

Listening

“May I join you?” the little Japanese man said.

Oh, no, I thought. He wants to practice his English. Happens all the time in Tokyo. I slumped my shoulders and made room on the bench. I’m not good at refusing people, even when I desperately want to. I expected him to ask me how many years I’d been in Japan. That’s always the gambit.

“Twenty years,” I said, mischievously, beating him to it.

He nodded. “Do you feel that you get enough attention?”

“Well, I—”

I looked at the man a bit more carefully. He was small and boxy. Like a package. Neat. Clean. Wore a sweater and slacks, plain but on the expensive side. Around thirty years of age.

“Are you pushing some kind of religion?” I asked him.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? Can’t be much of a religion.”

“I have an agenda. I should tell you that.”

“That’s kind of you. Most don’t. They keep it hidden.” I added, “And then spring it on you.”

He smiled and said he knew what I meant. Somehow I found that reassuring.

“Well,” I said, “whatever your agenda, to answer your question, no, I don’t get enough attention.” I hesitated. “Negative attention, yes, I get that.”

He smiled, as if he had been there too.

I went on a bit, outlining all the people who had slighted me recently, undervalued my work, used me as a stepping stone for bigger and better things. I must have talked for a good thirty minutes. Frankly, I was getting into it. The small boxy man did no more than nod, but he gave the impression that he was listening carefully. I felt a lot better. I hadn’t revealed the frustrations of a lifetime, but I had aired a few grievances.

“So what’s your agenda?” I said, catching myself. “You know, I think I may have seen you before.”

“I’m often in this area.”

“Good enough. But what’s your agenda?”

He smiled, took out a sheet, and spread it across his briefcase. On the sheet was printed *YOSHIDA KENZO HAS LISTENED TO ME WITH FULL ATTENTION*. Below it there was a space for the number of minutes.

"I'm Yoshida Kenzo," he said, checking his watch. He passed the paper over and asked me to write in thirty minutes, from 15:31 to 16:01, and date it.

"Is this a trick?" I asked hesitantly.

"Yes," he smiled, and hit me lightly on the back. Not so usual among the Japanese. The effusiveness, I mean.

"Could you please sign it in the space at the bottom?" he requested.

I must have been crazy. I signed it: *Henry Stark*. Then he countersigned it.

"For you," he said, giving me the sheet of paper. "A memento. I hope you will cherish it and remember that your opinion was listened to with full attention."

"I will. I really will," I said.

Of course, the little man was nuts or after something or both. Had to be. Nobody just listens to other people. That was ridiculous. Nonetheless, I found that the next time I was in Shinjuku, which was a Thursday (I always came in on that day for lunch at the Tsubame Grill), and in spite of my best instincts (fear that I would have to cough up some money, the first session had been a free trial, etc.), I found myself looking around to see if the little man, Yoshida Kenzo, might be in the vicinity and disposed to listen to me again. Fact is, I had a few additional things I wanted to go over, some particular grievances, and I needed a sympathetic listener. How many people will actually sit or stand through your complaints and griping and then present you with a diploma at the end?

"*Haro*," he said, coming up behind me.

"Do you remember me?"

"Of course," he said.

"What's my name then?"

He faltered.

"It's Henry Stark," I reminded him.

"Okay."

"Your English is good, you know. Have you spent time abroad?"

"I lived in America. Look, Mom, no *l/r poblems*." He laughed jovially and patted me on the back. Again the bonhomie.

"Is there a fee involved?" I asked.

"A hidden fee? Would that be what you mean?"

"Are you going to create a dependency, and then bill me?"

“Oh, no.”

I stepped back. It was a little chilly. We were standing in an open area and the wind was whipping by.

“Would you like a cup of coffee? It’s on me. Since there’s no fee, that is.”

“If you wish.”

“I wish.”

I directed him to a coffee shop where I sometimes went. It was a short walk. We reached it in a matter of minutes and secured a table by the window. I bought two coffees and two pastries and brought them back. He pulled some money out of his pocket. I tried to refuse it, but he insisted, so I took it.

“I thought you were going to let me pay.”

“No,” he said, and raised and lowered his shoulders. “So what would you like to talk about today?”

“How do you know I want to talk, Kenzo-san? Maybe I want to listen.”

He gave me a look, as if that were unlikely.

“Right. Well, first, I’d like to confirm a few things, if you don’t mind. You informed me last time that you were not a member of a sect. Not that you don’t have a right to be, but I must tell you that *proselytizing* won’t work with Henry Stark.”

He was unfamiliar with the word *proselytizing*.

“Missionary. Society of the Sacred Mirror. Order of the Swinging Sword. Anything like that. Won’t work.”

“Are you saying you’re a loner?” he asked.

“On the contrary, I’m a clarifier. I like to get things straight. I ask many little questions. Fact is, my mind’s natural state is to be tangled up, so I need to be vigilant.”

“I see,” he said.

“You probably don’t, but you will, if you stick around.”

I pointed to his pastry, which he hadn’t touched, and told him to eat up. “Of course, go at your own pace,” I added.

I myself ate up. Gobble, gobble, gobble.

“So what would you like to talk about today?” he repeated.

“Thank you. I admire your tenacity.”

He acknowledged the compliment.

“I’ll tell you something you should know about me, Kenzo-san.” I paused, as if a momentous announcement were forthcoming, and said, “I am a haiku poet.”

He nodded. That is, he merely nodded. Most Japanese people, on hearing that a *gaijin*, or foreigner, writes haiku, are astounded, or try to give

the impression that they are, or they assert flat out that no non-Japanese could possibly write haiku. They say, “*Usō!*” *You lie!*

“That doesn’t surprise you?”

He shook his head.

“If you told me you wrote sonnets, I would be surprised,” I said.

He smiled.

“Do you write sonnets?” I asked.

“No, I don’t.”

“Well, I write haiku.”

“As you’ve said.”

“You must assume therefore that I want to talk about haiku, right?”

“You appear to be headed in that direction.”

“Well, I have a surprise for you, Kenzo-san. I don’t.”

“What would you like to talk about then?”

“I’d like to talk about a member of the haiku group to which I belong.”

He smiled and said, “Of course,” as if expecting it.

“You foresaw that?”

He shrugged his shoulders. I leaned back. There was something unusual about Kenzo’s manner. He took things in stride. I’m just the opposite. I take nothing in stride. I’m not generally a calm person. In fact, I’m easily upset, and sometimes hyper. It goes in cycles.

“Guy’s name is Venders,” I said. “Jim Venders.”

I sipped my coffee again. Kenzo hadn’t touched his. I pointed to his cup, and he took a drink.

“And what is the problem with Mr. Venders?” he asked.

“Jim Venders thinks he’s subtle,” I said, folding my hands.

“Is he?”

“He is not subtle. He wouldn’t know *subtle* from *Sato*.”

Kenzo mulled it over. I unfolded my hands.

“Does everyone in the group share your opinion?” he asked.

“That’s a hard question to answer.”

“What’s hard about it?”

“No offense, but some of the members of the group are Japanese.”

I coughed lightly and folded my hands again.

“You mean they keep their thoughts to themselves?”

“They’re a complete blank.”

“It’s part of our upbringing.”

“I rest my case.”

“Besides Mr. Venders, are there other non-Japanese members in the group?”

“A woman and a man, yes. They think they’re subtle too. That would be Kay Whiting and Gary Strada.”

“Venders, Whiting, and Strada,” he repeated, as if putting the names on a shelf. I unfolded my hands, folded them, and unfolded them. You’d think I was going in and out of a church rather than dissing my fellow haiku poets.

“Do you have any advice for me?” I asked.

“I don’t, no.”

“You don’t? I thought—”

“I’m in sympathy with what you’ve said.”

“How could you be? Maybe I’m making it all up.”

“I trust you.”

“Kenzo, you don’t have to go along with everything I say, you know.”

He agreed.

“What if I said we should pretend to be oysters—would you agree to that?”

“Oysters?”

“Just an example.”

He sloshed from side to side in an oysterly way.

“Right,” I said.

He was quite pleased with himself and continued sloshing.

“I’ve got all day,” I said.

He appeared ready to take it.

“Does your haiku group have a name?” he asked.

“As a matter of fact, we call ourselves the Thunder Group.”

“Thunder of what season? We Japanese can be particular about that.”

“Our little group thunders all year long and in every season.”

He laughed—but without overdoing it.

“What does Mr. Venders look like?”

“Mr. Venders looks like a health biscuit.”

“Is he British?”

“He’s from Chicago.”

Kenzo placed his hands over his head and formed a makeshift helmet.

“Venders makes fun of the way I speak,” I said.

“How so?”

“He imitates the way I say *hey, man.*”

“That’s one of your—?”

“One of my locutions. I use it when I want answers.”

“When you want something clarified?”

“When I’m really in the mode.”

“And the other two make fun of you as well?”

"They chortle."

"Pardon?"

"They laugh without opening their mouths."

Kenzo tilted his head to one side. He looked as if he were trying to picture the phenomenon and having a hard time doing it.

"No one likes to be mocked."

"You said it, man."

"Am I being too inquisitive?" he asked.

"You're doing just fine."

He bowed. I bowed to his bow. He bowed to my bow. I stopped bowing.

"You said that Mr. Venders considered himself subtle," he resumed.

"Subtle. Refined. Discriminating. He considers himself all those things. The fact is, Venders & Co. want me out."

"They are discouraging you from staying in the group?"

"They are encouraging me to leave."

"Why don't you?"

"I was there first."

He saw my point.

"They're under the illusion that they have adopted the so-called Japanese way. They have *assimilated*," I said.

"In their manner?"

"Yes, of course." Though one never knew with Vender-Bender.

"And you haven't?"

"Well, Kenzo, what do you think?" I asked, spreading my arms.

"Some Japanese speak out."

"Do they? I have yet to see it."

"Perhaps you have a secret desire to become Japanese?"

"I have many secret desires, but that's not one of them. I'm an American who happens to live in Japan."

"Perfectly understandable."

"Do you want to be an American, Kenzo?"

He said he didn't.

"There you are. Venders & Co. are *impersonators*. My presence irritates them because I remind them they're not..." I trailed off. Suddenly I felt tired. Not physically tired, but tired of hearing myself talk about myself.

"I need to discuss my personal affairs less," I admitted.

"Not at all."

There was an awkward moment. He tapped his watch.

"Time's up?" I asked.

“Yes,” he said and unbuckled his briefcase, removed the Statement of Full Attention, and wrote in the time, 13:48 to 14:50, and the date. I signed the document and he countersigned and gave it back. I then slipped it into a plastic folder and inserted it in my haiku notebook. Kenzo bowed, stood, and excused himself.

“Going back to Shinjuku station?” I called as he headed for the door.

I don’t think he heard me, because he didn’t turn. I could see him through the window. He walked straight and purposefully. He had the stride of a man with a purpose, that of listening to the whole world.

For the next month or so, I went about my business. I teach at the university. I’m not much of a teacher. I used to be, but I’ve burned out. I just do the minimum now. I give the lectures, assign grades, keep office hours, but nothing extra. The university in Japan is the so-called “last vacation” (for the students, that is, not for us), and I’ve come to terms with it. I concentrate my efforts on building my bibliography—the only thing that’s really rewarded—and I write my poetry, the aforesaid haiku. I compose haiku when I’m walking the streets, idling in parks, commuting on trains, during and between classes. I’m an interstitial poet, you might say. I write in the cracks, crevices, ditches, and intervals of life. I used to talk about haiku with my colleagues at the U, but I had to stop because I was being branded a monomaniac. Actually, I was *persona non grata* in the faculty lounge. Under the circumstances, Kenzo seemed to have been spirited magically into my life. Unlike my colleagues (unlike anyone I’d ever encountered, for that matter), he didn’t seem to mind if I were daft or mad or whatever. I could say anything I wanted, talk about haiku all day long, and he would not only absorb it with equanimity, but he would present me with a certificate when I finished ranting.

The Thunder Group had its quarterly meeting in September. Venders read from a suite of haiku that he was writing titled *Blue Gray*. It was about the American Civil War, and the haiku were in 5-7-5 form. He had been working on it for years—that is, for longer than the Civil War itself. The subtext was the spiritual relationship between two characters, “Reb” and “Yank.” At a key moment, Reb says (in five syllables—it was the last line of one of the haiku), “Look away, young man.” Awful. Positively awful. Why Venders hadn’t chosen to write about the *Sengoku* period, Japan’s civil war, instead of the American Civil War, *if he were so Japanesey*, I hadn’t the foggiest. Once or twice, as he was reading through the sequence, he looked at me and said, “Hey, man, is that all right with you?” (Reader, I “looked away.”) The Japanese members of the group

were entirely compliant, of course. Venders, I believe, mistook their smiles for appreciation when it was evident that they were patronizing him. I did not submit any of my haiku for consideration. I hadn't for some time. One of the three, Venders, Whiting, or Strada, invariably detected something vulgar about the way I put things. My haiku were considered "unlikely." That was the term they applied not just to my work but to my life.

It was a late autumn Thursday, slight chill in the wind, and Kenzo was at his regular spot. He was wearing a sweater and slacks, his usual inconspicuous attire. Someone, a Japanese man, was just leaving the scene with what looked like a certificate. "Kenzo," I said. "It's good to see you—or not to."

"To see or not to see. Is that the question?"

"You're self-effacing is what I mean."

"All here," he said, tapping himself on the shoulder.

I mentioned a nearby café, different from the one we had gone to previously, and he assented. We got a small table and ordered blend coffees. There was a glass pyramid (an I.M. Pei knockoff) in the plaza in front of the café, and a weir that emptied into a pool.

"What would you like to talk about today?" he asked, putting himself in a listening posture, relaxed but attentive, hands in lap.

"Kenzo, you said that you lived in America for some time."

"Yes, I was enrolled at one of the community colleges in southern California."

"But you already had a degree from a Japanese university?"

He nodded in the affirmative.

"What did you study here in Japan?"

"*Ningen kankei.*"

Human relations, aka communication studies. Basically about preparing Japanese students to face the outside world. It was a popular major.

"Were you a good student?"

He looked off, pondered the question. "I always knew what the professors wanted."

"You knew how to listen."

"That was my talent," he said, bowing.

"And you gave it to them."

"Word for word."

"You were a sponge."

"Like a sponge," he corrected.

“Yes, of course, *like*.” I hesitated. “I’m trying to picture you in California, Kenzo. Presumably you were a listener there too.”

“I heard America talking.”

“I’m sure you got an earful.”

He didn’t deny it. “One gentleman attempted to sell me the Pacific Coast Highway,” he said, giving me a droll look.

“Right. After leaving America, you returned to Japan?”

“I came back via Europe.”

“Tell me, what exactly have you learned from all this listening?”

“People love to talk!” he said, enjoying the obviousness of it. In fact, he was quite pleased with his answer and nearly fell off his chair laughing.

“Point taken, Kenzo. Humans are loquacious.” I paused. “And you don’t think passing out certificates is a little outlandish?”

“A little,” he said.

“But you do it anyway?”

“Yes.”

“It must get boring at times.”

He shook his head.

“What standard do you use for choosing the particular *listenee*?”

“I can sense it.”

“You can tell?”

“Yes.”

“There’s a needed-to-be-heeded look?”

“I can tell.”

“Not to belabor the point, but...”

“Yes,” he said, beating me to it, “I could sense that you wanted to talk.”

I paused, not sure whether I wished to pursue this further.

“Kenzo, it may surprise you to learn that I haven’t always been a talker.”

“Really?”

“I sometimes feel that silence is my true language.”

He seemed to find that amusing, if not incredible.

“No, really, I have to make an effort. People don’t always pick that up. Of course, once I get started...”

“You want to make sense of things,” he helped.

“Yes, I want to disentangle all the details. Recently the process seems to have accelerated. I’m in a rush, if not a frenzy, to get things straight.”

I took a sip of my coffee, and he sipped his. I looked out on the plaza. The sky had clouded over, and an autumn wind was blowing a plastic

bag against the glass pyramid. The bag inflated and ballooned into the air and sailed off.

“Kenzo, do you—forgive me and please don’t feel compelled to answer—do you have a family?”

“No one doesn’t have a family,” he said.

“Of course, technically, but—”

“I live alone, if that’s what you mean.”

“You’re single.”

“Yes.”

“By choice?”

“No. My wife passed away.”

The remark caught me by surprise, and for a moment I couldn’t go on. “I’m so sorry.”

“No need to be.”

I slumped back.

“It’s been several years,” he said.

“That’s very sad, Kenzo.”

“A natural occurrence.”

“Sure, but...”

“Dying is as natural as living.”

“Is it?”

I wondered if I should drop the topic, but Kenzo didn’t appear bothered. He was his usual calm and collected self.

“You married after returning from California?”

“Yes, that’s right. Yoko and I had known each other a long time.”

“Forgive me for being so pointed, Kenzo, but you started passing out certificates after your wife passed away.”

“That’s right.”

“Then there must have been some connection.”

“I don’t really associate the two.”

“Why not?”

“I listened before my wife passed away, and I have listened since then. It comes naturally to me. I’m a listener.”

“Forget listening for the moment, Kenzo. How did the event affect you personally?”

“It was painful,” he said.

I sat back, stumped. Stunned, even. It seemed as if I were more affected by the event than he had been.

“But you say you’ve adjusted?”

“Yes, I believe I have.”

“You had no children?”

“Yoko passed away before we could have them, but we had planned to. It’s possible that I will marry again.”

I looked out on the plaza, and so did Kenzo. The bag had come back. It was throwing fits, inflating, deflating, scraping along, soaring. I surmised that there was a lot of deferred grief in my young companion.

“Look, Kenzo, I can listen too, you know. If you ever want to...”

“Thank you, Henry, but it’s not necessary.”

Dwelling excessively on loss would be morbid. One had to get on with life. Presumably that was Kenzo’s view. It was no doubt better for me to let the matter alone rather than roil things up. I’d talked too much already.

“We Japanese aren’t forthcoming, I’m afraid,” he added.

“You don’t like to reveal yourselves. Yes, I know the story. We Americans believe in letting things out, and you believe in keeping them in.”

My coffee had cooled, but I took a sip. Kenzo didn’t touch his.

“How are things at the Thunder Group?” he asked, changing the subject—for my benefit, it would seem. He was doing fine.

“You really want to hear about haiku?”

“Mr. Venders’s haiku are not particularly good?” he prompted.

“Let’s put it this way, Kenzo,” I said, falling in line. “They’re blue when they should be gray, and gray when they should be blue.”

“And how is the university?” he inquired.

“I am not a good teacher anymore, I’m afraid. The spark is gone.”

I went over a few things. Gossip. Shoptalk. Departmental stuff. It couldn’t have been of much interest, but he listened as carefully as always and didn’t hurry me in the least. He seemed to have endless time. Eternity, even. On the return to the station, he asked if I were married or had ever been. I said no, but that there had been some close calls. He asked if I were lonely. Did I seem lonely? I countered. He said he didn’t know; appearances were deceiving. At the station he filled out the Statement of Full Attention, presented it to me, and I signed it. We parted pleasantly, but I felt a little unsettled.

Kenzo was the most detached being I had ever encountered. All in all, a person *above* things. I, on the other hand, was below them. No, I had never married, unusual for a man of my generation, though there had been close calls. I was not a lonely man, however. I had been an intellectual drifter for a good part of my life. I had, so to speak, opted for the “cult of experience.” When I finally did come to consider marriage (the permanent thing, not the drive-by that it’s become), it was too late, psy-

chologically speaking. You might say that I had outlived the traditional institution. Of course, I *could* still marry. It wasn't over till it was over. In fact, I appreciated women now more than ever. When I was younger, I had never really understood them. Loved them, yes, but couldn't fathom them. Testosterone makes you half crazy and virtually blind. I wished now I could go back and apologize for all the wild and inconsiderate things I had inflicted on the women I'd dated. Can't imagine what I was thinking. Wasn't thinking, actually. More attention needed to be paid to young men's ignorance of women. The sheer incomprehension. Of course, I had been hurt myself. That first love affair had caused great pain. That kind of love you can have only once. Thank goodness, you think later, but at the time, no, you want it more than life itself. First love is about "wholeness." The person you love is whole and indivisible. When that comes crashing to an end (inevitably or not, I don't know), you start dividing, sectioning, partitioning, substituting the part for the whole, etc. You lose the unity of vision. You become unsuitable and uncivilized and go through a long period of restless and erratic and uncertain behavior. Only with time, and when you're on the wind-down, and if you're lucky, do you get some of that vision back. It's not automatic...

I had a restless winter. A winter of what I call "false imperatives." I seemed to be going through a cycle of some kind. Reality wasn't snapping to. Trivial stuff, really trivial, embarrassingly and inexplicably trivial stuff, bothered me. Generally speaking, anything that winter that was misaligned or out of order got on my nerves. I lacked all patience. I was irritable. Irascible. A book slanted at the wrong angle, my shoes not lined up neatly in front of the *getabako*—these things would drive me to distraction. I got angry at handkerchiefs, static electricity, plastic bags, the vegetable grater, my pencil sharpener, the hangers in the closet. In periods of stress we want symmetry; we want evenness; we want grooves. We want things to line up neatly and stop attacking us.

It was a warm spring day, and South Shinjuku was crowded. I spotted Kenzo at his usual location and went up to him. He was dressed in his usual casual attire and had his briefcase under his arm. I apologized for my long absence.

"It's a pleasure to see you again," he said simply.

"I expect you were busy over the winter with—" What was the right word? What were we to each other? Patients? Clients? Followers?

"Demand was steady," he said.

“A walk and a talk?”

He nodded and we started off. As we moved along, I told him about my recent frustrations, the unevenness, all the non-essential things that had bothered me over the winter. “Ever happen to you?” I asked him.

He pointed to himself. To his nose. It’s a Japanese gesture of self-identification, though you don’t see it so often anymore.

“Yes, you, Kenzo. Ever been bothered by small stuff? Lint that wouldn’t flick? Dropped chopsticks?”

He pondered it.

“Don’t give it too much thought,” I said.

“No,” he admitted after serious reflection.

“Well, I seem to be going through a transition period. May I tell you something that happened to me the other day?”

“Certainly.”

“I was doing computations, writing totals into a notebook, and one of my threes morphed into a crab.”

He tilted his head slightly and stroked his chin.

“Crab pincers are anatomically interesting,” he said.

“No doubt, Kenzo, but this was an angry and aggressive crab.”

“They say the brush doesn’t lie.”

“Then I must have been using a prevaricating pencil.”

He stepped back to give me some space.

“Yes, I know, Kenzo, I have an irrational side.”

“But you are the clarifier.”

“Clarifying is about getting control of details. At present, the details are running wild.”

“Try not to worry about it.”

“I’m trying not to.”

“Have there been other things like that recently, if I may ask?”

“Fresh packs.”

“Pardon?”

“Paks-in-snaks. The little pouches they put in snacks to keep them fresh.”

“You object to the chemicals?”

“I object to the obstacles. The *paks* get in the way of the *snaks*.”

“It’s a small matter, isn’t it?”

“That’s the trouble, Kenzo. Things that don’t matter, matter. Minor is major. My life is upside down.”

We came to a red traffic signal and waited at the curb.

“Pythagoras didn’t like beans,” he said.

“And Sherlock Holmes didn’t fancy oysters. The great ratiocinator had a nightmare about the earth being overrun with them. I’m sure you knew that.”

He sloshed sideways, a little predictably.

“Far be it from me, Kenzo, to impede your devolution...”

The light changed and we crossed.

“But your irritations eventually go away, don’t they?”

“They do, but they are replaced by others,” I admitted glumly.

“And the process has been happening with greater frequency lately?”

“Afraid so. Little things, unclarified, devilish details are overrunning me!”

We went down a small street and headed in the direction of Harajuku. There was a pedestrian bridge over Meiji Boulevard, and we climbed the steps, stopped halfway across, and surveyed the traffic below us.

“So what do you think, Kenzo, about my troubles? The riddle of my vexation.”

“You’re being too hard on yourself.”

“Easy for you to say. You have mastered the art of self-possession.”

“We’re all human.”

“Are we? I’m not so sure about you.”

He smiled. I’d like to say he smiled enigmatically, but he wasn’t like that. We descended from the pedestrian bridge.

“Do your irritations over small things prevent you from writing haiku?” he asked.

“As a matter of fact, Kenzo, they don’t. I was able to compose quite a few this past winter. I couldn’t fold a towel or align my shoes, but I could compose poems.”

“And your haiku group—how did the winter meeting go?”

“We met physically, but there was no meeting of the minds.”

“You don’t think you make too much of the group?”

“Exaggerate and overreact?”

“Yes.”

“Not altogether impossible.”

“When you make a haiku, you make a big thing out of a small thing,” he said, apparently trying to pep me up.

“It’s okay for haiku poets to make mountains out of molehills, true enough, but only in their poems,” I said.

There was an empty lot up ahead, and when we came to it, we paused briefly. Weeds and stones. Some debris. Rather desolate. According to the sign, a high-rise would soon occupy the site.

“Do you worry about ultimate things?” Kenzo inquired.

“Doesn’t everybody, in one way or the other?”

“And what have you come up with?”

“I think of ultimate things, but I don’t know what to think of ultimate things.”

“It can be confusing.”

“Exceedingly.”

“Do you write haiku about deep things?”

“I try to keep it light. That’s what I’m best at.”

“You write about—?”

“The frustrations of daily life. Whatever discombobulates me, which is just about everything.”

He mulled it over. That’s what he appeared to be doing, anyway. Of course, he could have been thinking about oysters. We descended the pedestrian bridge and walked down Meiji Boulevard and were soon in the heart of Harajuku, if Harajuku had a heart. The neighborhood was a noisy, motley place for young Tokyoites. If you wanted to have a meaningful conversation, Harajuku was not the place to go. And that’s exactly where we were going. A group of kids danced by, arm in arm. They were wearing garish outfits and didn’t have a care in the world, or were trying to give the world that impression. The carnival atmosphere suddenly reminded me of Poe and his mad fictional characters. I recalled as well his claim that the death of a beautiful woman was the only fit subject for a poem. I wondered if Kenzo knew about that. We passed Takeshita Street. Young people were everywhere now. Colorful congestion, you might call it. We surveyed the scene in silence for a while, and then Kenzo looked at his watch. He glanced at it; he didn’t gawk. Nonetheless the meaning was the same.

“Discussion of a thoughtful nature can be tiring,” he said, and patted me on the shoulder sympathetically.

“You said it, man.”

I looked around. I could have used an extension, but I knew not to ask. Kenzo had his schedule.

“I always feel I’m taking advantage of your good nature, Kenzo.”

“That’s what it’s there for,” he smiled.

He removed a Statement of Full Attention, filled it in, and I signed it and transferred it to my own briefcase. We bowed to each other, and he stepped into Harajuku Station, apparently headed back to Shinjuku to listen to someone else. He looked as fresh as a mint.

Kohi Ten was crowded, but I managed to get a window seat. All around me were people not talking to each other. That is, they were on their

cell phones talking to and texting people who were not there. But they weren't ignoring the people who were physically there with them; those people were also talking to people who were not there. The people not there were doing precisely the same thing, wherever they were. I had no cell phone, so I was talking to myself. Internal texting. What in the past was called thinking. My last session with Kenzo had given me some things to consider. I was now at the rock bottom of my fifties. What would my legacy be? What mark would I leave? In all probability, none. No progeny. No students recalling a beloved teacher. No PhD candidates dissertating on my work. No critic to stick up for me—or even stick it to me. No prizes. My haiku chapbooks would be pulped. My one work of scholarship, *Pedagogical Predecessors*, was long out of print. There would be no digital devices among my effects. I would not even be transformed into data. I would pass without a twitter. I opened my notebook and glanced randomly and a little glumly over my most recent entries. I read:

sleeve trying to get my arm into it

Oh, yes. That one. A record of yet another of my skirmishes with the quotidian. I happened to have been thrashing about and in a rush to get off to the U. The shirt in question (which was over my head) had seemed to possess multiple sleeve-and-head openings. It was like a two-person shirt. Did you have to specify shirt-for-one these days? As I had told Kenzo, I wrote about what discombobulated me. I turned a few pages and came to another of my one-liners:

I forget what it means but I wrote it himself

Clear metaphysical uncertainty. What identity would be if it were a shirt for multiple occupants. I sipped my Kohi Ten coffee. Looked out at the arcade across the street. Some haiku poets specialized in cherry blossoms. Some, like Vender-Bender, in civil wars. I specialized in the metaphysical twists of daily existence. Vengeful sleeves. Quirky situations. I paged onward once more and came to:

no idea what the building I'm drinking coffee in looks like

On the face of it, not a gripping aperçu. What Venders & Co. would have put down in haughty fashion as “unlikely, Stark.” It possessed no traditional elements. No sticky pistils. No bees nectaring. No moonlight on the water. But I was glad I had written it. Such inadvertence, such

not-noticing was the stuff of our lives. The so-called Great Themes didn't excite me. Ironically, I was not serious when I wrote seriously. My themes were the Un-Great Themes. I had found my voice. It was urban frustration. Discomfort was the soul of my verse, and the verse of my soul. As for the ultimate things, well, as I mentioned to Kenzo, I thought about them, but I didn't know what to think about them. I finished my mocha and descended from my stool by the window.

"You should try conversing with one another," I said to the two young women chattering on their cell phones at the table just below. "When you're dead, you won't be able to."

"*Kakko ii!*" they squealed, which meant that I was cool and stylish.

The Thunder Group met in early August. Vender-Bender supplied a progress report on *Blue Gray*. Again, I had to wonder why, if he were so deeply *Japanesey*, he hadn't written a haiku sequence about Ieyasu or Nobunaga. I sat patiently through his lecture (retreats, bugle calls, lost hats), smiled when the others did, and refrained from comment. No one else submitted samples of their writing. Privately (in the thickets of my mind) I had taken to referring to the sequence as *Yank and Rub*.

Afterward, I went for a beer with Shoko, or "Sophie," Nogawa, one of the Japanese members of the group. Cute. Thirties. We had a rapport. She had been a student in Toronto, and someone there had dubbed her Sophie, and that was what she went by now, at least at the Thunder Kai. Kind of thing happens all the time in Japan. Joji becomes George. Mari, Mary. Frequently there's no connection at all. Yuki just wants to be called Ellen. Anyway, I asked Sophie indirectly what she thought of our group. I didn't want to come out and make accusations, but I suggested it had been better in the past when more than one person spoke. She hemmed and hawed, twisted and turned like a morning glory, and finally said, "If you want to be a good writer, you can't worry about being a nice person." She smiled when she said it. Was she calling me a wimp? Perhaps I needed to speak up at the meetings and challenge Venders's haiku hegemony.

I didn't see Kenzo that summer. Some of the inconsequential things that had annoyed me had run their course—or been superseded by different annoyances that I wasn't yet ready to rant about. Every so often I would reach into my desk drawer and remove the Statements of Full Attention that Kenzo had given me and exclaim, "The man is crazy!" Indeed he was, and his Statements proved it. And yet he was fun to be with, and I would laugh. Then I would feel sad: no, he was like that character in *The*

Day of the Locust, the writer of the sob column who had nobody to sob for him. Surely a man such as Kenzo who had lost his wife at a young age could not have been unaffected. He was a man of hidden sorrows. Had to be. I veered back and forth.

When autumn rolled around again, I decided to drop by South Shinjuku and say hello. I took the Odakyu train and then walked to the spot where Kenzo always posted himself, but he wasn't around. Perhaps he was on a break from listening. Since I was in no hurry, I took a seat on a bench and idled away some time. An hour or so elapsed and still no Kenzo. I walked over to Kinokuniya and did some browsing. I bought a book of haiku, then came back to my spot and sat down again. The air had turned cooler, so I went into Starbucks and had a coffee. I got a window seat that overlooked the plaza. I read and drank my coffee and glanced up many times, but Kenzo never showed. Finally, I left.

Autumn dragged on, and I went through a somewhat lugubrious period. Paging through my notebook once again, I was startled to find that I had written the following monostich:

not knowing it feeling it death

The poem was out of character. Not about urban frustration and confusion at all. I couldn't even remember the circumstances under which I had written it. This was a little disconcerting, actually, as if someone else had written it—as if another of my selves, a hidden Henry, had scribbled it down. Perhaps it was the mood of the season: guttered leaves, denuded trees, shearing winds. An autumn genre poem, that is. I talked with a few people at the university, but that went nowhere. My colleagues either felt I needed to suck it up (one told me I was running out of lifetime—accept it), or they shifted instead to discussion of their own problems. What I really wanted was to talk to Kenzo. The imper-turbable little man would know what to say. He would make me feel better. I returned several times to South Shinjuku, but again he wasn't around. Then one day—it was a Thursday—I saw another man standing where Kenzo had always stationed himself. He was dressed in more or less the same outfit. I got the impression that he was a “listener” too. He even looked like Kenzo. Maybe he was his replacement. I left Starbucks, crossed the plaza, and approached the man.

“Henry, good to see you,” he said.

The familiarity threw me off, of course. Who was he anyway?

“Kenzo told me about you.”

“Did he?”

“He’s good at describing people,” the man said quickly. “I am his older brother!”

“How do you do, older brother.”

We shook hands.

“Would you like to walk a bit? Kenzo said you were a walker.”

Apparently he was trying to put me at ease, though he was the one who needed calming. He took out a handkerchief and mopped his brow.

“No walking today, thank you. So what’s happened to your bro?”

“Kenzo has moved on.”

“Moved on? That sounds ominous. Has something happened to him?”

“Oh, no, he’s quite well.”

“If he’s quite well, why has he moved on?”

“Ah, yes,” he laughed, “you are the clarifier.” He pronounced it “crarifier.”

“I like things neat and clear.”

“You see,” he said, choosing his words carefully, “my brother has retired.”

“He’s off the streets, you mean? No more Certificates of Full Attention?”

“That’s right. If I may be candid, Henry, it’s better.”

Of course, no one could deny that what Kenzo did was eccentric, if not preposterous. Apparently the family had staged some kind of intervention.

“Kenzo said you were in Shinjuku every Thursday about this time, and we wanted to bring you up to...” He fumbled and once again resorted to the handkerchief.

“To speed?” I prompted.

“Precisely, Henry.”

“I don’t know if I should be flattered or disappointed or both. I had hoped to see your brother again. Counted on it, really.”

“That’s why I wanted to talk with you, Henry.”

“I’m not the only one who will be disappointed,” I pointed out.

“So *desu ne*,” he said, nodding. He seemed a little overwhelmed by what his younger brother had set in motion.

“His wife’s death, at such a young age, must have been traumatic,” I said.

“He kept it inside. It’s the Japanese way.”

“He’s an artist, you know.”

A wind arose, scattering leaves and litter across the plaza.

“Kenzo can always contact me at the university,” I added.

“Thank you, Henry. He sometimes quotes your words.”

“That would put him in the minority.”

“He wanted me to inform you that you were a great help to him.”

We bowed to one another, and older brother backed away slowly, having acquitted himself of his filial responsibilities. He was soon out of sight.