

FOR THE COMPANY

Translation and Interpretation was always the most fun to teach because it wasn't teaching; it was give and take; my sense of Japanese versus their sense of English. Then Matsunaga -- the most polite, the quietest, the "really Japanese" member of the class -- was absent for two whole weeks. "I am sorry to have miss." "Where have you been?" I asked. Matsunaga grinned sheepishly. His doctor, it seems, had diagnosed appendicitis several weeks before, and ordered Matsunaga to proceed immediately to his hometown for treatment; but Matsunaga had a company deadline to meet. First things first, right? When, eventually, he did descend from the hometown train platform, appendix ruptured, Matsunaga had to be operated on while conscious; only a sheet obstructed his view of poisoned, gaping entrails. "You out of your mind?" I snapped. The whole class laughed, but especially Matsunaga; laughed it off the way a samurai would have laughed off having to commit hara-kiri, even as he committed hara-kiri; and then I realized what this was. They had me. There are some things that don't translate into English. They had ushered me to the border and now they would cross it, and leave me behind. I waved to them as they disappeared into that all-enveloping mist.

AS THE WORLD SHRINKS

I'd hardly arrived in the port village in Shikoku when a man dashed into the inn to announce the "giant turtle" was coming. I'd had no premonitions of giant turtles while checking in, but everyone assumed I had and directed me to the beach. Walking along, I thought of the various marble monuments depicting the world riding on a turtle's back which you see in Japanese graveyards; I was hoping the "coming of the great turtle" wasn't some cataclysmic idiom. It wasn't. An actual sea turtle, at least five feet long, was lumbering ashore to deposit her eggs ... here, with the fishing village evolving into a tourist trap ... here, with gawkers by the dozens shoving to get closer ... none of which seemed to faze the turtle. She had a hole to dig! Eggs to lay! She went about her business. I walked back after supper and she was still digging, though it took awhile to

muscle in close enough to determine this. TV crews and newspaper photographers were about their usual deadly serious business of anesthetizing the event, purging it of any significance, rendering and blendering it into 'filler.' A week later, back home in Kyoto, I picked up the local newspaper to find, on the front page, among the silhouettes of humans surrounding an egg-laying turtle in a photograph ... myself. Yes, it was me, it really was ... thoroughly cooked into the meatloaf of the topical. If things keep up like this, if the world keeps shrinking ... pretty soon we will be able to strap the entire planet on a turtle's back. And I think it's at exactly that point that the turtle's going to make her break for the open water.

SOME PEOPLE: Part I

Once upon a time, a bomb created a vacuum in a city named Hiroshima, which the gangsters of Japan (Yakuza) rushed in to fill; and before long, even as the Occupation force was disarming the country at large, yakuza mutants were constructing their own gun factories. What that's come to mean is that the streets of Japan are generally safe; the gangsters tend to follow their self-imposed code to use guns only against each other; but the guns exist.

During the Seventies, I was soaping up at a public bath in Kyoto when a yakuza, his torso one continuous tattoo, ambled over and flopped down at the spigot next to mine. I confess I find it tough to ignore people with gaudy skin, especially when they start to regale fellow patrons with a running monologue on my bodily proportions

Un-American as it may seem, I could feel my proportions folding up like an accordion ... but by God my dander was up. "Omae no mono, sore hodo taishita mono ka ne?" (Is yours really all that huge, fella?) I demanded. There was a flurry in the room, during which I girded myself for the most squalid of deaths; but our friend the yakuza seemed not to have heard me. A pimp would never learn English, after all ... so why expect the hairy foreigner to give him tit for tat in Japanese? That was unimaginable, so ... he stayed in his bubble, I stayed in mine, and here I still am, telling the tale.