

## James Alan McPherson

### FROM *CRABCAKES*

Last evening I found on my desk, under a great pile of unopened mail, a letter sent to me by Mr. Takashi Ishii. I don't know *why* it remained unopened for so long. But at the same time I *do* know. On some level of my spirit I *did* sense, when this letter arrived from Chiba, that something had happened to Ms. Natsuko Ishii because the letter was from her husband, whom I had never met. It must have arrived here at a time when the pressures on me, or my own self-absorptions, were so great, especially in the months after my stay in the hospital, that I never went back to the old letters on my desk. A great backlog of work was waiting for me when I recovered. I remember that you and Hamamoto-*sensei* called me from Japan during that time. Ms. Natsuko Ishii also called, and afterwards she made the kindest gesture in the world. She sent me by special mail a compact disc of the sound of running water. It is called "Water, Gift of Life." I lay in my bed and listened to winter storms, seasounds, mountain waters running downhill. Ms. Ishii's gift arrived here in the late spring of 1993. By late August, unknown to me until just the other day, she was dead.

Mr. Ishii said in his form letter to all their friends:

It is so sad for me to inform you that Natsuko had suffered from heart disease since last May and passed away on August 19, 1993 at the age of 48. When I came home from office, I found her sleeping in her bed, and shortly after that I realized that she was in permanent sleep . . .

The mysterious thing, Kyo, is that I still have on the wall in this room a black cloth scroll-calendar for 1993 that Ms. Ishii sent me at Christmas of 1992. I don't know why, the *reason*, I kept it on the wall for over two years. The months and days are listed in both *Kanji* and Roman numbers. At the bottom of the scroll there is an impressive *shodo*. I have never bothered to have it translated. Also on the black cloth, above the listing of months, there are paintings of beautiful sum-

mer flowers. When Ms. Takahashi was helping me to learn *hiragana*, I got over-enthusiastic and began, prematurely, to write letters in *hiragana* to my friends there. I wrote a letter in *hiragana* to Ms. Ishii. Ms. Takahashi told me that the Japanese characters for “Natsuko” mean “summer flowers.”

Each time I look at that calendar now I feel the deepest guilt, shame, what you call *haji*.

Ms. Natsuko was one of the most sensitive and loving women I have ever known. She seemed driven to do good in life, to make some difference. Her husband’s letter said that she had her first heart attack in 1972, four years after they were married. They were students at Stanford University then, and Natsuko’s condition was diagnosed by the doctors there as “Sportsmen’s Heart.” The second heart attack came in 1977, when they were back in Chiba. Her husband said in his letter:

The situation was serious this time. She was sent to hospital by ambulance and immediately got surgical operation. Fortunately, enough operation was successful and she became perfectly well after six months stay in hospital. This experience had changed her way of living. She started volunteer activities, some of which were conducted through international networks. She devoted herself to volunteer jobs and worked three to four days a week at office and usually stayed late at night at her home desk. Fifteen years have passed since she got operation, and nothing had happened. However, those excess activities seem to become overburden to her weak heart, and again she needed doctor’s help in May 1993. She was not so bad this time and we made an appointment with her doctor for elaborate check up on August 20, just next day she slept permanently. I and my children, Yu and Kyoko, are very much proud of her, and wish to express our hearty thanks to all of you for your encouragement, kindness and friendship given to Natsuko and to my family . . .

*These are the facts.* I also have on another wall in this room a framed rice-painting she sent me. She sent an additional one for my aunt, who

now sits in Congress representing a poor farming district in North Carolina. I think Ms. Ishii wanted her to look at the rice-painting and begin to recognize the common bond that all farmers, in the rice fields of Japan or in the tobacco fields of North Carolina, *share*. I wonder now whether Eva Clayton has ever studied the picture I sent her, or whether it even occupies a place on one of her walls. From her point of view, it must be only a gift from a stranger in a foreign country. Limited as she is by the confines of history and judgment, as well as of language, she could never understand the *life* beyond the script in the rice-painting.

Death is now walking in a greater than usual hurry in this country. Your predictions those many years ago are now coming true for me. The impulse to kill has spread from the cities, where it had been contained and promoted as an aberration, and has fled to the suburbs and to the small towns. There are now armed standoffs, sieges, revenge killings, moral-dandy killings, bombings, suicides—every possible expression of twisted and perverted passions. The corporate focus on the externalities of this madness, the institutionalization of its form as normative, is a certain sign that this country is going through the nervous breakdown you once predicted. But obscured by the blaring details of public deaths are the imprints of the much more mundane private ones. News comes each day of friends who have died or who are dying. A close friend in Chicago has recovered from one form of cancer after a regimen of chemotherapy only to find that another form of the same disease has taken up residence, a life of its own, in his pancreas. Another close friend in the Northeast has had the very same cancer and the very same treatment, but the growth has only been arrested, and has been diagnosed as lingering in his cells, biding its time, until it is again strong enough to make a murderous assault on his life. He writes to me that his friends have advised him to take a leave from his regular job and learn, after a full lifetime devoted to work, to smell the flowers. He offered the same advice to me. I wrote back to him that both of us, like all other people, had come into this life lured by the promise that we would eventually be able to smell the flowers. I told him that he and I, like everyone else, had been badly misinformed.

Mr. Masaki Kondo, in his Christmas card to me several years ago, advised me to keep quiet and serene. He spoke of a new age coming.

He also spoke of you, and of some of the same things you and I discussed. I read over his words last night as I thought back on Ms. Ishii. She was serene, gentle, with sympathetic currents as deep and as calm as a pool of mountain water. She was, in fact, as in name, a “summer flower.” You would have liked her a great deal. I met her during my second visit to Japan, around the same time I met you. She was a friend of Kio Ono, who also lives in Chiba. Ono told her that I was coming to Japan, and she called me here, several days before I was to leave Iowa. She asked me to give a speech to the group, with which both she and Kio Ono were associated. My intention that spring, in returning to Japan, was to look for some flowers to smell. I was in search of that elusive area containing respite and freedom from responsibilities. I was also still poisoned by the “Orientalism,” the romantic projection of all the world’s mysteries on the shadowy East, the *kage* that is the eternal disease of Western men. I had nothing of concrete value to say to anyone. My greatest interest that spring, my only pleasure, was in selecting gifts *here* to give to the friends I had made *there*. I had recently attended an art exhibit, and had purchased a painting of a Caribbean woman done with great sensitivity by another woman, a Jewish woman, whose work I admired. I chose this painting as *omiyage* for Ms. Ishii and her group.

I presented it to her, and met her, at her office in Tokyo, several days after I arrived. She was a small and delicate woman, middle-aged and settled. But there was a nervous energy in her, a quickness of spirit, that caused her to move slightly and make private sounds to herself, as if she were in constant communication with a series of intimate intuitions. She radiated emotional energy. I had, as I have told you, gone to Tokyo again armed with a private plan to look again for those elusive flowers. But Kio Ono had already made other plans for me (I know that you met him recently at a party because his most current letter to me said “I felt as if I had seen him so often before on account of your repeated references to him in your letters to me . . .”). Ono had assessed me as first of all an American, and secondly as a black American, and he had quietly arranged a talk for me at the American Embassy in Fukuoka. He and Ms. Ishii had also arranged another talk for me before the members of their group, but at the American Embassy in Tokyo, one week from the date of my arrival. The last thing I wanted to

be in Japan was an American, and the next to last thing I wanted to talk about was the condition of black people here. I had, as I have said before, gone there with my own plans. I wanted to be free of emotional connections to this country. I had been under extraordinary pressures for well over ten years, and in Japan I thought that I had at last found a place where the flowers *really existed* and were worth the smelling. I wanted to see Hamamot-*sensei* again, and Makino, and Nopher, and Mr. Sengoku. I wanted to spend time with Hiroko McDermott and her husband, Joe. They had already lent me their apartment in Nakano, and had already invited me to dinner at their home at I.C.U. I had known Hiroko since 1968, and I was looking forward to her gentle laughter and kindness. I wanted simply to be inactive, and *free*. But I agreed to go to Fukuoka, so I would not dishonor Kio Ono. He arranged for Ms. Ishii, who seemed to be the total work-center of the office, to escort me from Hiroko's apartment in Nakano to the airport for a flight to Fukuoka. She brought me an *omake* the day she arrived to escort me. She even took me to lunch. I could speak very little Japanese, and she spoke very little English. But we managed to communicate through gestures and through sympathy. I remember that, in the somewhat sterile atmosphere of that plastic restaurant in Nakano, she offered half her food to me when I had finished my own. I refused three times to accept it. She offered it four times, to provide me with strength for the flight into Fukuoka. I finally accepted part of her meal because, like a caring sister or like a loving mother, she seemed used to seeing to the needs of the men in her life. Ms. Ishii had great *shizen na kimochi*, great "naturalness."

We rode the train from *Nakano hon machi* into the center of Tokyo, then transferred to a bullet train for the airport. You have probably noticed, Kyo, from my demeanor during those times when we took trips together here, that I tend to become self-protective and extremely circumspect when I travel. When Makino met me at Narita, when I first arrived in Japan, he noted, and made fun of, the large amount of luggage—many, many books, appliances, food, home essentials—that I had brought there with me. I had simply tried to transfer the security of this house into another part of the world. For the past thirteen years or so, I have grown painfully cautious and aware of myself as a black American male. Whereas, before those years, I had considered myself

as primarily human. Something happened to my soul to cause it to withdraw into a category created for it, and projected *onto* me, from places outside my *self*. This is the burden carried by all black Americans, most especially the males, because those around us, depending on their fears or on their perversities, or even on their passing moods of the day, have the capacity to distort our most basic of *human* gestures into something incomprehensible in human terms. I will not belabor this tired point except to say that this is the great *koan* for black people here. It is how to make a *human* gesture, a *simple and clean human gesture*, within the context of perceptions grounded in hostility and fear, and have it communicated, *in normal human terms*, with *shizen na kimochi*, in its full *anticipated* intention. The *koan* consists of the paradox generated by the clear *intention* of the action which loses its clarity, *and its intention*, within the instant of time the gesture is interpreted by other intelligences which distort it. After too many personal experiences of willful distortion, gestures grounded in human impulses, in *shizen na kimochi*, begin to lose their purity of motive and begin to be perverted by calculations, second thoughts, self-protective censorings, or even by passionate confidencings. One result of this focus on the total protection of the self, by absolutely any means at hand, is the reduction and the negation of the full *human* self. One then becomes a parody of a human being, because the calculated social gestures one begins to make, their practice and refinements, the inevitable outcome of living within a hostile environment, become bent out of sync with the continuity of *universal human impulses*. This practiced discrepancy or distortion, between the inside and the outside, the *clue* and the *view*, is in large part responsible for the comic black face, the smiling image, that is so popular in the West. These were the broken human spirits, the “out-of-human” comic black masks, the *eta*, introduced by the Portuguese into *Edo* in the 16th century from among the baggage of the *kurofune*, the “Black Ships,” which brought the first *permanent* images of the West.

I wore such a self-protective black mask, the black American version of your *sumairu*, while riding with Ms. Ishii on the crowded bullet train to the airport. The early afternoon train was crammed with Japanese—*Juku* students dozing in their uniforms over open books on their laps, their yellow caps lowered almost in unison while they dozed; Japanese salarymen in their grey and blue suits pressed together while grasping

straps like so many elegant sardines; young office girls in their light summer dresses and their uniformly red lips and heavily powdered round faces; older Japanese women, looking harried and tired, with babies clinging to their backs or with sacks of groceries; an unbelievably old and wrinkled woman, bent almost in two probably from the rice fields, escorted by and wedged between two elegantly painted younger Japanese women in flowery *kimono*. I remained the only foreigner in the car.

Mr. Yoshimeki told me once that when one Japanese looks into the face of another, he sees in it Japan and all its history. By contrast, in this country, when one American looks into the face of another American, which face is not like his own, he sees in it *terror* or the possibility of *chaos*. The current euphemism employed to mask or to defuse this terror is the word “diversity.” It was under the protective power of this euphemism, now being slowly extended into Japan, that I rode on the bullet train, seated next to Ms. Ishii in her blue summer dress, my deadpan *sumairu* in place. I sat with my suitcase on the floor very close to my feet and my briefcase on my lap. The overcrowded car was heated and moist. Ms. Ishii sat squeezed close to me. She was intent on reading something I had written many years ago. Ono had translated it into Japanese and, unknown to me, had given it to her. I noticed that she was crying, but for reasons unknown to me. I determined to *ignore* her.

In this country, given the chaotic ways in which our emotions are structured, two people from different backgrounds, no matter how close or intimate they are, would hardly dare to express the depths of that intimacy in a public space full of strangers. We have learned that it is best to pretend to ignore each other. I read recently in a book by a writer who was investigating the social structure of my own home town, an observation about the bizarre extremes of *this concession to non-action*, to an *absence of shizen na kimochi*, as a social norm. This writer observed two people, a white female and a black male, jogging at the same time each morning in a public park. One day the white female would be wearing a certain sweatshirt, and the next morning the black male would be wearing the same sweatshirt. And yet, while they jogged together along the same path in the city park each morning, they never spoke to each other or acknowledged that they knew each other at all. It became obvious to the writer that they were lovers,

so the public ritual seemed to him absurd, if not comic. He could not penetrate into the perverse distortion of *self* that had developed from their commitment to *non-action* as a norm in the life between them. I understood this commitment to non-commitment perfectly because it was *my own* commitment on that crowded bullet train, seated next to Ms. Ishii while she cried over something. In deference to her social station, and to her risk of potential censorship by the car-full of same-seeming Japanese, I thought it best to *protect* her by *ignoring* her tears. *I pretended to not know her as a person.*

So we rode on through the underbelly of Tokyo. This was on a day in early June, in the rising heat of a Tokyo summer. Everyone on the train was sweating. My own sweat was especially profuse behind my black *sumairu*. I ignored the warm water trickling down my face. I tried to ignore my growing wetness with the resolve of a *samurai*. Ms. Ishii had taken out her handkerchief to either wipe away her own sweat or to wipe away her tears. Whatever her motive, she glanced at me, observed the sweat pouring down my face, made a private sound like a moan, and in the very same action, in solution of the *koan*, or paradox, that I had brought into Japan with me, she lifted her handkerchief to my face and busily wiped away my sweat. It was an expression of the most profound *shizen na kimoichi*. Your word for the *reverberation* I felt is *yoin*.

Now, Kyo, I must leave behind me, as Mr. Kondo advised, all of the inheritances, the intellectual inheritances, from the 19th century, and enter into the texture of this *koan* stripped of my *reason*. There are known to be some mountains whose chemical compositions predispose them to always attract the same lightning that bypasses surrounding mountains. There must be something in the nature of the chemical sympathy between the particles in the elements of both weather and soil, *an electricity*, that *knows* it is at home in either place. The lightning *seeming* to strike the mountain top might be said to be no more than a *celebration* of energy particles recognizing the familiar chemical elements of *home*. We can see, from a distance, the terrible energy of the transit. *We do not see the joy of recognition* that is the *cause*. From our limited, and *reasoning* points of view, this particular mountain is *unlucky*. But from the *mountain's point of view* each lightning bolt received by it is *confirmation* of the supremacy of its place in the natural world. This

way of seeing might also apply to human beings. We sense that there are certain people whose presence always seems to attract bees, mosquitos, or trouble. They seem to possess a terrible sympathy with negative energies, always seem to bring out the worst in other people. But there are also *others* of them whose very presence brings out *the very best* in people. It is almost as if the purity of their chemical composition radiates out into life and attracts to them *the most perverse*, or *the very best*, elements in *others*. And these others, because they know, on an intuitive or chemical level, their own deficiencies, follow the hunger of their own *famine* to that abundantly overbalanced source, offered by the extraordinary person. This is your *yin-yang* given back to you through the terms of antagonistic co-operation. Such "special" people tend to offer, in their persons, a potential for balance for the extremities of souls existing in others. The great writers of the West are skilled in fleshing out the mysterious dance of this dualism: Jacob and Esau, Jesus and Judas, Job and Satan, Faust and Mephistopheles, Billy Budd and Claggart, the *striga* produced by the hysterics of the European Dark Ages, which afterwards reconstructed the world in terms of Jew and Gentile, Black and White, East and West, *Them and Us*. The relentless emotional logic of this dualistic dance is being played out here, at this very moment, in terms of the group self-fortification that is everywhere the primary enterprise in this country.

But what if, the Western dualistic dance aside, nature does *indeed* throw up, once in a while, people whose emotional vitalities, whose intentions, are predominantly pure, or *shizen na kimochi*? What if this advantage allows the intuitive senses of such people to be much more keenly attuned than the intuitive senses of others? And what if their emotional senses, their feeling tones, are so steeped in human sympathy that they could know, intuitively, on the *insides* of themselves, *exactly what is missing* in others? Mr. Yoshimeki told me, as I have already said, that the deepest of Japanese fears is the fear of *famine*. Perhaps it is this encoded memory of famine that still drives the industrious habits of people there. Perhaps it is this ancient memory that feeds, or that harries, the Japanese obsession with progress and expansion of markets. People simply want to be ensured of the probability of eating. But what if, after having eaten, a metaphysical sense of *hunger* still remains in their feeling tones, and what if, in a highly intuitive person, such as

Ms. Ishii, this well-developed sense could be sympathetic enough to recognize the hunger, *the human hunger*, in others? Even in a *gaijin*, a stranger?

I make no special case here, Kyo, for the mysticism of Ms. Natsuko Ishii. But I do know that when she wiped away my sweat from my face with her own handkerchief, which was damp with her *own* sweat and her tears, *something of her*, far beyond the human sympathy of the gesture itself, perhaps a *kage* of it, *entered into me*. Did her chemicals enter the chemicals of my face? I do not know. I do know that something mysterious began to happen to me. I know that I began then, slowly, to take another chance on being openly human, on being *shizen na kimochi*. I began to move out of, with a tentative slowness, the black compartment that had been enforced on me, or that I had accepted for myself. And I began to smell the flowers that I had gone to Japan seeking. They were “summer flowers.” They were alive with the most exquisite *yoin*. I smelled them while on the airplane to Fukuoka, and I smelled them again later that week in Hiroko’s little garden at I.C.U. There is still the scroll calendar for 1993 on one wall of this room. I am beginning to realize now that I did not take it down, after the year 1993 had passed, because Ms. Ishii had given it to me, and at the top of the black scroll there are paintings of four beautiful bouquets of summer flowers.

The Foreign Service Officer in charge of the American Center at Fukuoka kept saying after my talk to a room crowded with Japanese: “You’re so *human*. You’re so *human!*” She spoke to me as a heretofore unrecognized distant cousin. She spoke as a minority among the Japanese, about an insight that might have escaped her all her life at home. But I was not speaking to or for her and the country she represented. I was speaking out of Ms. Ishii’s gesture, out of my feel for its *yoin*, and for the first time in many, many years, out of my *full self*.

Back in Tokyo, I sat up all night to write out my second talk for the group at the American Center there. I wanted to say something about the kindness of Ms. Ishii, but could find no way. Then, towards dawn, just before Kio Ono came to Hiroko’s apartment to pick me up, I found all the right words, and they flowed for one full hour. When Ono came and took me to the American Center, I spoke about the possibility of human renewal, *natural renewal*, with Ms. Ishii’s gesture at

the center of my talk. I attempted to generalize her spirit to *all* the Japanese. In my enthusiasm, I asked her to stand. I said, proudly, in my broken Japanese, "*kore wa*"—there she is.

It was only later, after the talk, that a young Japanese woman who had been in the audience approached me and said, "You do not really know Japan. Ms. Ishii is not Japan. She is *unique*. She is not typical of Japan."

Kio Ono has just recently given me his translation of a Japanese proverb which, he says, might sum up Ms. Ishii's life. He offered it as a corrective. While he says that Ms. Ishii was a "good" person, he added the wisdom of the Japanese proverb: "*A good man is hard to live long.*" *Yoi-hito-ha nagaiki-shinai.*

But Nepher, when I asked her for the *hiragana* for this proverb, offered me one which she said was much more "settled" in the Japanese mind. Her offering is a set expression originating in Chinese poetry. The expression is "KAJINHAKUMEI." "*A beautiful woman has a short life.*" I cannot copy the Chinese characters for this expression, although Nepher was kind enough to write them in Chinese for me. The *hiragana* for it is *kajin-haku-mei*.

Ms. Ishii's husband said in his letter that she is asleep.

I say that the mystic who told me recently that I was being kept alive by *two* good spirits may have been right. I intend to go through my boxes of old letters and find those that Ms. Ishii sent to me. We used to communicate at least twice each month. I want to read those letters again with affectionate recollection of the times they came, *miren*, so I can retain the memories of her kindness, her *naturalness*. Next summer, if I am lucky, I want to see Japan again. I want to go to Chiba, if Ms. Ishii is buried there, or to her home village, if she has been buried there, and pay the most profound of respects to her spirit. I want to be there at *meinichi*, the anniversary of her death day.

I think that Ms. Ishii's husband was correct in his assessment. Ms. Ishii is asleep.

I want to say to her, and to her family, with the same depths of sincerity I keep saying to you, "*Gomen. Gomen nasai.*"

I was distracted by other things at the time of her death.

Is *this* what *shizen na kimochi* means? Just as I was applying this word to Ms. Natsuko Ishii, the telephone rang. It was a Japanese man, a

member of her old group. He spoke very kindly of her help to him over the years. He was looking toward the future, without her. Kio Ono sent me a proverb for this condition: *Nikumarekko-yoni-habakaru. Weeds grow apace.*