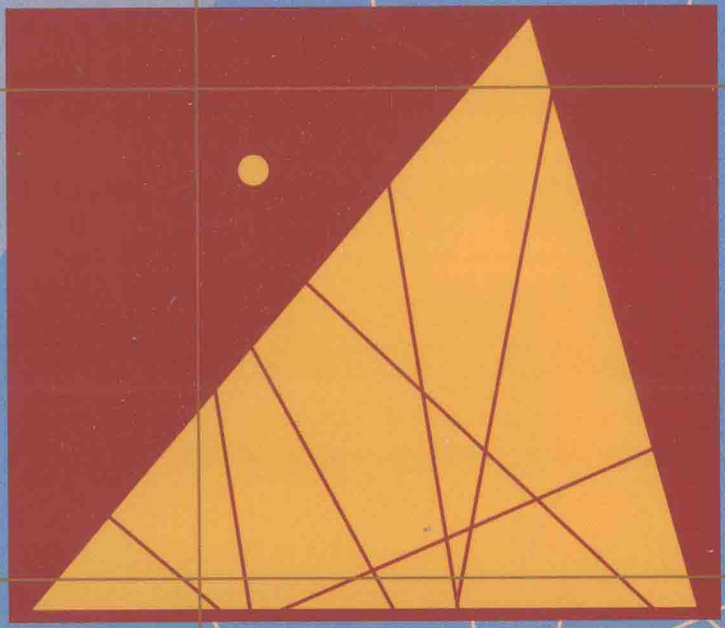
STONE BRIDGE FICTION

The Cape

AND OTHER STORIES FROM THE JAPANESE GHETTO

BY KENJI NAKAGAMI

Translated, with a Preface and Afterword, by Eve Zimmerman



"Grim and abrasive, and probably impossible to forget."—Kirkus Reviews

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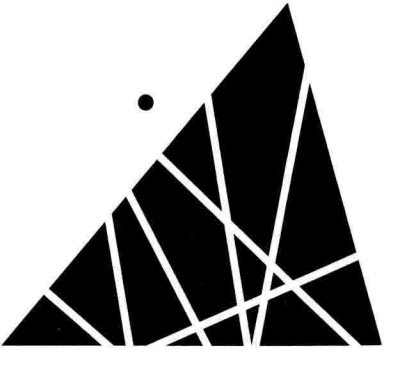

Translator's Preface

Shingū (pop. 35,000) is a wet place. Located at the foot of high mountains on the Kii Peninsula near the southernmost tip of central Honshu, it is subject to dramatic turns of weather. The rain falls so hard that people say it rains from the ground up. Sitting in a coffee shop one Sunday in May during the rainy season, Matsumoto Iwao, a local sake dealer, speaks about Shingū's unique history: its natural wealth in coal, paper, and lumber; its oppression by the central government (a number of Shingū locals were persecuted in the Great Treason Incident of 1910); and its eventual marginalization when it was divided between Wakayama and Mie prefectures (it was situated in the province of Kii, or Kishū). Recalling Shingū's more prosperous days, Matsumoto describes a feeling of separatism on the part of Shingū people, who still nurse resentment toward the center.

The talk soon turns to the writer Nakagami Kenji (1946–92), Matsumoto's school friend who enjoyed meteoric success in Tokyo and returned home to die of kidney cancer at the age of forty-six. Matsumoto, a frail child, had been picked on by the other children, and the young Kenji, large for his age, walked him home from school. There was a certain irony to this relationship. It was Nakagami, not Matsumoto, who was born into the outcastes'

(*burakumin*) community of Shingū and who, according to Matsumoto, was at times made to feel unwelcome in the homes of their school friends. But the young Kenji took on the role of protector.

Not far from where we are sitting is the old site of the outcaste neighborhood, the network of alleyways that once wound out from the back of the train station—the *roji* or "alleyway" as it is called in Nakagami's fiction. According to one aging former occupant of the alleyways, now ill in the People's Hospital of Shingū, the outcastes suffered severe poverty and discrimination before World War II. Those who lived along the alleyways did not often venture into the town, knowing that they would be ignored or openly ostracized. For the most part, the outcastes had very little formal schooling and soon entered the distinctive "unclean" trades of slaughterer, shoe mender, and day laborer. When times grew hard it was not uncommon for a woman to be sold to a brothel for a time to put food on the table, and my informant remembered a number of such cases. When it was time to marry, the people from the alleyway would choose partners from a pool of other outcastes who lived in communities scattered along the southern Kishū coast.[1]

Since outcastes are racially and ethnically identical to other Japanese, the origins of their status are still shrouded in mystery and seem to vary from place to place. Most historians trace the creation of a rigid outcaste class back to the early eighteenth century when the Tokugawa government issued a number of edicts defining outcaste status and listing rules to regulate outcaste dress, freedom of movement, and even the style of houses they could build (there could be no windows facing the street). These edicts coincided with a time when craftspeople working with leather had gathered in the castle towns to provide weaponry

[1] Personal interview with Matsune Hisao, Shingū, July 1993.

for the new military class. Some scholars assert more ancient origins, discovering evidence of settled outcasts communities in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.[2] These conflicting theories notwithstanding, Ian Neary traces a development over time in the formation of outcaste identity: "Whereas before 1600 the emphasis was on occupation afterwards it was on bloodline, but why this should be has not been clearly explained."[3] At least one theory has been debunked—that the outcastes are not Japanese but the descendants of Koreans or ancient slaves.[4]

In the early 1970s, the Japanese government, unable to ignore the widening gap in living standards between outcastes and prosperous middle-class Japanese, began to throw money at the outcaste problem. Nakagami's neighborhood in Shingū was the beneficiary: the old alleyways were bulldozed and replaced with concrete prefab buildings, a hill that separated the neighborhood from the town was razed, and a department store was built nearby. Nakagami's relatives and others profited from the change: they received construction contracts or jobs, and many moved away. Much of Nakagami's fiction traces the conflict, corruption, and even violence that marked this project of urban renewal.

Although the present-day outcaste neighborhood is but a shadow of its former self, a time when the people huddled together defensively, their doors open to each other, their children wandering back and forth,[5] there are still markers in 1998. Across from the Shingū city hall a banner reads, "Let's get rid of all discrimination, starting with discrimination against the *burakumin*." There are many shoe stores near the station, a leftover from the

[2] See Ian Neary, "Burakumin in Contemporary Japan," *Japan's Minorities*, ed. Michael Weiner (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 52–55.

[3] Ibid., p. 55.

[4] Ibid., p. 52.

[5] Nakagami discussed the communal aspects (*kyōdōtaisei*) of life in the *roji* in a personal interview in 1989 in New York City.

days when the outcastes mended *geta* (clogs) and worked with leather, and when I enter one and show my map to ask directions, I immediately realize that the proprietor cannot read. There are also the family names—fully recognizable to the people of the town—revealing who was born in the *roji*. Discrimination still rears its head when people marry.

Nakagami Kenji was born in 1946 in the alleyway in Kasugachō next to the railroad tracks on the site of what is currently government-issued prefab building #13. The spot is now marked on tourist maps of Shingū, the city that also claims Nakagami as its own on a large billboard by the station. By returning home as a famous writer, Nakagami literally put what was once invisible on the map. Yomota Inuhiko, a critic and friend of Nakagami's, charges that the worst aspect of discrimination against the outcastes is the secrecy that attends its practice.[6] Through his writing, his regular visits to Shingū, and his enthusiastic embrace of his own people and their past, Nakagami broke this secrecy and brought the dark, impenetrable network of alleyways into the light. As the old survivor of the alleyway said succinctly: "Nakagami made me proud to be *burakumin* for the first time in my life."

Reading Nakagami

Nakagami's fiction poses certain challenges to the reader: a layered narrative structure that switches between time periods and points of view and a complex cast of characters. "The Cape" and

[6] Personal interview with Yomota Inuhiko, Tokyo, June 1998.

"House on Fire" share many of the same characters—the father, the elder brother, the mother, even the main character (the son in "House on Fire" is simply an older version of Akiyuki). Both stories also share certain events and take place in the same location (although the grown son lives in Tokyo). The genealogical chart on page xiv will simplify both stories. "Red Hair," with only two main characters and a simple narrative, stands alone.

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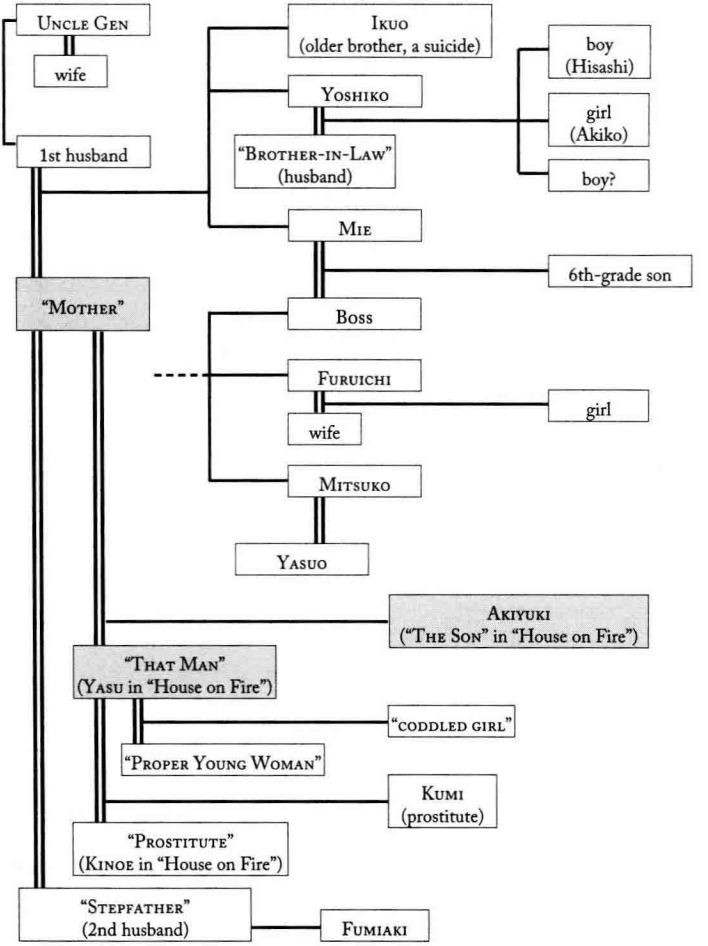
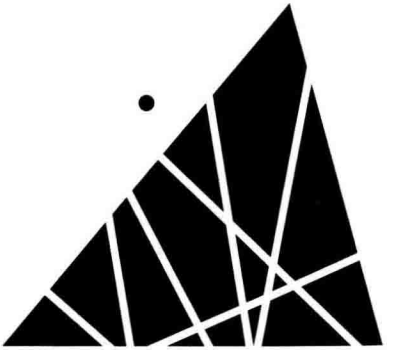
Family Relationships in "The Cape" (and "House on Fire")

This chart provides a simplified layout of the relationships of the characters in "The Cape." Later Nakagami works encompass additional family members and interconnections. The chart also illustrates the primary relationships in "House on Fire," where the father character is named Yasu.



Contents

The Cape



The night insects were just beginning to hum. If he listened hard he could hear them far away, like a buzzing in his ears. All night long, the insects would hum. Akiyuki imagined the smell of the cold night earth.

His sister came in with a large plate of meat.

"Hey, how 'bout a drink?" Kan asked her, holding up a beer bottle.

"I don't drink," said Mie. She set the plate down beside the charcoal grill. "I'm scared to. We've got this thing in our blood. It kills our brains. Just the sight of *him* drinking worries me," she spoke intently, looking not at Kan but at Akiyuki, his face red from a single glass of beer, his big body hunched over, his breath hot.

She smiled, on the verge of tears.

Kan didn't intend to press the sister to drink. He just wanted to thank her for supplying him and the other workers with beer and meat.

"Oh, have a drink," slurred Mitsuko from across the table, "Forget the boss every once in a while and live it up."

"I can't. I can't." Mie, smiling, shook her head.

"C'mon, go for it." Mitsuko shifted into a cross-legged position. Akiyuki could see her frilly peach underpants.

"Hey, cover yourself up, you," laughed Mitsuko's husband,

Yasuo. Seated next to her, he was now tugging at the skirt that had risen up over her knees.

"There's still plenty left for you. Who cares if I show it off a little?" Mitsuko pushed Yasuo away. "Let me tell you, Yasuo, I'm not like Mie here. I've been around a little. More than a little."

Mie collected the empty beer bottles and went back to the kitchen.

The front door and the windows of the house were open. After work the men had started drinking in the six mat office with the wooden floor where the boss had his desk. Curious, the neighborhood kids peeped in. The men sat in a semi-circle facing out onto the alleyway. A breeze sweeping down the alley carried away the odors of cooking meat, the iron and the dust from the boss's house. The air became suffused with the cold smells of the flowerpots tended by the old people and widows, and of the ditches and the quickly gathering night.

"Drink up, drink up, drink up. Who cares if we're short on brains?" said Yasuo, hoisting the beer bottle.

"Yeah, nobody here had much to begin with anyway." Akiyuki drained his glass. Yasuo poured him another.

"Well, my family's famous for its stupidity," said Mitsuko. The chopsticks she was using to turn the meat burst into flames. "My brother'll kill me for saying so, but it's true." She stuck out her tongue.

"The boss is no dummy. He's got brains," said Fujino.

"That's what you think. You say he's smart because he's your boss, but he's my flesh and blood. My second oldest brother, if you want to get picky about it. But when we were growing up I always thought he was an idiot. And who would know better than me?"

Mie yelled in from the kitchen. "Hey, stop badmouthing my old man!"

Mitsuko stuck out her tongue again.

"But no matter what anybody says," said Mitsuko, turning to Yasuo and rapping him on the head, "you come from the biggest line of idiots. You're even worse than I am. Wasn't it your grandfather who slept with some lousy whore and got the clap? And your father was the result, right?"

Yasuo gave a deep belly laugh. He showed no sign of being affected by the beer. A sober Yasuo was as docile as a cat. He was cheerful. He worked hard. He let Mitsuko poke fun at him. But a drunken Yasuo was another story.

Hearing Mie call, Akiyuki went to the kitchen.

"How about if you stop drinking now and take me to Mother's house? The road's scary at night."

"What are you going to do there?" Akiyuki asked. Even his voice felt hot from the alcohol.

"The memorial service, for Daddy," said Mie, "I need you for my bodyguard. Once they get a look at you, nobody'll bother us."

"Mie, you are such a chicken," Mitsuko chimed in from the office. "You could never live at the beach house."

Mitsuko turned to the others and started telling them what a coward Mie was. The beach house had been owned by Mitsuko's father. Sometime after the father's death, the oldest son, Furuichi, who worked for a trucking company, had moved in with his wife. Mitsuko often berated them for it. "I'm Daddy's girl. He meant for me to live in the beach house," she would say. The house was near the concrete embankments on the beach. Close by was a forest planted as a windbreak and a communal graveyard.

"What are you talking about? Is that your idea of being a chicken?" Mie quickly took Akiyuki by the hand. "Let's go, bodyguard. I'll be back soon. Mit-chan, make sure everybody has drinks while I'm gone."

"Chiiiiickennnnn," said Mitsuko. "But that's what makes her so adorable. She's not all in your face like Furuichi and his wife.

Next time the boss cheats on her, I'm gonna string him up." Mitsuko leaned her head on Yasuo's shoulder.

The night air was cold. Akiyuki and Mie walked through the alleyway, away from the railroad crossing. Mie took little running steps. She only came up to her brother's shoulder. Akiyuki wrapped his jacket around his waist. The sweat in his cotton undershirt suddenly chilled and felt good on his skin. Benches holding potted plants were set out in the alleyway, and the aroma of flowers filled the air. They followed the curve of the alleyway, cut across a street that ran past the station, and walked down a path through the fields. Again, the night insects sounded like a buzzing in Akiyuki's ears. Taking a road that cut over the hill, the two passed a cattle shed.

"Everybody's coming to Daddy's memorial service again," said Mie. Then, out of the blue she spoke his name. "Akiyuki?"

He grunted.

"Don't flirt with Mitsuko. It upsets me. It could cause big problems in the family."

"I understand," he said. With every step, his work breeches rubbed together. He walked with his legs apart. His split-toed cloth tabi shoes made no sound. A small car approached, its lights blinding. In the moment they stood still and waited for the car to pass, Mie looked over at her brother. A sweet scent of gasoline washed over them.

"Akiyuki," said Mie, "hold my hand."

She took his hand in hers.

"What a baby," he said shaking her off. "Hey, chicken, you scared?"

Mie took his hand again.

"I just now had this feeling you were... Akiyuki, hold my hand like Brother used to. We always used to walk along this road holding hands on our way to Mother's house. And when we got to

about here, he'd say, 'Mie, are you scared?' even though I was fine. But then I'd get scared because he asked me if I was."

Mie laughed softly. Her hand was cold and firm.

"Are things going O.K. with the boss?"

"Mmm," Akiyuki nodded.

"He can be harsh sometimes," said Mie.

Akiyuki had nothing to say.

It was barely a ten-minute walk from Mie and the boss's house. The mother was in the kitchen washing dishes. "You came at just the right time," she said, catching sight of Mie and drying her hands on a towel as she came to the door.

"I just had a call from Nagoya," scowled the mother. "It was Yoshiko, giving me a hard time again. 'But I'm the eldest daughter,' she says in her big know-it-all way."

"Where's Father?" asked Mie.

"Gone to a meeting. Fumiaki went back to his apartment." Seeing Akiyuki, she added, "Akiyuki, hurry up and eat your supper, then take a bath. I left a change of clothes in there for you." Then, as if she had just noticed his red face, she continued, "Drinking with the crew again? Don't blame me if you ache all over tomorrow."

"He just had one or two," said his sister, covering for him.

"Just a couple after work," Akiyuki said.

"Ah, well then, if it's just one or two," laughed the mother. "You're twenty-four, not fifteen or sixteen, so it's no big deal."

"He's just Brother's age when he died," said Mie, scrutinizing him.

"You're right," said the mother as she sat down at the low tea table. Suddenly her strength seemed to leave her. Mie's eyes shone in the glow of the fluorescent lamp.

"On our way here a couple minutes ago, I felt Brother was with me. It was spooky." Mie sat down. "He's really come to look like him."