

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Tokyo does things to people. You see neon, and baseball, and golden arches, and girls in skintight jeans; and you start to think you can take certain things for granted.

Tim told me he'd met the guy, Hiroshi, first. This Hiroshi joked about sex constantly. Tim tends to do the same. Akiko, Hiroshi's girl, would giggle when the jokes were tasteful ... but Hiroshi seemed to make a point of grossing her out. There'd be tension ... sometimes Tim simply got up and left. Akiko would be furious -- at Hiroshi. The next day Hiroshi would show up at Tim's, hung over, to apologize. He and Tim would go out and drink. Hiroshi knew erotic haiku: "As lovebirds next door/ attempt Kama Sutra moves/ I hear a bone snap."

One day at school, Akiko came up to Tim. She had a problem. What to do about Hiroshi, his relentless disregard for her needs. She was insisting on a room of her own in the house they were planning. Hiroshi wouldn't have it. Tim made Akiko feel worth something. Tim couldn't help it. He had eyes in his head, after all, but that wasn't the only thing.

Tim naturally thought of what his ex-girlfriend from America, who was also at the school, had told him. Shortly after arrival, she and Tim had finally made the complete break, freeing the American woman to pursue a Japanese guy Tim happened to think was a cold fish. He was a cold fish -- a theoretical existentialist who could explain to you, point by point, how Sartre had creamed Camus in their debate -- and

this philosopher also believed, with equal conviction, himself to be, on the basis of one non-happening, impotent. Naturally this posed a tremendous challenge to Tim's American ex -- that is, to turn her cold fish into a leaping salmon, which she did, and only the once, if recklessly, not wanting to inhibit him; whereby he left her pregnant and told her it was her problem: she'd seduced him.

Tim sketched this out as best he could in his halting Japanese. He knew the word for 'foreign country' but not for 'abortion,' for 'baby' but not for 'fetus,' etc. What he'd just described, it seemed to Tim, was a little fable on the Japanese male at his misogynist samurai worst. It would be better for Akiko if she clarified things with Hiroshi now, set her preconditions. Tim meanwhile would get Hiroshi drunk, mention the cold fish, let Hiroshi draw his own conclusions.

Of course Hiroshi's biggest problem was insecurity, needing to assert his adequacy. Tim couldn't see that -- too close to home. But Tim had enough sense to start planning a move. He loved Hiroshi and Akiko both. He did not want a mess. But Hiroshi got drunk at Tim's going-away party, flung Akiko at him, humiliated them both. At the station Akiko whispered she'd see Tim again. Hiroshi had disappeared. Tim couldn't sleep for two days.

Soon Akiko, who was still living with Hiroshi, visited Tim in secret. She was everything he might have dreamed. Then she was gone. They next spoke on the telephone. She had some astonishing information. It turned out that the cold fish and Hiroshi were pals, that Hiroshi had recognized who it was from the story, that he had gone to the cold fish afterward and said: "If what I've heard is true, you're a prick." The cold fish lied about it. Next he'd rushed to the town Tim had moved to, to kill him. A man of action. Tim happened not to be home that day. Now Tim had to call his ex-girlfriend and reveal what beans had been spilled. She wanted to throttle him. She was still trying to make a go of it with the fellow, and this would wreck everything. Everything!

Akiko and Tim, too, persisted. But they were in separate towns. And she got involved with another American who lived nearer. And those two were eventually married. And everybody despised Tim. That was the one point on which all parties agreed. Tim, to take the obvious example, hated himself even more, he was sure, than Hiroshi could have (which was an accomplishment). At the same time, Hiroshi hated Hiroshi even more than Tim could have -- if Tim had. You see what I mean about Tokyo?

HAIKU

The one quiet place
to make out: the graveyard. But
they believe in ghosts.

Earthquake underneath
rocking the lake like a tub
and leaving a ring.