

Seishin

by Tom Maremaa

The Japanese sun, bloodred and vibrant, like
a Cézanne apple, was setting far away in the distance
over the snowcapped peak of Mt. Fuji.

For a moment, the intensity of the light blinded him.
He could not see the road ahead.

His front bicycle wheel wobbled and he fell, landing on his chin.
He had hit a rock on the ancient road to Kyoto. For centuries,
travelers like Hiro had followed its fractal curves and twists, jagged
edges and valleys in their various pilgrimages to the holy city. He
got up slowly, brushing the dirt from his clothes and mounted his
bike again.

Soon night will fall, he thought. Soon I shall be engulfed in the
world of shadows, including my own. This means I must pedal faster.

In the fading light, with the Japanese sun now beginning to hide
its face behind the imperial mountain, Hiro pumped the pedals of his
bicycle even harder than he had when he first began his journey
three long days ago in Tokyo. Every muscle in his body ached. He
was frozen to the bone, the beads of sweat on his back having
turned, he was most certain, to crystals of ice. I am fire and ice, he
thought. My skin freezes, yet in my heart and in my gut I burn for
Yoshiko.

He panted heavily, and was now gaining speed. In the remote
distance, coming over the crest of a hill, he could see the faint
outlines of Kyoto; and the breathtaking view, which was at least
twenty centuries old, as old as Japanese culture, inspired him to
push ahead with all the strength he could muster. He had not slept
in more than three days since his journey began. He was groggy,
almost delirious. Even now, after hitting a rock in the road and
falling off his bike and bumping his chin, he had got up again,
mounting his bike to pedal harder and farther into the twilight. I am
much too close to let injury slow me down, he thought. His hands
were bleeding.

Tokuhiro “Hiro” Nakazawa had what is known and cultivated in his culture as seishin. It was a difficult word to translate into any Western language because of its multiple meanings; some thought of it as spirit, or, in difficult times, guts. But mostly, it was indefinable, a state of mind without ambivalence or inner contradiction. Seishin was the goal of all traditional arts and disciplines in Japan, as well as the goal of Zen. In Kyoto, he would meditate at the Buddhist temples and practice the teachings of Zen with his master to develop his seishin even further. It was something you worked on throughout the stages of your life.

In Kyoto, he would also secretly meet Yoshiko, his girlfriend. They would spend the night together in a ryokan, a Japanese inn of old, in absolute comfort and tranquility, and make love many times. Their affair, their joji, which unfortunately lacked the blessing of her father, had gone on now for three years. Everything in Hiro's life seemed to occur in cycles of three.

“Kusottare!” he cried, shouting an obscenity into the cold night wind. “My body is in pain, yes, but I will still have enough strength to make love to the old man's daughter!”

Hiro and Yoshiko's father had not got along particularly well and the old man had forbidden him now to see his daughter. Hiro, who had grown up without a father, was too much a rebel, a hankousha, for the old man; he was, in a word, too individualistic. But there were historical reasons for this, which Hiro understood but could not explain to the old man because the old man would simply not listen.

In 1880, the thirteenth year of Emperor Meiji's reign, a young man—Hiro's great grandfather—had come to Tokyo to study mathematics at the university. He had failed to complete his studies and earn his degree because he had fallen in love with a peasant woman who bore him a son. The son began to learn mathematics at the age of three from his father, and like his father, grew up to study mathematics at the prestigious Tokyo University. Unfortunately, he

met the same fate as his father and abandoned his studies to care for his newborn son. The newborn son followed the family tradition and also grew up to become a mathematician, but when the Second World War broke out, it appeared as if the pattern would be broken—and there would be no more sons.

For the young man had enlisted in flight school to become a kamikaze pilot. The training for all Japanese pilots was rigorous, indeed, but with one exception: pilots were never taught how to land their planes. The week before his final mission, when Hiro's father was on shore leave, Hiro Nakazawa was miraculously conceived. The cyclical pattern of history from generation to generation repeated itself again, as predictably, some said, as the Japanese sun was now setting serenely over Mt. Fuji. After his father's plane crashed, right on target, into the hull of a big US Navy ship carrying munitions supplies in the Pacific, the father became a war hero, suitably decorated and honored by his countrymen. Of course, he was not alive to pick up any of the medals. Young Hiro was born soon after the war ended and his mother, a musician in a Tokyo symphony orchestra, was stuck with the unenviable task of raising the child herself.

With great sweat and toil, she brought up the boy. There was no food during those bleak years, 1946 and 1947, after the war, and the Black Rain, as the bomb that landed on Hiroshima was called, had killed her brothers and uncles when their house was destroyed from the blast. There was no help from her family because every member, spanning three generations, had been killed. Fate had dealt her a terrible blow.

She had to work long hours at whatever jobs she could find just to survive and put food on the table. These early years of hardship and self-sacrifice, though, made Hiro fiercely determined, an aggressive warrior: no problem was too difficult to solve, no challenge would go unmet. This was fine for a while.

At the age of three, without a father (the historical cycle had been broken in that regard), Hiro solved his first mathematical problem beyond simple arithmetic (at the age of two he was already

multiplying and dividing large numbers in his head) and diligently taught himself chess. He also learned, thanks to his mother, three musical instruments, including the flute, violin, and the viola da gamba. In school, he dazzled his teachers with his mental gymnastics but lost friends because of what was construed as his Western-style arrogance. He skipped classes and ran away several times. He refused to obey the rule of law established by his elders and by the time he was a teenager had been branded (forever) as a hankousha, his fate sealed within Japanese society.

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