

JETAA.NY

Newsletter for The
Japan Exchange
and Teaching Program
Alumni Association,
New York Chapter

Vol. 13, Issue 3

SUMMER/FALL

THE END OF SUMMER ISSUE

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SCARIEST MOMENTS ON THE JET PROGRAM

We had a lot of fun, confusing, and bizarre experiences while we were living in Japan. But what was your scariest experience on the JET Program?

Some of our fellow alums recount their moments of fear.

Getting appendicitis and having an operation in a Japanese hospital! Being told by a Dr. in Japanese that i would have to stay in the hospital for a week and have my appendix removed while not fully aware of what he was saying, at the same time thinking that i couldn't possibly be translating his comments correctly because there was no way that I could be that seriously ill. I hadn't ever been in a US hospital, so everything about the experience was new to me. Listening to all of the Japanese was surreal, but when they called my supervisor and he translated for me, the first English words he spoke were, "I am very worried about you". Scariest moment hands down!

Getting pulled over by Police on a drunk driving sting in 'Bonenkai season' and managing to get by with just a warning (the old trick about sucking on a penny before taking a breathalyzer test seemed to work...but the wait was excruciat-

ingly nerve-wracking!!!)

Living in Iwate prefecture, one is used to driving in snow, but the night my car slid backwards back down a narrow road (is there any other kind in Japan?) with a 30 ft. drop into a gateball court on the one side was one of the heart-stopping moments of my JET experience. Lucky for me, the car slid and spun and back into the ditch on the other side of the road.

Hitching a speedboat ride back to the mainland from some Japanese folks we met on the beach on a holiday island seemed like

a good idea at the time...until we realized - speeding and careening wildly across the water and narrowly missing other boats - that our jovial, driver was pretty much bombed out of his mind. Didn't help that he kept turning



("Scary" Continued on page 8)

The "End of Summer?" Issue

What indeed did happen to summer? Because as you read this on the train, in the bathroom or wherever you do your reading, you're no doubt aware that summer has ended.

Fortunately, a number of your fellow JET alums had interesting summers during which they did interesting things which they share with you in this curry rice (Japanese style of course) hodge-podge of articles.

There is a theme hiding somewhere in this issue, for the record, and the task for you the reader is to discover it and submit your answer to the Newsletter at newsletter@jetaany.org.

Fear, patriotism, summer, fiction and blind swordsmen all represent something when thrown together, no?

So enjoy reading this issue and then looking back on it and trying to make sense of it in the same way we've all tried to look back and make sense of our lives in Japan. I'm sure you'll find some good themes.

Steven Horowitz

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JETAA NEW YORK SOCIETY PAGE

by Yoku Shitteiro



In the Spring Issue ("Politics") we talked with former JETAA Hawaii President Nadine Nishioka who is in the midst of a hot and heavy race for a seat in the Hawaii State Legislature.

How's Nadine doing? Here's the latest update from the candidate herself.

"I did very well in the Primary election and victory on Nov. 2 looks great! I have been endorsed by some really wonderful and prestigious organizations which include the Medical doctors (HMA) and the Police Union (SHOPO).

"My campaign is on target for our goals and we continue to work hard.

"Unfortunately, I injured myself one week prior to the Primary election while walking door to door. I slipped while walking down a mountainside home and tore my left ankle ligaments. I am supposed to stay off my feet, but we know that is not possible. I am on crutches for another month while signwaving and walking.

"Of course my pace is hindered but I am trying my best and I believe my constituents appreciate my efforts; hopefully strong enough for them to cast their vote for me on Nov. 2."

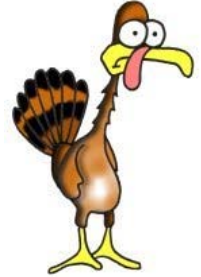
Aloha
-Nadine

Thanks Nadine! Ganbatte kudasai!

In other news, our esteemed JETAA Treasurer, **Jo Sonido**, has been sent to Japan on business for a few months. He didn't get away without a *sayonara samba* send-off at **Sounds of Brasil**, however, where he demonstrated dancing abilities that are not part of the Treasurer's job description, but perhaps should be.

Also, congratulations to alums **Ethan Levitas** and **Jennifer Jakubowski**, New York's two winners in the **Kintetsu Essay Contest**. Both of them won and took all expense paid trips to Japan at the end of August along with 13 other winners from various chapters.

Lastly, for those who couldn't make it to the excellent *Nihongo Dake Dinner* organized by **Clara Solomon** at **Kenka**, the super cheap *izakaya* on St Mark's Place, you missed not only a *suu-pa nihon-rashii* experience, but also a chance to sample a bite of **turkey penis**. (Hey, I couldn't make this up if I tried.)



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PATRIOTISM

by Karen Sumberg

A self-described wise traveler once shared his cardinal rule of travel with me, "Mate, never talk about politics, religion, or football (in the British sense of the word) and all your voyages will be sweet." His qualifications for dispensing wisdom were that he had been exploring the world for the better part of eight years, most spent in Thailand ingesting and inhaling illicit substances, living on the equivalent of \$2 a day, and "absorbing the true Thai culture." A week at a meditation camp in India ("Seriously, it was so intense. Not many people can handle it mate.") had also given him knowledge and understanding clearly beyond my comprehension. Although, I saw this guy for the pretentious stoner that he was, his advice about conversations while abroad stuck with me.

I landed in Japan on July 29, 2001. A little over a month later, I watch live on NHK as the second plane hit the World Trade Center and then the resulting collapse. This changed everything for obvious reasons and for the not so obvious. My identity as an American became explicably tied to September 11th and every decision, action, and consequence the U.S. faced thereafter.

Suddenly, the usual innocuous questions about how big America is or how tall am I replaced with the far more complex, "Is America/New York safe?" or "How do you feel about terror?" How do you answer questions like that? The weird thing about being away during a national crisis is that you can turn it off when you want to. Japanese media was inundated with updates and reports about what was happening, but my Japanese skills were only two months old and limited to picking out words like "America," "terror," and "bin Laden." The closet that I lived in did have satellite radio (I suppose to distinguish it from a holding cell) so I listened to NPR, the BBC, and, weirdly enough, WPLJ to get my news, but when it got too repetitive or there was nothing else the news could tell me that I did not already know, I could click off.

The intense patriotism that followed September 11th did not hit me. When watching memorial services or looking at pictures I became overwhelmed with sadness and the need to be home to mourn, but not anger or the need to

avenge what had been done.

The international turmoil and chaos that stemmed from 9/11 made me more reluctant to come home. Everywhere I went on vacation or when I was in Japan, I was bombarded with questions about what I thought of President Bush's actions, or what did I think of the war in Iraq or where were the weapons of mass destruction (interesting question.). Suddenly, I was more than just a representative of America; I was expected to be something of a mouthpiece and punching bag for American foreign policy as well.

The advice of the pretentious stoner was proven correct during the six months that I worked in Australia. I left Japan in August of 2003, traveled a bit around Southeast Asia and then headed to Australia. My introductory conversation with people I met there was:

"So, where are you from? Canada?"

"No, the States."

"What is the deal with your president?"

And then my personal favorite:

"I cannot believe **you** invaded Iraq!"



My answer was a quiet, "I am not a fan of the President and I will not answer for his actions." But, then usually there was more probing to further the issue. People really seemed to want to vent about what was going on or try to engage me in a political debate. I tried it once, but no person will ever concede they are wrong. A political debate is really a "look how smart and world savvy I am" debate. We have all had one of these conversations. You are sitting at a bar discussing how anal retentive your cubical neighbor is, you mention the guy/gal is a fierce republican/democrat and suddenly the moron across the table (the one who just spilled beer on his face trying to lick the pint dry) digs back to that one political class he took in college (it was required for his golf course management major) and unleashes a diatribe against Fascist Marxists and their detrimental effect on the condition of the working class in 1950s Poland. None of the information is relevant, half is inaccurate, but they are right, you are wrong, and

("Patriotism" continued on page 13)

JETAA Presents

JAPAN BY MALE
by Alexei Esikoff, Fukushima 2002-03

The first in a fictional multi-part series.

My school had a language requirement. I could have continued with Spanish, but after six years of the language I was, despite my high school's best intentions, nearly fluent, and also bored with it. Perusing the undergraduate schedule, I saw that Modern Greek, Urdu, and Japanese met at the most inoffensive times; that is, after 11 am. (I was determined to do college right.)

So I took Japanese. I wasn't a manga geek. It just held the most appeal, and turned into one of those arbitrary decisions I make that changes everything.

In the airport, a joyous discovery: I was tall!

At the baggage claim, I stood in the back of the crowd and was able to see my beat-up bags over the tops of their heads.

At the trains, the petite woman gazed up at me when I asked what *shinkansen* I should take.

On the train, I placed my bags in the overhead compartment with little effort.

This was a smoking compartment. Further convinced of Japan's infallible understanding of zen, I lit up a Marlboro happily and read through my new university's course bulletin. If it was going to take another two

hours to get that far north, at least I could fidget.

The *apato*: From the outside, it looked like a Soviet-style concrete block. I hoped the inside was a little homier.



Described in the welcome letter as "six tatami mats" in size (what the hell was that supposed to mean? I thought the Japanese had the common sense to use the metric system), was too tiny to be considered charming. Sure, it had a full kitchen, but I could have sauteed mushrooms and crapped at the same time, the toilet was so close. In the large closet was my futon, a pillow (buckwheat), and some wire hangers. There was also a concrete porch with a real clunker of a machine sitting on it. I

had no idea what it was for, as the *kanji* was indecipherable.

It was 5 PM in Aomori.

That meant it was 3 AM in Pennsylvania.

The flight was fourteen hours, of which I napped one.

That means I was too tired to figure out how little I slept.

("Fiction" continued on page 10)

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MOVERS & SHAKERS: JET Alum Lynette Martyn Seeks to Create the Perfect Post-JET Job

We all had to be innovative and entrepreneurial on the JET Program. Now one of our own JETAA alums -- **Lynette Martyn** -- has gone one step further with the launch of her first company -- **YourTourNYC (www>YourTourNYC.com)**.

YourTourNYC is a customized tour service for visitors traveling to New York City and caters to Japanese clients looking for the ultimate guide to the Big Apple by one of its experienced natives.

Certain lucky JET alums already know Lynette for her culinary sensibilities and her penchant for organizing fun outings and *Nihongo Dake* dinners. Now she's left her job in finance and is using her special skills full time to provide visitors with a wide and customized selection of themed group or private tours such as *Manhattan's Best Food and Wine*, *All Access Shopping in SoHo*, *Jazz Nights in Harlem* and many others.

In addition, by filling out a detailed questionnaire, clients can be enchanted by one of YourTourNYC's made-from-scratch specialty tours inspired by the visitor's interests and needs.

Another unique feature that separates YourTourNYC from the traditional tour experience is its *English Lesson Tours* which allow clients to learn English while simultaneously taking in the sights of The City. Lynette, who speaks Japanese fluently, was motivated to incorporate an English component into her tour business upon noticing the demand for the private and corporate English lessons she continues to offer to the Japanese New York City community.

And for Lynette, the greatest part for her is that in creating YourTourNYC, she has managed to integrate all of her passions and strengths into a job she can look forward to every day.

The Newsletter spoke with Lynette about her new business. Here's what she had to say:

Newsletter: What prompted you to start a tour company?

Lynette: I had been working in finance for four years and felt

unfulfilled. I asked myself, "what am I good at, what do I know well, what makes me happy?" I love New York. I know New York well and I am always taking guests around The City. I love sharing the best places with them and tailoring their time to experience the things they enjoy most. Through my studies and time abroad I have gained a deep appreciating and understanding of Japanese culture and knew that I wanted to maintain that connection as part of my life. When I told

friends and family what I was thinking about doing, everyone thought it was a perfect fit for me. That gave me the confidence to launch YourTourNYC.

Newsletter: How has your JET experience helped you?

Lynette: Well, certainly by introducing me to Japan and Japanese culture. Also, by exposing me to the possibility to teach English and to learn the Japanese language. If not for JET, I wouldn't be the same person I am today. Japan is a tremendous part of my life. I'm always relating experiences back to Japan and I am certainly a better teacher due to my experiences on JET.

Newsletter: What about your connections with JETAA?

Lynette: JETAA has been a huge resource for me. When I first moved to New York, I didn't know anyone. Now almost all my contacts are one or two degrees of separation from JETAA. JETAA also exposed me to the Japanese community here in NY. This network enabled me to find my first English students for tutoring and provided me with the forums to market my services, where Japanese people in New York hang out, stuff like that.

Check out Lynette's website at www>YourTourNYC.com



▶ 日本語/Japanese



BANPAKU E IKU? (ARE YOU GOING TO THE EXPO?)

by Michelle Boodleman

Thanks to the JET Program –my experience with Japan has blossomed over the years and six weeks ago I started working as the U.S. Pavilion Guide Manager of Aichi USA 2005 World Expo, Inc. I am very excited for the opportunity to live and work in Japan once more.

The US Pavilion team for Aichi USA 2005 World Expo, Inc. has been created to build, fund, and design the US Pavilion. My work so far has been one moment after another. Recently I returned from Japan after a two week trip where I was assisting the Commissioner General Lisa Gable. It was great to learn from her and to be able to work with her. The schedule was so busy going from Tokyo to Nagoya for meetings and receptions and interviews as well as looking at housing in the Nagoya area. I really enjoyed the opportunity to meet with the people from around the world who are taking part in the 2005 World Exposition, in Aichi Japan. It was fantastic to stay



at the Okura Hotel, Tokyo with a view of Tokyo Tower from my room and experience hospitality second to none. I also enjoyed the reception at the US Embassy to welcome Commissioner Gable to Japan. It was here that I was able to meet with many significant people who are working hard to make the 2005 World Exposition, Aichi, Japan a success.

The Commissioner and I also went to the EXPO site together during the handover of the keys for the US Pavilion. The construction workers are now busy working on the exciting details within the pavilion. There will be many exciting exhibits inside the US Pavilion- a few include a specially commissioned replica of the Wright Glider, and a prototype of the Mars Rover. Please visit our website at www.uspavilion.com

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("Scary" continued from page 1)

around and talking and joking with us when he should have been watching where we were going. That was kind of scary.

I met the *kucho* of the *ku* where I lived, and when I told him that I snowboarded a lot, he said "Oh, that's great! My daughter wants to learn to snowboard. I'll introduce you." I smiled and said "Great!" while thinking "Holy ****, I don't want to be responsible when your daughter breaks her arm on her first day on a board." Fortunately, he forgot about it by the end of the evening...

When I was on the bus, on the way from Tokyo orientation to my new "home" in Gunma-ken, I was called to the front by the CIR. She said she had to tell me something before I got to my town. Apparently, my predecessor had died in my apartment. One month into her time in JET, she was found dead, in the apartment, on the futon. The cause of death was never discovered. No one had removed any of her stuff from the apartment (apart from the fateful futon) or from the desk at school. I saw photos of her and she looked kind of like me. And, I discovered that I had worked with her brother in the Prosecutor's Office in Seattle a couple years before. For most of my first year there, when people learned that I was living in that town, they said, "Oh, so YOU'RE the one who got assigned that town..."

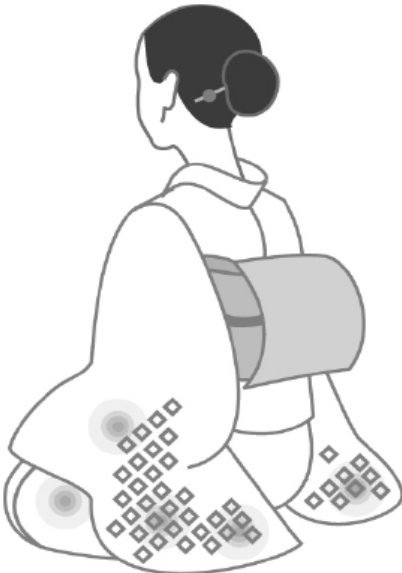
When I made a boy cry. I had a coalition of *genki* boys who followed me around the school, taking turns yelling "I amu curazy boy!" in the hallway. One afternoon I was teaching in a *san-nen-sei*

class where the baddest ass of that group ruled, and he just wouldn't be quiet. I told him to shut up in English, then Japanese. (My JTE, as usual, did nothing.) He was insistent in his *curazy boy*-ness. Finally, in frustration, I called him a *hen-jin*. The class actually applauded. The boy responded by throwing a pencil at me, then bursting into tears: This tall, spiky-haired bad ass was crying. The JTE took him outside, and I continued with a silent class. When I got home that day I cried myself.

My scariest JET moment was when I was hit by a car while riding my bike. The car clipped my back tire and the bike collapsed under me, with my knee at a weird angle under the bike. The scary part was trying to get help. I didn't speak Japanese and most of the Japanese people I ran into didn't speak English, so they didn't help me out. I had to drag me and my bike probably half a mile to the closest hospital. When I actually got to the hospital, I didn't know how to ask for help. I stood around for a few minutes until I got lucky and ran into a German lady who spoke English and Japanese and she was able to translate to the doctors.

I was living in Kyoto for a month during the summer and going to Kyoto International school of languages. One night, I was out really late with a bunch of friends -till about four- and felt it safe enough to make a short walk to Kyoto *eki* after separating from my friends. Sure enough, as I turned the corner, there was a buck naked Japanese man flogging the log in my behalf in a closed store front. I was so shocked, I didn't know what to do, so I just ran away as fast as I could. As I tried to flag down a cab, I noticed the motherfucker coming at me on a bike!!! Yeah, my guy friends I told the next day seemed to find it rather funny, and I'm

("Scary" continued on page 12)



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THE JAPAN *FOUNDATION*

JET Alum Eva Heintzelman tells us what it's all about

The Japan Foundation. Maybe you've heard of it. Or maybe you think you've heard of it, but are actually mistaking it for the Japan Society, Inc. here in New York.

As it turns out most Japanese are not familiar with the Japan Foundation either, despite the fact that it is publicly funded and has 49 offices around the world. Organizations like the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), which provides assistance to developing countries, have wider name recognition. I wonder if even the JET Programme is more of a household name in Japan.

One reason that JF is not well known in Japan is the outward focus of its activities. JF is an international cultural exchange organization. The Tokyo headquarters, with about 30 employees, coordinates the activi-

ties of overseas offices, which aim to introduce aspects of Japan--Japanese culture, arts, language, and ideas--to other parts of the world. Overseas offices may have libraries with books, videos, and other resources related to Japan, concert halls for performances of Japanese music and theatre, or Japanese language support centers.



There are two Japan Foundation offices in the United States, one in Los Angeles and one here in New York. The Los Angeles Office is largely devoted to the support of Japanese language education in the US. Yes, the dreaded Japanese Language Proficiency Test is administered by this office in the US. They also have programs for Japanese language teachers, so if this applies to you, you might want to check out their website (<http://www.jfalac.org/>)



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("Fiction" continued from page 5)

It was midnight in Aomori, 10 AM back home, and the buckwheat pillow had to be the stupidest invention ever. Left fuckin' pockmarks on my ears.

I opened my last pack of cigarettes. On the porch it was cold and my hands shook. There was a 7-11 (a 7-11 up here?) across the street that looks open. Snuffing out the cigarette, I put my shoes back on in the *genkan* (how Japanese of me, already taking off my shoes in the entryway) and thumped down the stairs. The 7-11 glowed like Mecca in front of me. When I entered a chime sounds.

"*Irashimasen*," the pimply kid behind the counter says. I was red; I hadn't expected to have to talk to anybody yet. So I rushed to the back, where there was liquor. Lots of liquor. Kirin Ichiban should bring on some sleep.

In the aisle were salty snacks. The squid chips I could have done without, but the oyster crackers had a nice smiling shellfish on the front. I also picked up a package of Country Ma'am Chocochip Vanilla cookies, because the name was so righteous.

At the front the kid was waiting, as I am the sole customer. He rung up the beer, crackers, and cookies, and gestures to the 800 yen total, which in American dollars is...oh, who knows. In my hand I got confused by the new coins. Also by the beige bill with a greenish-blue man staring critically at me. The kid reached over to my hand and made a reluctant *allow me* gesture. I stretched it across the counter and he plucked out a handful of coins and I had no choice to believe him.

Outside I looked at my new home. In the dark it wasn't so ugly. There are frogs chirping from somewhere. Someone whizzes by on a bicycle. On the fourth floor I see the lighted ember of a cigarette, but I couldn't even make out if it was a man or a woman.

At the orientation there were more guys than girls. A number of the guys looked like typical anime geeks (you know the type: pale, with creative facial hair and sizable guts).

The leader of my get-to-know-you group was an Australian girl named Heather. She had that glowing look you associate with Australians and her accent was killer-cute. She worked in the international student center, so if you have any problems don't hesitate to speak with her, okay mates? She got us to laugh when she lamented the way her name was butchered in Japanese—*Hezeru*. Then she wanted us all to get to know each other by saying who we were, where we were from, and by telling three things about ourselves, one of which had to be a lie. We were supposed to guess the lie.

Shaggy blond guy was from California—could he possibly have sprouted from anywhere else?—and his lie was that he knew the Coppolas. How lame.

The Indian guy from England's lie was he was arrested in a political rally for threatening the Prime Minister. None of us guessed that.

The only girl in our group, besides Heather, was a smiley but sort of shrunken-in English girl. You wouldn't have guessed she was English—

her eyes were pure Asian. Though when she said her name was Maggie Cotter, and you looked at the rest of her, it was obvious what her parentage was. Her lie was that she was an unwed teenage mother. She had a quiet voice and it was hard to hear her, but when we did it got a big laugh. The choices I offered were: I smoke cigarettes, I have Gandhi's autograph, and I turned twenty right before I came here.



Everyone moaned. "Gotta be Gandhi," said California Kid. "Uh-huh," I said, and we moved onto the Kiwi next to me. Maggie whispered—did she want me to hear?—"You didn't reveal *anything* about yourself." Having a nic fit, I asked if I could step outside.

It was hot to the point of suffocation. Fucking tie was trying to kill me. My last pack of Marlboros was dwindling. That didn't stop me from smoking three in a row. The Indian guy, Ravi, appeared outside as I finished the last one. "Bum me one?" he asked

With great reluctance, I handed over a precious cigarette. "Thanks, mate," Ravi said, loosening his own tie. "Or, you're American, right? Should I call you 'dude'?" I lit up a fourth (that left two in the pack). "I don't really like to be called 'dude.'" He laughed. "What was your name again?" "Peter Szeikaly." "Say...what?" "Szeikaly."

"How on earth do you spell that?" "S-Z-E-I—" "Never mind. Ravi Shekar." Simultaneously we put our cigarettes in our mouths and shook hands. I took a long drag. "I think we should go inside soon. We might miss registration." "Yeah, you're probably right." Ravi restored his tie's dignity and we stepped into the air-conditioning.

We were at the end of the line. Being Japan, you can't just go online and pick your classes. No, the Japanese love their paperwork and they love suffering. You don't merely take a class, you spend hours waiting for *permission* to take the class. Then you thank them profusely of course, for the great honor of education bestowed on you, bow, promise them your first-born children.

After fifteen minutes the line had made no progress. Accidentally my briefcase swung forward and hit Maggie, the half-Asian girl. She turned around and smiled at me. "Bit of a queue, eh?"

"My god," I guffawed, "you are so English!" Her look was puzzled, baffled, and befuddled. She turned back around.

Aomori-shi was gray. Population wise, it was a city, but lacking in something vibrant. Hell, even Pittsburgh was more cheerful. There where a couple malls where the high schoolers (girls in

("Fiction" continued on page 11)

("Fiction" continued from page 10)

their pediphilic-fantasy sailor uniforms, boys in Prussian Army suits) hung out and play noisy games. I tried playing a shooting game but the words zoomed by too fast—god, and here I thought video games would be the one thing I'd excel at. Life outside the malls is what happens when a city is depressed, post-industrial, and located nowhere: No space. No parks, just streets crammed against gray buildings (some with shops no one ever goes in, dusty fabrics and clothing and batteries tended over a hunched man) crammed against train tracks and concrete, be it sidewalks or streets, everywhere. Every apartment building, I noticed, had a concrete porch too, with *futons* draped over the railings. And there seemed to be an obsession with wires, which hung in the street from every edifice and street-light.

I walked in the direction of the *shinkansen*. Things cheered up nearer to the station. Hungry, I went into the most uppity place: a yellow-and-orange fantasy called Mr. Donut.

"*Irashimasen!*" went a high-pitched female voice, connected to a grinning teenager in a Lego-looking uniform, who then asked if she could help me.

Um...

The menu was in *katakana*, which was frustrating, because *katakana* is essentially a Japanese version of English, except written in round symbols that don't resemble their Roman sound in any way. Eventually I deciphered I could have:

Ku-ra-si-ku donuto

Cho-ko donuto

Ku-ri-mu donuto

(Say it out loud to yourself, and it may be apparent that these are Classic, Chocolate, and Cream donuts. Or, like most people, you may realize that this is the kind of English only spoken by insane drunk foreigners.)

At the table to my right were some girls cooing over little sticker photos of themselves. To my left were boys, one of whom took it upon himself to say, in English, "Hello."

"Hello." I took a bite of my chocolate donut. Goopy goodness. They laughed. The bravest one, Hello Boy, followed up with "This is a pen."

He wasn't holding a pen. "You have a pen?"

"I love you."

Of course I left.

I stopped outside a 7-11-looking place called Sunkust to tie my shoe. When I raised my head back up, there was a wizened grandmother grinning demonically. In no way was she over 5 feet. She said, "America?"

I responded in Japanese. "Yes, I'm American."

Delighted, she clapped her hands together. "Please, wait just a minute," and disappeared into Sunkust.

A Marlboro beckoned. Two puffs in, and the tiny *obachan* was back outside. She was quick despite her cane. She handed me a plastic bag with both hands. "A present to thank you."

I bowed deeply, thinking, *um, for what?* "Thank you very much."

She bowed back, patted as far up as she could reach (my elbow), and continued on her merry way. She didn't seem to want anything else.

In the plastic bag was a salmon rice ball, a package of radish pickles and—*fire-works??*

I looked up and she was waiting at a red light to cross. There were no cars in the opposite direction. Still she leaned on her cane patiently.

What are you thanking me for?

—and then—

Didn't we bomb you?



Heather organized a *gaijin* night at an *iizakaya* (Japanese pub, though with its tatami mats and hobbit tables, it looked nothing like a pub). All the people from the orientation were there, along with the international office staff and an assortment of her Japanese friends. Instead of suits, it was an informal occasion. (Read: beer-filled.)

People naturally grouped off in the same way they had at orientation, which meant I was stuck with California Brad again, so I sat in the corner next to Ravi. He handed me a cigarette. "Thanks for the other day, dude."

Dude. I gulped my beer. Someone had ordered sashimi, glittery pink and tasty, for the table so I helped myself. Next to it was a pile of uncooked chicken, also pink [but a bad way (the Japanese love salmonella!)], and some sort of seaweed salad. I picked up the laminated picture menu and searched for other things to order.

In the middle of the room (the paper doors had slid together to ostracize the *gaijin* into one room), Heather pierce-whistled with her fingers for us all to be quiet. Or, some of us: Brad was still chatting with one of Heather's slinky Japanese friends, causing Heather to yell *Urusai! Shut up!*, and we all laughed, and Brad flung his hands up—*Gomen ne!*—and everyone laughed again.

Heather held up her beer. "To my fellow foreigners, welcome! To your new Japanese friends, welcome! Here's to a year of international cooperation and alcohol!"—Laughter—"Beers and cheers! *Kampai!*"

"*Kampai!*" the room toasted. And they were off! (Con conversationally, that is.)

("Fiction" continued on page 12)

("Scary" continued from page 8)

sure it does sound kinda funny from a guy's perspective, but I can assure you it's a really violating act!

At one of my schools there was a notoriously xenophobic teacher who came up to me one day with a huge smile on his face and said "I heard there was a massacre at an American school in Colorado!" It was the day that Colombine happened and to this day, I can still remember the insult to injury that asshole brought.

I travelled to the Beppu Prefecture one weekend and I was in a



popular *onsen* town there. I hunted for a particular *onsen* and when I arrived, there was no *kanji* for men or women on the door. I peeked around the doorway and the *onsen* was right there so I thought I might be at a co-ed one. I didn't really want to take my chances, so I began to walk away. Before I could, a man comes to the door with only an *onsen* towel around his waist and a camera in his hand. He asked me to take a picture of him in front of the *onsen*. As I was getting ready to take the picture, the man takes the *onsen* towel that was wrapped around his waist and ties it around his forehead and poses for the picture. Yes, I found myself taking a picture of a very naked man. I was so surprised that I think I broke his disposable camera!

About five days before I was due to leave for Japan I had a dream in which a friend of mine from college dropped me off at my new apartment in Japan (which I of course had never seen.) My friend said goodbye and left me in my apartment all alone and I was freaked out because I didn't know what to do next. After I got to Japan, the board of ed people took me to lunch and then dropped me off at my apartment with no further instructions. I didn't know any Japanese, I didn't know where the heck I was and I had no idea how to use any of the appliances in my apartment. It was just like the dream. I just sat there freaked out thinking what the heck do I do now?

("Fiction" continued from page 11)

I asked if anyone wanted more food, but it was so loud no one heard. So when the waitress came back to our table, my hands cupped around my mouth, I ordered *yakitori*.

When it arrived half an hour later not only was I hungry enough to chew Ravi's ear (which hovered at eye level as he spoke to Kiwi Bob next to him), but I was drunk. Spinning drunk. I took a skewer hoping it would sponge up the alcohol wreaking havoc in my stomach.

Ravi smelled it and turned around. "Excellent. Cooked chicken." He took a skewer and called down the table, "Anyone else want chicken?" Bob and Simon took a skewer each, and I was left with one.

"Hey," I started.

Ravi looked at me, glassy-eyed. "Shit, was that yours?"

I backpedaled. "Not really, but I..."

"I'm so sorry. Look, mate, I'll order another one."

"It's no big deal—" but Ravi was already calling over our waitress. She hadn't quite made it to the table when he yelled "*Yakitori futatsu onegai-shimas.*"

"*Hai domo!*" the waitress yelled back and scuttled out of the room.

Drunken Ravi, his arm on my back: "No worries, Peter. They take care of us here, you see? No worries."

Across the table Maggie was chatting to another one of Heather's friends. "Sorry," she was saying, "but it hurts my knees to sit like this for so long." And when she unfolded her legs from under her she smacked my shin. She didn't notice.

"Ow!" I said. (Maybe too loudly.)

Her reaction was delayed. "Peter, was that you? I thought it was the table leg!"

"It was me."

"I'm so sorry!" (I take it the Brits are always so sorry.)

"I'll live."

She smiled and gestured to her new companion. "This is Mitsuko. Mitsuko, this is my friend Peter. He's American."

Mitsuko was something else. Dusky-skinned, long-limbed, actual-breasted, she glowed with the light of a thousand suns. When she opened her mouth to speak, her only flaw became visible—her crooked teeth. (But in a cute, Jewel-like way.)

"Nice to meet you, Peter." Her accent was good.

...And somehow, maybe because of the beer, conversation unfurled organically. Maggie was a sort of mediator, telling Mitsuko the few things she knew about me. Like we were teammates or something. Mitsuko smiled a lot and rearranged her lovely arms on the table, gradually moving closer to mine.

(I'll admit to rearranging my body to face the girls, dropping Ravi's arm away.)

Maggie, her face mottled, left around midnight. I found myself on the other side of the table, taking over her warm spot. Mitsuko and I sat, our legs crossed, speaking in quick child-breaths and laughing. She told me about her childhood in Perth. She told me how hard it was to readjust to Japan when she was thirteen, how far behind she was in *kanji*. I told her I hated *kanji* too, but that I was the Hiragana Master. She thought I was funny. (You know those nights you're just *on*? That you think of one unusually funny thing, which brings on another funny thing, which someone, like the beautiful stranger next to you, compliments for being funny, which brings on a whole slew of further funny things.) When I told her

("Fiction" continued on page 16)

(*"Patriotism" continued from page 4*)

somehow at the end you owe them a beer. This constant bombardment of political rhetoric wore on my nerves and my national pride, which was low to begin with.

When I arrived home in late April of this year, I was all confused. I had no idea what the mood of the country was, the election was in full swing with seven months to go and I had to start looking for a job. My patriotic levels were not being raised at all. I watched the further chaos in Iraq and the upheaval within the FBI, CIA, and federal government. Adjusting back to life after being away is difficult enough, but it was especially hard coming back after missing three critical years in the shaping of the American psyche. I not only felt that most people could not relate to my experience abroad, but that I could no longer relate to their experience over the past three years. Part of my repatriating process included my own guideline of putting myself in all kinds of new situations again. I figured the election was something to get energized about and perhaps the antidote to my national malaise.



My friend works for the Democratic National Convention and I called her to see if I could help with the convention. She assigned me to be a runner, a rather ambiguous term that had nothing to do with aerobic exercise. I ended up in the Fleet Center working for the communications office delivering speeches to the various newspapers and print media in Fleet. It was nice to see the NHK had their own broadcast booth sandwiched between NBC and FOX. I said "Dozo" to the reporter from the Asahi Shinbun and watched as he nearly swallowed his tongue in surprise. Things were looking up.

The orgy of patriotic and pro-democratic speeches and affirmations was contagious. I was hooked the second day and so happy to be there, in a country where political conventions happen, where people are excited about politics and not afraid. Plus, the DNC had the added bonus of ridiculous amounts of celebrity sightings. Upon returning from a speech run, you were expected to regale your fellow volunteers with an "I saw" update, as in "I saw Bono" or "I saw Ben Affleck." The latter was said with the fervor of a rabid New Kids on the Block fan at a concert. It sounded something like, "OH MY GOD! BEN AFFLECK....CLOSE TO ME..... I SAW.....HE IS.....OH MY GOD!"

I was swept up in all the political excitement. It was great to not have to defend my country or the president to permanent travelers in Thailand or political know-it-alls in, well, any country. I felt at home in America, a feeling that had been sadly absent for a few years. I remembered my

mother's wary reminder that "America is not a bad place." She was right, as mothers usually are. America was not a bad place, but, moreover, it was a place where there were political conventions, freedom to trash your political opponent, and ridiculous amounts of money spent on longwinded campaigns. Normally, these things are not parts of the political process that are noteworthy, but at that moment in Boston I had a renewed sense of pride. My sense of Americanness (a new word of my own creation) was on the rise, but it was not quite at its height, yet.

One of the coolest parts of working inside the Fleet Center was the access we were afforded. Our temporary bosses had two or three floor passes in their possession which they rotated in giving out to the volunteers. When the speeches were already handed out to the media or if there was a pause in production, a few of us would venture onto the floor of the convention with the borrowed credentials (credential was the it word of the four days, as in "Are you credentialed?" or "Dude, do you have the credentials for that?")

My time on the floor afforded me the opportunity to see a few speeches, walk past Larry David (looks totally the same as he does on TV, but taller), spot Rob Reiner, and experience the pinnacle of my patriotism. It was actually time for me to leave the floor since my time with "the credentials" was expiring, but I wanted to hang around to hear the singing of "America the Beautiful." I have always liked this song, and long thought it the shoo-in for national anthem if "The Star Spangled Banner" ever decides to retire.

When the song began the entire floor was silenced. There rose, perhaps just in my sentimental being, a sense of togetherness and unity. By the refrain most everyone had joined in singing with the soloist. I was actually blinking back tears. It was a truly corny moment, but one which will stay with me. The Fleet Center was unified and it felt good, homey, if you will. It caused me to reflect on my travels and my initial hesitation to return to the States.

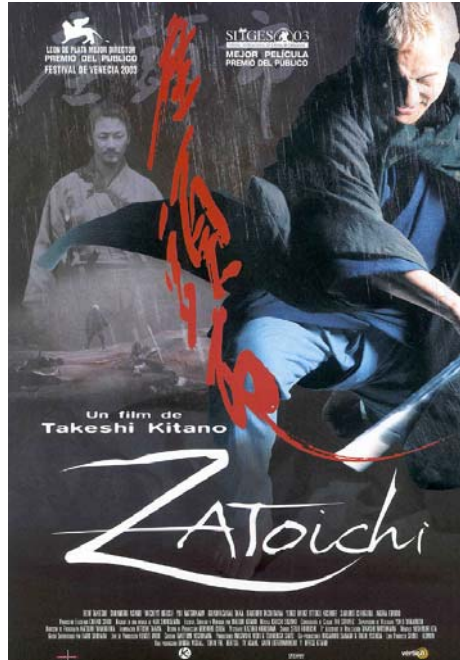
My stoned friend was right, you should never talk about politics, religion, or English football with strangers, unless you are home.

Film Review

ZATOICHI

Reviewed by Lyle Sylvander

Takashi Kitano has had a long and varied career as an entertainer in Japan. He burst onto the scene in the 1970's as one-half of the comedy duo The Beat Brothers and then extended the range of his acting by taking on more dramatic roles. While filming the Yakuza thriller *Violent Cop*, the director fell ill and Takano took over the directorial reins. The rest is, as they say, history. Takano churned out a steady stream of action films and then achieved worldwide recognition with his masterwork *Hana-bi* (*Fireworks*) in 1997. When that film won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, Kitano was recognized an artistically mature filmmaker. *Hana-bi*'s melancholic violence and contemplative pacing transcended the limits of the commercial action film and provided a unique visceral experience. Since that auspicious breakthrough, however, Kitano's output has been somewhat disappointing. *Kikujiro* (1999) and *Brother* (2000) more or less repeated the formulaic storytelling devices of their genres (the "little kid" and Yakuza action film respectively). 2002's *Dolls* was a beautifully shot but emotionally distant experiment that pleased neither critics nor audiences and flopped at the box office.



When it was announced that Kitano would write, direct, and star in a new rendition of the classic series of films *Zatoichi*, many accused him of selling out. The original series of *Zatoichi* films (26 in all) starred Shintaru Katsu, who essentially owned the role of the blind samurai and became an iconic figure in Japan. It seemed that reviving the series with Kitano was little more than a marketing gimmick. Fortunately, Kitano has played against expectations and delivered his best film in years. Far from being predictable, Kitano reinvents *Zatoichi* and delivers an immensely entertaining film.

The basic plot follows that of the standard *jidai-geki* (period film) as *Zatoichi* stumbles into a rural town run by mobsters. *Zatoichi* teams up with a pair of sisters, one of whom is a man in disguise, who are seeking revenge for the murder of their parents. Together, they fight the minions of the villainous Ginzo (played by Ittoku Kishibe). Another wandering samurai, named Hattori (Tadanobu Asano), is hired as a mercenary by Ginzo and he and *Zatoichi* meet in the film's climax and final showdown.

Zatoichi is the first *jidai-geki* for Kitano and he not only uses

its conventions well but plays against them. This is apparent in the film's opening, where a gang of thugs mistake the blind swordsman for an easy target and *Zatoichi* makes mince meat out of them. The sequence is comically choreographed with the robbers accidentally stabbing and slicing each other. One man's sword flies out of his hands and into the body of one of his comrades. The standard blood squirting effect is rendered by CGI animation and the semi-cartoonish effect reveals that Kitano is not taking the violence seriously. In fact, the film has many slapstick moments and *Zatoichi* even sports a ridiculously anachronistic bleached blond hairdo. Kitano's serious side is reserved for a few flashbacks that provide backstory for the supporting characters – like that of the sibling seeking vengeance. Such a device allows the audience to empathize with the characters while enjoying the comic goings-on.

Overall, Kitano uses moving cameras and quick cuts to convey a sense of spontaneity and continuous motion. The visuals are nicely complemented by a rhythmic soundtrack consisting of rain drops, metallic farming tools and clashing swords. This hypnotic rhythm culminates in a ten minute dance sequence that has to be seen to be believed (it alone is worth the price of admission). As in Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*, the peasants celebrate the defeat of the warmongers at the end of the film. What begins as a traditional *takatsuki* dance with wooden clogs and taiko drummers evolves into a modern dance spectacle stylistically situated between Busby Berkley and the stage show *Stomp*.

Visually in a class by itself, the final number is the ultimate act of subversion: only Takeshi Kitano has the audacity and courage to end a samurai film with a musical number. By doing so, he has reinvented himself once more and even the most hardened cynic would be delighted with his *Zatoichi: The Blind Swordsman*.



THE "END OF SUMMER" ISSUE TOP 14!

Sure, you might think Bush or Kerry would make a good president. But what if they had a real job? What if they had to go teach English in Japan? What then, praytell, would be...

THE TOP 14 CONSEQUENCES IF BUSH AND KERRY TAUGHT ENGLISH IN JAPAN

14. Both candidates surprised to discover "Ohio" is equally popular topic of conversation in Japan
13. Kerry repeatedly insists English is "the wrong language at the wrong time" for Japan.
12. "Mission Accomplished" - Bush claims all Japanese able to speak English fluently after his one year JET stint
11. New Horizon English textbook incorporates unit on "y'all"
10. Kerry's chin helps encourage temporary revival of "Long, long a-go" joke
9. Tax rate reduced on foreign-earned income under \$75,000.
8. Kerry develops increased decisiveness through ancient Japanese *janken* technique
7. Bush accepts JET position only on condition of team-teaching every class with Dick Cheney
6. "Do you play Botox?"
5. Ministry of Education gives school lunch contracts to Halliburton
4. Kerry claims he did not flip-flop when he voted for "i" both before and after "e"
3. Loyalty oath required for English learning
2. "OK class, repeat after me: Nu-kyu-lar"
1. Live televised JETAA Presidential Debates in 2008!



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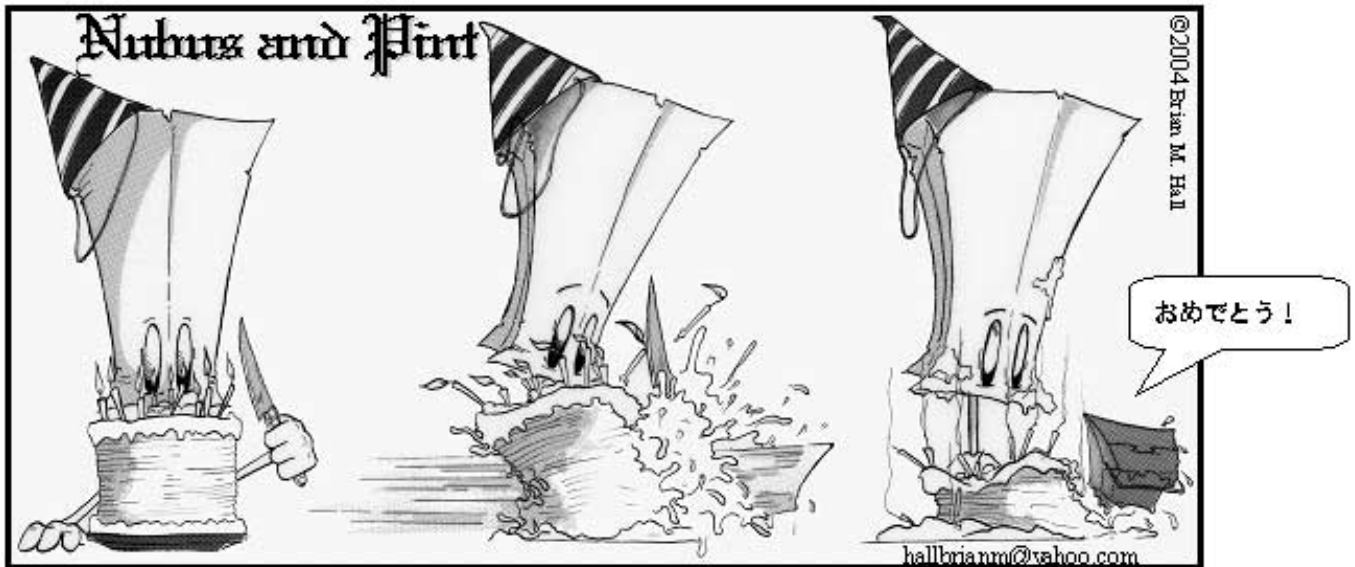
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("Fiction" continued from page 12)

about the old woman and the fireworks, she giggled so hard her long black hair fell forward and grazed my knee. "Oh! I'm so embarrassed when Japanese people act like that!"

It was *magical*.

And then—

Ravi fell onto the table. Not fell, passed out drunk in a melodramatic way. The soy sauce went airborne; Mitsuko shrieked as it landed on her red shoes. I grabbed napkins and blotted. "It's okay. They're just shoes." "They're Prada!"

I stumbled, still drunk, around to the other side of the table. Kiwi Bob laid Ravi on the ground. He threw a cup of water on his face and Ravi opened one eye. "We should take him home."

"Yeah." We heaved him in a sitting position.

I want to get your number.

Outside it was chilly and neon. I couldn't focus on the ground, and half

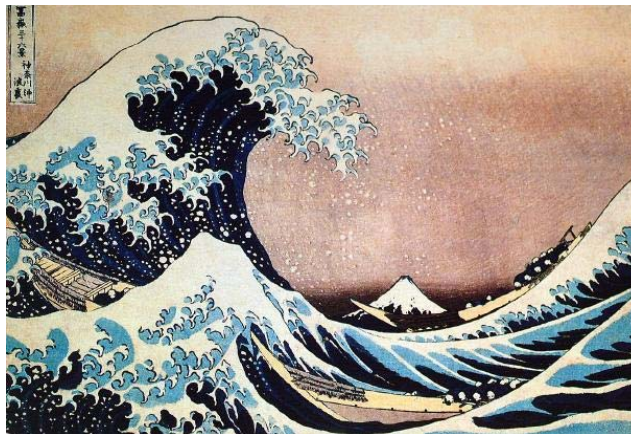
of Ravi's weight wasn't helping. "Bob?"

"Uh-huh?"

"I left something inside. Can you wait a minute?"

"What am I supposed to do? Let him drool on me?"

"Uh, if you don't mind." Manuevering Ravi's arm over Bob's free shoulder, I hustled back inside where Mitsuko had corralled another friend into the Great Shoe Blot.



"Mitsuko?" I breathed, and her friend giggled and looked away. She looked up from her feet. "I thought you were helping your friend."

"Bob has him."

"I see." She took a good look at me. She didn't seem drunk. She seemed perceptive. "Bob can probably carry him without you." Was that a back-handed compliment?

With as much courage as I could muster, I wrote my number on a napkin and handed it to her. I don't know why I didn't take her number. Instead I fled.

Bob was struggling with Ravi.

"Bastard's heavier than he looks." His arm reinstated over my shoulder, we began the drudge home.

*** TO BE CONTINUED IN THE NEXT ISSUE! ***

Alexei Esikoff is an adjunct professor of writing at Brooklyn College.