it because I grew tired of the insults swapped between those who loved Japan so much that they were blind to its faults and those who hated Japan so much that they were blind to its virtues. There was sometimes useful information, but the ratio of chaff to wheat was too high.

The Japan lovers included those that yearned for the glories of the Japanese Imperial Army of the Sino-Japanese War, the Russo-Japanese War, and the early years of World War II. They denied that the Japanese had committed any war crimes, denied that any racism or sexism now existed in modern Japan, and called the Chinese and the Koreans bad names. They also included those who had fallen in love with Japanese culture due to their love for Japanese animation.

The Japan haters included posters from economic rivals who haven’t forgiven Japan for the atrocities of World War II and for being richer than they are. Mainly, they were Chinese and Koreans. Their number also included some white supremacists and others who hate Asians in general.

Sasaki fit in perfectly with the other netizens of soc.culture.japan, swapping insults with the worse of them. He was one of those who yearned for the past glories of the Japanese Imperial Army, and his messages often had many slurs against Chinese, Koreans, and the white race. Unlike most of the other Japanese posters, he also had slurs against the *burakumin* (the “untouchables” of Japan), the *Ainu* (part of the indigenous people of Japan), and residents of Tokyo (because they look down on him).

He frequently used phrases like “dirty Allies,” “little Chink weasels,” and “honorary Whites.” Sometimes, his language was stronger and sometimes more vulgar.

Besides insulting various groups, he had one truly signature belief, a belief that was his alone. He believed that the Japanese Imperial Army fought the “real” Nazis during the war. To him, the “real” Nazis were Great Britain, the United States, and especially the Chinese army. He even went so far as to claim that the German army also fought the “real” Nazis. Many newsgroup posters often deliberately misuse the terms “fascist” and “Nazis” to apply it to anyone who disagrees with them on any topic. Godwin’s Law roughly states that as a newsgroup discussion grows longer, eventually someone will make a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler. Sasaki was the only one that I had heard of who had so distorted the term “Nazis” as to apply to the Allied forces of World War II.

While I disliked the tone and content of his messages, I had seen worse. It was the nature of that newsgroup and newsgroups in general. Something about the anonymity of the Internet causes some people to act at their worse. Some, like him, used the newsgroups as a

means of insulting people they don't know with slights and slurs that they would have never dared use face to face.

Viewed objectively, Sasaki had not caused any breach of network security nor had he violated policy. He might have violated the spirit of our company policy, but using the web to access newsgroups had not been specifically banned. Frankly, I hadn't anticipated that it could have become a problem.

Viewed subjectively, his messages bothered me. It is one thing to deal with a racist on the Internet, and it is another thing to deal with one in real life. On the Internet, one can filter out messages from known racists, but one cannot "filter out" people in the workplace.

All that afternoon, I found myself looking at the nametags of employees as I passed them in the hall, to see if I could spot the "Grey Samurai." They all seemed friendly, but one of them secretly hated me because I was white. I hadn't thought about being white in Japan for a long time. Now "Grey Samurai" was making me feel paranoid. I told both Tanaka-san and the president about what I had discovered.

I wondered what kind of person would write such messages. They were full of hate and weird beliefs, but at least he could spell and he used proper English grammar. Most racists on the Internet weren't so eloquent.

My guess was that he was an educated but bitter man. My mental image of him was a young salary man, dressed in a black suit, coming home to an empty hovel filled with expensive electronic gear. I guessed that his social life consisted solely of soc.culture.japan and video games.

His actions did raise one important issue that I needed to take up with upper management. If someone made a connection between our company and his messages, it could damage our reputation. His remarks could turn customers and employees against us. Since he insulted such a wide variety of people, the chance of someone being offended was high.

That night Tanaka-san and I went out for a few drinks at an *izakaya* (a Japanese-style bar) near the train station. It was small, not much bigger than an average hotel room. We sat at the counter and drank large bottles of beer while snacking on side dishes of grilled chicken on skewers, fried potatoes, and *gyoza* (Chinese-style dumplings).

Since we were both married with children, we didn't go out drinking very often. I had invited him out because I wanted to know more about the Grey Samurai.

"I read the messages you gave me, and I just can't believe that he wrote them."

"They are definitely his. I found the messages still on his computer."

"That's not what I meant. I know in my mind that he wrote them, but in my stomach, it is hard for me to believe that he would do that. It just doesn't seem like him."

"His messages about Americans are making me feel a tad paranoid, and I'm not comfortable about the other messages either."

"He also said some really nasty things about the Chinese. Everyone knows that my wife is from China."

"What kind of person is he?"

"I don't know. I thought I knew... Before, he seemed conscientious, knowledgeable, with a great feel for numbers."

"His postings make me think he's a very bitter little man."

"Bitter? He doesn't seem particularly bitter."

“How about gloomy?”

“No.”

“Withdrawn?”

“Not really. He seems like a typical Japanese salary man. He seems to like his work.”

“What are you going to do about him?”

“I don’t know. I’ll talk to him tomorrow and try to find out what is going on. I’ll let you know what happens before the meeting.”

The next day, I presented my findings at a management meeting, with the recommendation that the filter procedures be adjusted to disable web browsers from posting newsgroup messages. I made no recommendation about what to do with the Grey Samurai, since that was not my section’s concern.

Earlier, Tanaka-san told me he counseled Mr. Sasaki on his inappropriate behavior. During that counseling, Mr. Sasaki apologized for the trouble he had caused. He said he had meant no harm, thinking of it as an innocent means of reducing stress. He admitted that in hindsight, it was a stupid thing to do. Tanaka-san recommended that he be placed on probation, that we monitor the newsgroup to see whether the change in filter procedures put an end to the Grey Samurai.

Both recommendations were accepted.

After two weeks, there was a follow-up meeting where I reported no further posts by the Grey Samurai. After that meeting, I stopped monitoring the newsgroup.

I thought the matter was over, but then something happened at the next company trip. Each year, we all go for an overnight trip to some fancy resort where the employees can “bond.” The company pays for part of the expenses, and we pay the rest.

That year, the trip was to a fancy resort along the beach of the Sea of Japan, near Kanazawa and the famous gardens of Kenrokuen (one of the three great gardens of Japan). The hotel was rated one of the best resort hotels in Western Honshu, with outdoor baths right next to the sea. The only reason we could afford it was by sleeping five people to a room.

After reaching the resort, we had a formal Japanese dinner, where the seating was selected randomly to promote better interdepartmental relations. The meal consisted of a variety of small dishes, including among other things, grilled salted salmon, pickled ginger, grated daikon radish, dried plums, *sashimi* (raw fish), clear miso soup, and of course, rice. Seated opposite from me was Toshio Sasaki.

I was surprised because he looked clean-cut and intelligent. He was even good-looking, resembling Yon-san, a current Korean star popular among Japanese women. He didn’t look anything like the pathetic loser that I imagined from reading his posts.

While most of the conversation was in Japanese, enough of it was in English for me to find out that he had an excellent grasp of the language. He seemed knowledgeable and informed. Then, when one of the other diners said she was going to China for vacation, I was surprised by his comment.

“Be sure to see the Great Wall. I went there and it is unbelievable. It made me realize how advanced Chinese culture was that they were to be able to build something like that.”

“When did you visit China?” I asked.

“I went during last Golden Week. I was only able to go for a few days, but it was fun.”

“How did you find the Chinese?”



“They were very friendly. It is a visit that I will treasure for the rest of my life.”

That night, I had trouble going to sleep because of the snores of my four roommates. As I lay there, I wondered if he really did go to China. If he really did go, how did he like the people? If he didn't like them, why bother lying about it? He could have just stayed silent.

A few weeks after the trip, I checked soc.culture.japan again. I noticed that a new poster was sending messages that used the same type of language that the Grey Samurai had used. There was even a remark that “the Japanese Imperial Army fought the ‘real’ Nazis.” An Internet search showed that the Grey Samurai had been the only one who had previously used that particular phrase before in a newsgroup.

I told Tanaka-san about what I found, and two weeks later Toshio Sasaki was gone.

A few days later, Tanaka-san and I went out for drinks again and I asked what happened.

“When I showed him copies of the messages, he said they weren't his. He said that a copycat poster must have posted them.”

“That's weird.”

“He said it might be some Chinese person who had felt insulted about his previous posts, who was trying to make him look bad.”

“That doesn't make sense.”

“It left me speechless. I was standing there, listening to him as he rambled on. The more he talked, the stranger it got. Maybe if I said something, he might have stopped. As he continued to talk, he elaborated on his theory of some Chinese conspiring against him. He tried to explain to me how sneaky and unprincipled the Chinese were, drifting into harsher rhetoric. Then it happened. Right in mid-sentence, he stops.”

“Why?”

“I think he must have suddenly remembered that my wife is Chinese.”

“What did he say next?”

“Nothing.”

“What did you say?”

“Nothing.”

“Someone must have said something.”

“No, neither of us did. Instead, he went to back to his desk and wrote out his resignation.”

# Bouquet's Sweet Connection

*by Yuka Urushibata*

Bouquet is the name of a café. It is a simple two-storied wooden house, only a block from the bus terminal in downtown Shizuoka, but it is fortunate enough to be situated next to an ancient Japanese shrine with its thousand years of tradition. The shrine has an aged bulky tree of cherry blossoms.

Though there is a flood of people deluging the cafe on Saturday and Sunday afternoons, nobody comes on Sunday evenings. At Bouquet's entrance, on the left side, a variety of homemade cakes, perhaps twenty different kinds, lay waiting on their plates to welcome the guests. It was one such Sunday, an unseasonably warm evening in April, that I climbed up the wooden stairs, passed by the cakes, and seated myself at a table in the corner. Even when I was with friends, I preferred to sit at this small table by the small window, where we could peep into the small world of abundant greenery at the shrine. Sitting hours chatting on the wooden chairs and feeling the wooden table, we felt the warmth of wood. We could recuperate from the day, stretch and be ourselves there.

From that small window, fortuitously, I enjoyed the cherry blossoms in full bloom, lit by a clashed prism of sunset, which was splashing on every west-facing gray wall of the higher buildings. I forgot time. My mind was floating off into the air outside and I became one milky cherry blossom petal, soaking up the serene vernal air and even sunlight. I became the vein of the cherry tree nourished by the earth. Only when I felt thirsty would I come back to myself again, returning to reality, sipping a cup of coffee with its rich roasted aroma, realizing this daydream was still half-true since I could still feel the wood of the chair beneath me.

On that Sunday evening, an old couple joined my solitary company on the second floor. Before they gave their orders, they began to talk aloud, from their seats, to the owner inside the small kitchen. The kitchen was just beside the table that the old couple occupied, and inside the owner prepared tea and coffee. When the owner, a flabby old man like Falstaff, came out of the kitchen and stood before the couple, the wife said;

“This is a souvenir from our garden. I hope you enjoy it.”

The owner reached out, saying; “Thank you! Thank you so much.”

I saw the couple over my book as they offered the owner a parcel of greenery, which he accepted with respect and gratitude.

The couple continued; “It's our pleasure. It's really nothing. It's only a bit of the harvest from our garden.”

They exchanged a little bit of conversation and the owner returned back into the small kitchen.

After a while, he reappeared in front of the couple, saying;

“I have a little something here. It's wine jelly. I just made it. I'm thinking of adding this to my new menu. It might be a little bit sour but it has a sweet aftertaste.”

Tasting the jelly, the wife spoke first; “This is really good, especially when it is too hot for spring like today.”

Her husband added, “Oh yes. This has a sour taste, but with a bit of a chill, enough to soothe our throats.”

The owner replied to the couple; “I am trying to think of a name for this jelly. I am wondering if “Zephyr before Summer” suits the taste? We really need this kind of soothing thing—cold, sour and sweet especially just before summer.”

The wife responded “It sounds great!” taking another taste of the jelly in her mouth.

The husband cut in, gesturing towards the plates of waiting cakes; “I bet it takes hours to make sweets like this.”

The owner replied; “Indeed. It really does take a lot of time. Did you know that for chocolate cake, if you change only one spoonful of chocolate, the whole taste will be different? And with the lemon tarts,” he said, pointing emphatically to the creamy yellow confection in the case, “I crush every hazelnut with my hands.”

He made a nutcracking gesture with his hands, squeezing his eyes shut as he did so. The “crack!” of the nut could almost be heard in the near-empty café.

He continued; “I choose the best flavored liquor to add flavour. I guess everyday I go through the trials, I make the errors. I make a lot of cakes. Three hundred and sixty-five days a year. There is no end. I am really trying to create the most delicious cake.”

Sitting at my table by the small window, I had stopped reading my book. In that book I was sure I could not find more sweeter words than those that were just spoken a few tables away. The book set aside, I focused on finishing my coffee.

Only fifteen minutes before closing time, I stood up from my table, collected my book and paid the bill. Behind me I left the couple who were still enjoying their lemon tarts. At the doorway of the entrance, I looked up to see a handmade toy bird perching on the café’s sign. The bird was made of wood.

# Subway Stops

by George Van Horn

I stare at shoes these days between stations. I used to be a people watcher, but it looks as though my focus has dropped along with my middle-aged libido. I used to welcome a pretty-faced distraction. Now I let my thoughts wander while enjoying the comforting blur from the windows on the periphery of my footwear focus.

Can you tell a person by the shoes they wear? I hope not. I mean, just look at those painfully pointed boots. How about those sawed-off and squared tips? Ah, the fetters of fashion. Who will scream for the toes, for they have no voice. What would you make of my consistently bland choice of black soft-leather wrap-around walkers? It's definitely not an aggressive in-your-face macho choice. Gosh, do I really look like a softy, a wimp? They're light, practical, and provide for excellent agility and speed. I mean what else would Bruce Lee wear? Hah. Who am I kidding. He'd be barefoot.

Another stop. I hate when the windows are in focus. Let's keep this car in motion. Ah, yes, middle age shoes. Middle age. An acquaintance of mine just buried his 90-year-old father. I wonder if he realizes just how lucky he's been to bury a parent that has lived through several generations in one lifetime. Pure luck.

Death. It's the next stop after this middling station in life. They say death is nature's strongest aphrodisiac, as there's nothing like death around you to make your body want to recreate itself. Not the most romantic thought, I know, but it certainly is true. I remember I had quite the fever after I buried my mother. Was I deceived by my biological impulses? Don't know, don't care. I certainly needed a cuddle. There's no better cuddle than the one right after the fever's been brought down. Ah, re-creation.

Re-creation. I should be so lucky. Me, a childless uncle who plays imaginary parent when visiting relatives. I have fun watching them recreate life in their homes on my trips back. I sometimes sit on the side and ask myself how I would react if my daughter did that, or what I would say if my son said such a thing. Besides the bewilderment, it brings a tear of happiness. But, I'm usually bashed in the head by a wayward ball or catching a lap-bound jumping kid before that tear falls.

Nurture. How do you answer a child when they ask how babies are made? Gosh, what a loaded question. Better to ask how we make ourselves. I'd like to reply that it's done by how we answer children when they ask such questions. Isn't nurture what it's all about? Nurture created those memories that come so clearly to mind when I think about the parents I recently buried. Not sure if such nurture created who I am at this juncture in life. I'll just leave that to the Phuds with head shrinking skills. I mean how is one expected to respond to the statement, "You don't have kids do you? Ah. " Add ellipsis here for the un-uttered: "Well, then you can't understand." Is that all it takes to understand? To have kids? Possibly so. I'd like to reply, "But, hey, I've been a son." For some reason I don't. Why tussle with their pride of parenthood. I'm just content to watch. Watch those other middle-agers recreate. Ah, recreation.

Blurry windows.

I'm not at the terminus yet.

# Poetry

## Honey Hue

*by Tom Bauerle*

This golden stroke of moonlight  
does me no good.

It's the same rich honeyed hue  
as the blouse I haggled for  
in the marketplace at Johdpur  
with the gaggle-toothed woman  
whose runneled hands  
had embroidered  
each exquisite peacock feather,  
fawn and flower.

When you wore it,  
the slightest shifting of  
your limbs and breasts  
sent shock waves  
shivering the topography  
of that lush golden jungle;  
startling long legged gazelles  
while earthquaked tigers strode  
beneath the newborn constellations  
created by the swing  
of conch shell  
shooting star earrings  
hung in the twilight horizons  
of your sunless hair.

But now this benighted town  
greet each morning aurora  
with concrete indifference,  
sleeps in shadows,  
and shuffles with feet  
firmly planted  
on passive asphalt  
never noticing that  
every noon is evening  
and every dawn  
a solitary eclipse  
of sun and moon  
and stars  
and you.

# Contact

*by Linda Donan*

The sun caressed  
the edge of the horizon,  
a blazing orange red contact.  
just as the traffic signal turned green,  
the sun's glare pricked my eyes,  
a blinding connection.

My foot left contact with the brake,  
my eyelids blinked together, comforting closure.  
Just as I touched the starter, the front of my car  
gently connected with the back bumper of the car in front,  
soft thump  
collision!

My heart thumped,  
a blasting junction of guilt and fear  
As we both pulled our cars to the edge of the road.  
I sheepishly said, "Car, OK?"  
as the young Japanese man touched my window,  
my eyes trying not to meet his.

His eyes widened and lost convergence.  
English and Gaijin shock crashing together.  
Much Japanese chattering with his friends  
as they all studied his rear bumper,  
Time passed as I pried my fingers off the wheel  
Breathe deeply, breathe slowly, breathe.

Then at my window again, he leans in.  
Says, "Car OK." and reaches a finger towards me  
Shakes it, without touching me, and adds,  
"Be a safety driver."  
English teacher, I want to correct his grammar,  
But I put my foot to the gas and squash the impulse.

# Golden Week

*by Reed Gage*

Governmental leaders a while back wanting to have some fun  
Decided to take 4 Japanese holidays and squeeze them into one

First there was the Emperor's birthday simple as it seems  
They changed it to Midori no Hi because this emperor liked green

Then there is Constitution Day for Article number nine  
Though no longer recognized and ignored most of the time

Next is Kodomo no Hi for boys to grow up healthy and strong  
Physicalized by streaming fish-like kites colorful and long

Finally there is a special holiday created for convenience it seems  
After Constitution Day and before Kids Day — called the "holiday in-between"

If we add Saturday and Sunday to this 4 day sum  
We have almost (but not quite) a week for pleasure and fun

Not that I want to sit in criticism or try and make a nasty rhyme  
But I can think of better than an entire nation being off at the same time.

127 million plus people moving across a landmass smaller than California  
A hectic and competitive scramble for 5 days of euphoria

JR Meitetsu Kintetsu what have you— the subway lines are busting,  
College — Jr. College, Hi school — Jr High school — Elementary school kids  
bustling

Salary Men — salary Women, retired folks — (housewives a given)  
Workaholics — workaphiles, company slaves all escaping for some livin'

The weather may be sunny - cloudy - rainy / hot - cold or in between  
The roads, the stores, the hotels, the parks, the movie theatres — all very crowded  
scenes

If you want to survive this frenzy of humanity / insanity in a dance  
Stay at home and read a book — or else book well in advance

# A Breath Of Air

*by Roy Hernandez*

As an azure whale in the umbrage of the Antarctic,  
Leaps towards Heaven,  
In the mystic waters of Earth,  
Through its brittle essence in Life,  
To touch the sky,  
And capture a breath of air,  
It woes in silence,  
Beneath the sea,  
Awaiting lofty for another chance  
Once again...  
For a breath of air.

Within the embryo of its ownself  
The seconds of doom befall the whale,  
And it rises and breaks the sea of green,  
Into open turmoil  
To capture a breath of air,  
And men...mere men in exuberance,  
Await to harpoon the Blue Whale,  
But lo !  
The whale retreats below the sea once again,  
Without a breath of air.

In its time,  
The creatures eyes softly gloom,  
While its heart weakens rapidly  
And its soul cries,  
Below the sea,  
It softly dies  
Without a breath of air.

Poem by Roy Hernandez 1969...Age 14 years old



# The Dead Along the River

*by Steve Howard*

Along the gentle sweep of  
Kiso River kami wander  
absorbing offered incense  
from bodiless cemeteries.

Flowers emerge through  
frozen dirt amid  
black cenotaphs.

All will be covered  
in snow by afternoon.

gray and white.

abandoned.

# Yuku Haru

by Shoichi Miyamura

抱きあい結び合う歓喜の残り火のように  
燃え始めた新しい命を  
母体とつないでいたもの  
そして生まれ出た直後に切り離されたもの  
誕生の喜びと哀しみ

それから 時が 確実に刻み始め  
とおくちかく 激しく  
或いは 緩やかに  
ゆらぎながら燃え続けて  
いつかまた ついに消える

そのようにして 受け継がれてきた炎の  
故郷はどこなのだろう  
続けつづけている力は何なのだろう

その昔 生まれ出た未熟児の命を  
毎日辛子湯につけて守った母がいた  
守られた男の子はやがて兵となり旅立ち  
見知らぬ国で除隊となった後に  
一人の女と出会い  
そして 私が生まれた

数日で終わっていたかも知れない命は  
九十年の長さを生きて ある病院の片隅で  
数ヶ月細い管につなぎ止められて生きていたが  
五分咲きの桜を見た直後  
見知らぬ土地へと旅立っていった

残された者たちも 又 暫くの後には  
同じ向こう側に出向いていく

花は散り 吹かれては ゆらゆらと

今 目前の春は粛々と過ぎていく

# At The Crossroads

*by Sarah Mulvey*

I sat alone one afternoon  
A beer my only friend  
The bar that day was empty  
Not a soul from end to end

The mug soon offered only dregs  
I gestured for one more  
The barman did oblige me  
A perfect pint he poured

I took a swig and licked my lips  
Trying not to think too hard  
About the reasons I was here  
Sitting lonely at the bar

But pints have this tradition  
It is worn and it is true  
Beer melancholy soon creeps up  
And then you're feeling blue

The barman he has seen this sight  
A million times before  
He hides a yawn, wipes up a glass  
And looks up to the door

It suddenly swings open  
Afternoon light creeps in  
In walk two gents with faded jeans  
Their faces showing grins

They swagger over to the bar  
One with two fingers held up high  
"A pint for me and for my friend  
We're feeling mighty dry!"

Two mugs are set down on the counter  
Soon filled with golden beer  
One gent looks right at me and says,  
"Mind if we sit here?"

One fella sits to my left  
The other to my right  
One slaps my back and with a wink says  
"Cheers mate, we don't bite!"

Gent to my right smiles knowingly  
And makes me feel at ease  
Left guy's more aggressive  
Perhaps a man who likes to tease

"Hey there my name's Dexter,"  
Says the man with the calm smile  
"We're pretty parched, our legs are sore  
I think we walked eight miles."

"Hey mate my name is Southpaw,"  
Says new friend number two  
He drinks his drink, slams down his glass  
"I'm still thirsty, how 'bout you?"

Barman pulls us our frosty drinks  
They're set down one, two, three  
One for Dexter, one for Southpaw  
And one for new friend me

"Hey fella, what's going on?  
What's with the worried face?"  
Asks Dexter sitting to my right  
His demeanour full of grace

Southpaw leans in closer  
His eyes come near to mine  
"Come on friend and spill your guts  
We'll listen, we've got time."

And so that's how it happened  
That's how it came to pass  
I started talking slowly  
Staring down into my glass

"Well here's how it goes fellas,"  
I began my tale of woe  
"It's all about a decision  
I made not so long ago

I was living my life from day to day  
Doing ordinary things  
I worked and did my fair share  
On occasion I'd even sing

I had someone beside me  
It wasn't a great fit  
But I had made my bed, it's done I thought  
This is where I must sit

But on my daily journey  
One day I did get lost  
I came upon a crossroads  
Like something out of Faust

I suddenly had options  
Destinations I could choose  
Left or right or straight ahead  
I really couldn't lose

I took a peek behind me  
At the life that I had made  
The complications and the pitfalls  
I had the power to make fade

I turned my head and looked up high  
I was seeking some advice  
I yelled "Please Lord God help me  
It's not like rolling dice..."

No voice told me what to do  
So it's gambling I did choose  
The familiar road behind me  
Was the path that had to lose

I stepped hesitantly forward  
My feet wobbly at first  
But then my gait got stronger  
An amazing esteem burst

"I am me, me am I,  
This is who I am!"  
I shouted to the skies above  
Breathing deeply as I ran

All the hurts and disappointments  
Of my previous life  
Were now so far behind me  
That old life full of strife

The road at first was smooth as silk  
It really was a dream  
Each morning new adventures  
Idyllic it did seem

But then one day there was a bump  
The next day a few more  
My new path now not so easy  
My feet were getting sore

I took a glance behind me  
And that's when I did see  
Remnants from my other life  
Had come to follow me

The reminders from my past life  
Had taken human form  
With legs and feet and arms and hands  
And a face that looked forlorn

"Why have you forsaken us,  
your connections to your past?  
This new life you have left us for  
Do you think it's going to last?"

I felt the tug of guilt's strong chains  
Pulling strongly from behind  
I questioned my motives for my choice  
Had I been wrong? Had I been blind?

And so I sit today alone  
Seeking solace in a beer  
The bumps ahead do scare me  
The guilt behind I fear

I looked up then to Dexter's face  
His eyes so calm and blue  
And then I looked to Southpaw  
His smile wide and true

They nodded at me knowingly  
They both set down their beers  
"Listen friend and you'll soon see  
there is nothing you should fear.

We all come up to crossroads  
Humans young and old  
To make a choice is bravery  
You do not sell your soul

There are so few who take the chance  
To move forward, left or right  
They think that standing still is easier  
Than soaring, taking flight

How could we move forward  
If by one choice we remain  
In never seeking options  
The road would stay the same

This is true and this is tried  
However we must stress  
The road that is left behind  
Should not be left a mess

The road behind is property  
Where others will remain  
To leave unfinished business  
Is considered inhumane

Those bumps you felt, that forlorn face  
They haunt you for a reason  
To choose a forward path is bravery  
To neglect the old one treason

Slow down my friend, and breath in deep  
Let out a lengthy sigh  
The paths we choose aren't easy  
But they're the right ones by and by

To second guess, to wonder if  
To ponder endlessly  
Wasting time on the road you chose  
That's squandered destiny

I am me, me am I,  
This is who I am  
Shall once again pour out your lips  
Shouting loudly as you can."

Dexter finished up his beer  
And Southpaw had his fill  
They pushed their seats out from the bar  
Laying down money for the bill

I pushed their money back at them  
I couldn't let them pay  
These two new friends had helped me  
They had let me have my say

I stood up to say goodbye  
As they walked over to the door  
Southpaw's wink and Dexter's smile  
Had touched me to my core

Those two had really helped me  
They had made it very clear  
Life offers endless choices  
Many ignore them out of fear

I do expect more crossroads  
And more choices I will make  
Knowing all the better now  
That the best one I will take

I know too not to leave behind  
Bits and pieces of loose ends  
They will be tied up very neatly  
I will make proper amends

Thank you Dexter, thank you Southpaw  
You truly helped me see  
Whether left or right or straight ahead  
On the right road I shall be



# The Fossil on your Stoop

*by Rachel Price*

The falling sickness came  
when you compared my hips to a bowl.  
My teeth jumped out of my mouth.

And the last of mother's squashy warmth?  
I forgot it  
To huddle in your door way. For snow.  
To call out as you were falling  
(and you were always falling).

But remember:  
I'll stop your mouth with mine  
before you are anything more than weight.

You, my ever-maybe. You, my square hands  
are all the things I bought  
for someone else to see  
(flasks, books, velvet, pillows, slips)

and whoever you are,  
(square-handed, brown-eyed, biceped)  
you'll have a concrete imprint  
of my bending back on your front porch.  
You'll have me frozen in my flasks and possibilities.  
All but one.

## Wrinkled Ticket

*by John J. Sapelak*

There's a question written  
Where I wanna put my hand  
What are you gonna sell me  
I wonder  
And a face twists itself  
To look stupid enough  
For a beer ad  
Riding this train together  
At least to the next stop  
Got nothing but my chair until then,  
And the dirt on my shoes  
What's between here and there is just something to contemplate  
Till we get there  
Fingering an old memory  
That's old enough to regret  
Empty enough to feel  
And too far to get  
And that wrinkled ticket in your hand  
Looks just like what's in mine

## **This Then is Love**

(perhaps a male perspective)  
*by Joe Sichi*

You stand on a street corner  
with a woman  
who lays her head on your shoulder  
and tells you  
how enchanted she is  
with the faded and frumpy —  
once hot pink —  
housecoat  
which wraps her.

Every bit of your rational mind  
flies out through your  
pores screaming,  
“No dear, it’s a  
FADED and FRUMPY,  
vaguely pink housecoat!”

You silence your logic  
with a kiss,  
playful in its infancy,  
controlling you both by its end.

The moment stays in your mind.  
Long after, you realize  
she was right  
about what she was wearing.

This then is love,  
and it is the silliest, soundest  
thing in the world.

# Coping Strategies For Gaijin

*by Sarah Winslow*

Some study for their masters and some their PhDs  
Or write a textbook or novel or even poetry

Some spend all their holidays traveling around Japan  
Soaking in onsen, staying in minshuku, exploring ryokan

Some settle right in completely at home, find a Japanese partner to wed  
Never returning to their own country, they build a house, start a family, pay off the mortgage instead

Some end up joining churches, some disguise themselves as priests  
Some become addicted to sushi, going out for nightly feasts

Some are academic, become tenured professors  
Act as counselors, advisors, father (or mother) confessors

Some gamble with pachinko, some gamble with stocks & shares  
Some just spend time in sleeping to avoid ex-patriot cares

Some take up water-colour painting, some join a group for drama  
Some even open nail salons to alleviate ex-pat trauma

Some study Japanese martial arts, some hang out at the gym  
Working out with those little weights, perhaps a daily swim

Some sell organic vegetables, some sell Australian beef  
Some make business trips 'down under' to swim the Great Barrier Reef

Some write for newspaper columns, some publish magazines,  
Some watch TV cooking programs to master Japanese cuisine  
Some join hash house harriers for running and for beer  
Some join a Japanese chorus, sing a concert twice a year

Some study kanji and kana, take the Japanese exam  
Some stand outside train stations where they try the phone-card scam

Some open cozy cafes and convenient little bars  
Some escape to Gifu every weekend in their cars

Some get involved with sake, go out drinking every night  
Some do tea ceremony, turn the cup the correct number of times, must get it just exactly right

Some turn into dorama fans, obsessing over Kimura and Tsuyoshi  
And some haunt department stores, Maruei or Mitsukoshi

Some become followers of pop stars, Morning Musume or the Smap boys  
Some ride with the bosuzoku and make a lot of noise

Some flee Japan in the holidays, travel around the hemispheres  
Some work with homeless people, become soup-kitchen volunteers

Some organize committees: 'foreign wives of Japanese'  
Some start import businesses and sell us English cheese

Some rent and copy CDs, build up a huge collection  
Some worry about their purpose here, obsessed with self-reflection

Some work in little bars, mixing cocktails, measuring shots  
Some take photos, some sell jewelry, some paint pictures, some throw pots

Some collect exotic masks from their travels to foreign places  
Some spend all their savings on their teenage children's braces

Some fall in love with students, some just take them to bed  
Others abstain but cheer their mates on, 'full speed ahead'

Some even become geisha, mastering the art of the kimono  
Some get into sumo, becoming fans of Akebono

Some support their kids in boarding school in Australia, Malaysia or France  
Some attend evening classes: Spanish, Chinese, judo, salsa, belly-dance

Some organize gay discos, aids marches and demonstrations  
Some visit temples, sit in zazen, get hooked on meditation

Some become computer freaks, spending hours in front of screens  
Meet possible partners in chat-rooms, fall in love, sight-unseen

Some collect little creatures: doraemons, gromits, pooh-chans  
The cooking gaijin buy exotic spices, expensive pots and pans

Some teach ecology, save forests and wetlands single-handed  
Some sight UFOs, secretly hope the real aliens have landed

Some play in a jazz band, rock band, homemade jazz-band  
Some go off with their girlfriends for a two-week fast in Thailand

Some cope by using sarcasm, have a good bitch and moan  
In this country of over-population they feel isolated and alone

Some leave forever, then return each year for a visit  
After all it's perfectly natural to want to come back... or is it?