An artist of the floating world

Kazuo Ishiguro

by the same author

A PALE VIEW OF HILLS
THE REMAINS OF THE DAY
THE UNCONSOLED

KAZUO ISHIGURO

An Artist of the Floating World

faber and faber
LONDON · BOSTON

First published in 1986
by Faber and Faber Limited
3 Queen Square London WC1N 3AU
This paperback edition first published 1987

Photoset by Parker Typesetting Service, Leicester
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Mackays of Chatham PLC, Chatham, Kent

A CIP record for this book is
available from the British Library

ISBN 0-571-14716-X

FOR MY PARENTS

OCTOBER, 1948

If on a sunny day you climb the steep path leading up from the little wooden bridge still referred to around here as 'the Bridge of Hesitation', you will not have to walk far before the roof of my house becomes visible between the tops of two gingko trees. Even if it did not occupy such a commanding position on the hill, the house would still stand out from all others nearby, so that as you come up the path, you may find yourself wondering what sort of wealthy man owns it.

But then I am not, nor have I ever been, a wealthy man. The imposing air of the house will be accounted for, perhaps, if I inform you that it was built by my predecessor, and that he was none other than Akira Sugimura. Of course, you may be new to this city, in which case the name of Akira Sugimura may not be familiar to you. But mention it to anyone who lived here before the war and you will learn that for thirty years or so, Sugimura was unquestionably amongst the city's most respected and influential men.

If I tell you this, and when arriving at the top of the hill you stand and look at the fine cedar gateway, the large area bound by the garden wall, the roof with its elegant tiles and its stylishly carved ridgepole pointing out over the view, you may well wonder how I came to acquire such a property, being as I claim a man of only moderate means. The truth is, I bought the house for a nominal sum – a figure probably not even half the property's true value at that time. This was made possible owing to a most curious – some may say foolish – procedure instigated by the Sugimura family during the sale.

It is now already a thing of some fifteen years ago. In those days, when my circumstances seemed to improve with each

month, my wife had begun to press me to find a new house. With her usual foresight, she had argued the importance of our having a house in keeping with our status – not out of vanity, but for the sake of our children's marriage prospects. I saw the sense in this, but since Setsuko, our eldest, was still only fourteen or fifteen, I did not go about the matter with any urgency. Nevertheless, for a year or so, whenever I heard of a suitable house for sale, I would remember to make enquiries. It was one of my pupils who first brought it to my attention that Akira Sugimura's house, a year after his death, was to be sold off. That I should buy such a house seemed absurd, and I put the suggestion down to the exaggerated respect my pupils always had for me. But I made enquiries all the same, and gained an unexpected response.

I received a visit one afternoon from two haughty, grey-haired ladies, who turned out to be the daughters of Akira Sugimura. When I expressed my surprise at receiving such personal attention from a family of such distinction, the elder of the sisters told me coldly that they had not come simply out of courtesy. Over the previous months, a fair number of enquiries had been received for their late father's house, but the family had in the end decided to refuse all but four of the applications. These four applicants had been selected carefully by family members on grounds purely of good character and achievement.

'It is of the first importance to us', she went on, 'that the house our father built should pass to one he would have approved of and deemed worthy of it. Of course, circumstances oblige us to consider the financial aspect, but this is strictly secondary. We have therefore set a price.'

At this point, the younger sister, who had barely spoken, presented me with an envelope, and they watched me sternly as I opened it. Inside was a single sheet of paper, blank but for a figure written elegantly with an ink brush. I was about to express my astonishment at the low price, but then saw from the faces before me that further discussion of finances would

be considered distasteful. The elder sister said simply: 'It will not be in the interests of any of you to try to outbid one another. We are not interested in receiving anything beyond the quoted price. What we mean to do from here on is to conduct an auction of prestige.'

They had come in person, she explained, to ask formally on behalf of the Sugimura family that I submit myself – along, of course, with the other three applicants – to a closer investigation of my background and credentials. A suitable buyer could thus be chosen.

It was an eccentric procedure, but I saw nothing objectionable about it; it was, after all, much the same as being involved in a marriage negotiation. Indeed, I felt somewhat flattered to be considered by this old and hidebound family as a worthy candidate. When I gave my consent to the investigation, and expressed my gratitude to them, the younger sister addressed me for the first time, saying: 'Our father was a cultured man, Mr Ono. He had much respect for artists. Indeed, he knew of your work.'

In the days which followed, I made enquiries of my own, and discovered the truth of the younger sister's words; Akira Sugimura had indeed been something of an art enthusiast who on numerous occasions had supported exhibitions with his money. I also came across certain interesting rumours: a significant section of the Sugimura family, it seemed, had been against selling the house at all, and there had been some bitter arguments. In the end, financial pressures meant a sale was inevitable, and the odd procedures around the transaction represented the compromise reached with those who had not wished the house to pass out of the family. That there was something high-handed about these arrangements there was no denying; but for my part, I was prepared to sympathize with the sentiments of a family with such a distinguished history. My wife, however, did not take kindly to the idea of an investigation.

'Who do they think they are?' she protested. 'We should

tell them we want nothing further to do with them.'

'But where's the harm?' I pointed out. 'We have nothing we wouldn't want them to discover. True, I don't have a wealthy background, but no doubt the Sugimuras know that already, and they still think us worthy candidates. Let them investigate, they can only find things that will be to our advantage.' And I made a point of adding: 'In any case, they're doing no more than they would if we were negotiating a marriage with them. We'll have to get used to this sort of thing.'

Besides, there was surely much to admire in the idea of 'an auction of prestige', as the elder daughter called it. One wonders why things are not settled more often by such means. How so much more honourable is such a contest, in which one's moral conduct and achievement are brought as witnesses rather than the size of one's purse. I can still recall the deep satisfaction I felt when I learnt the Sugimuras – after the most thorough investigation – had deemed me the most worthy of the house they so prized. And certainly, the house is one worth having suffered a few inconveniences for; despite its impressive and imposing exterior, it is inside a place of soft, natural woods selected for the beauty of their grains, and all of us who lived in it came to find it most conducive to relaxation and calm.

For all that, the Sugimuras' high-handedness was apparent everywhere during the transactions, some family members making no attempts to hide their hostility towards us, and a less understanding buyer might well have taken offence and abandoned the whole matter. Even in later years I would sometimes encounter by chance some member of the family who, instead of exchanging the usual kind of polite talk, would stand there in the street interrogating me as to the state of the house and any alterations I had made.

These days, I hardly ever hear of the Sugimuras. I did, though, receive a visit shortly after the surrender from the younger of the two sisters who had approached me at the time of the sale. The war years had turned her into a thin,

ailing old woman. In the way characteristic of the family, she made scant effort to hide the fact that her concern lay with how the house – rather than its inhabitants – had fared during the war; she gave only the briefest of commiserations on hearing about my wife and about Kenji, before embarking on questions concerning the bomb damage. This made me bitter towards her at first; but then I began to notice how her eyes would roam involuntarily around the room, and how she would occasionally pause abruptly in the midst of one of her measured and formal sentences, and I realized she was experiencing waves of emotion at finding herself back in this house once more. Then, when I surmised that most of her family members from the time of the sale were now dead, I began to feel pity for her and offered to show her around.

The house had received its share of the war damage. Akira Sugimura had built an eastern wing to the house, comprising three large rooms, connected to the main body of the house by a long corridor running down one side of the garden. This corridor was so extravagant in its length that some people have suggested Sugimura built it – together with the east wing – for his parents, whom he wished to keep at a distance. The corridor was, in any case, one of the most appealing features of the house; in the afternoon, its entire length would be crossed by the lights and shades of the foliage outside, so that one felt one was walking through a garden tunnel. The bulk of the bomb damage had been to this section of the house, and as we surveyed it from the garden I could see Miss Sugimura was close to tears. By this point, I had lost all my earlier sense of irritation with the old woman and I reassured her as best I could that the damage would be repaired at the first opportunity, and the house would be once more as her father had built it.

I had no idea when I promised her this that supplies would remain so scarce. For a long time after the surrender one could wait weeks just for a particular piece of wood or a supply of nails. What work I could do under such circumstances had to

be done to the main body of the house – which had by no means entirely escaped damage – and progress on the garden corridor and the east wing has been slow. I have done what I can to prevent any serious deterioration, but we are still far from being able to open that part of the house again. Besides, now with only Noriko and myself left here, there seems less urgency to be extending our living space.

Today, if I took you to the back of the house, and moved aside the heavy screen to let you gaze down the remains of Sugimura's garden corridor, you may still gain an impression of how picturesque it once was. But no doubt you will notice too the cobwebs and mould that I have not been able to keep out; and the large gaps in the ceiling, shielded from the sky only by sheets of tarpaulin. Sometimes, in the early morning, I have moved back that screen to find the sunlight pouring through the tarpaulin in tinted shafts, revealing clouds of dust hanging in the air as though the ceiling had only that moment crashed down.

Aside from the corridor and the east wing, the most serious damage was to the veranda. Members of my family, and particularly my two daughters, had always been fond of passing the time sitting there, chatting and viewing the garden; and so, when Setsuko – my married daughter – first came to visit us after the surrender, I was not surprised to see how saddened she was by its condition. I had by then repaired the worst of the damage, but at one end it was still billowed and cracked where the impact of the blast had pushed up the boards from underneath. The veranda roof, too, had suffered, and on rainy days we were still having to line the floorboards with receptacles to catch the water that came dripping through.

Over this past year, however, I was able to make a certain amount of progress, and by the time Setsuko came down to visit us again last month, the veranda was more or less entirely restored. Noriko had taken time off work for her sister's visit, and so, with the good weather continuing, my

two daughters spent a lot of their time out there as of old. I often joined them, and at times it was almost as it had been years ago, when on a sunny day the family would sit there together exchanging relaxed, often vacuous talk. At one point last month – it must have been the first morning after Setsuko's arrival – we were sitting there on the veranda after breakfast, when Noriko said:

'I'm relieved you've come at last, Setsuko. You'll take Father off my hands a little.'

'Noriko, really . . .' Her elder sister shifted uncomfortably on her cushion.

'Father takes a lot of looking after now he's retired,' Noriko went on, with a mischievous grin. 'You've got to keep him occupied or he starts to mope.'

'Really . . .' Setsuko smiled nervously, then turned to the garden with a sigh. 'The maple tree seems to have recovered completely. It's looking splendid.'

'Setsuko probably has no idea of what you're like these days, Father. She only remembers you from when you were a tyrant and ordered us all around. You're much more gentle these days, isn't that so?'

I gave a laugh to show Setsuko this was all in good humour, but my elder daughter continued to look uncomfortable. Noriko turned back to her sister and added: 'But he does take a lot more looking after, moping around the house all day.'

'She's talking nonsense as usual,' I put in. 'If I spend the whole day moping, how did all these repairs get done?'

'Indeed,' Setsuko said, turning to me and smiling. 'The house is looking marvellous now. Father must have worked very hard.'

'He had men in to help with all the difficult parts,' Noriko said. 'You don't seem to believe me, Setsuko. Father's very different now. There's no need to be afraid of him any more. He's much more gentle and domesticated.'

'Noriko, really . . .'

'He even cooks meals from time to time. You wouldn't have

believed it, would you? But Father's becoming a much better cook these days.'

'Noriko, I think we've discussed this enough,' Setsuko said, quietly.

'Isn't that so, Father? You're making a lot of progress.'

I gave another smile and shook my head wearily. It was at that point, as I remember, that Noriko turned towards the garden, and closing her eyes to the sunshine, said:

'Well, he can't rely on me to come back and cook when I'm married. I'll have enough to do without Father to look after as well.'

As Noriko said this, her elder sister – whose gaze until then had been demurely turned away – gave me a swift, enquiring look. Her eyes left me again immediately, for she was obliged to return Noriko's smile. But a new, more profound uneasiness had entered Setsuko's manner and she seemed grateful when her little boy, speeding past us down the veranda, gave her an opportunity to change the subject.

'Ichiro, please settle!' she called after him.

No doubt, after the modern apartment of his parents, Ichiro was fascinated by the large amount of space in our house. In any case, he seemed not to share our fondness for sitting on the veranda, preferring instead to run at great speed up and down its length, sometimes sliding along the polished boards. More than once, he had come close to upsetting our tea tray, but his mother's requests that he sit down had so far been to little avail. This time too, when Setsuko called to him to take a cushion with us, he remained sulking at the end of the veranda.

'Come on, Ichiro,' I called out, 'I'm tired of talking to women all the time. You come and sit beside me and we'll talk about men's things.'

This brought him straight away. He placed his cushion next to me, then seated himself in a most noble posture, hands on hips, his shoulders flung well back.

'Oji,' he said to me sternly, 'I have a question.'

'Yes, Ichiro, what is it?'

'I want to know about the monster.'

'The monster?'

'Is it prehistoric?'

'Prehistoric? You know words like that already? You must be a clever boy.'

At this point, Ichiro's dignity seemed to give way. Abandoning his pose, he rolled on to his back and began waving his feet in the air.

'Ichiro!' Setsuko called in an urgent whisper. 'Such bad manners in front of your grandfather. Sit up!'

Ichiro's only response was to allow his feet to slump lifelessly on to the floorboards. He then folded his arms over his chest and closed his eyes.

'Oji,' he said, in a sleepy voice, 'is the monster prehistoric?'

'Which monster is this, Ichiro?'

'Please excuse him,' Setsuko said, with a nervous smile. 'There was a film poster outside the railway station when we arrived yesterday. He inconvenienced the taxi driver with numerous questions. It's so unfortunate I didn't see the poster myself.'

'Oji! Is the monster prehistoric or isn't it? I want an answer!'

'Ichiro!' His mother gave him a horrified look.

'I'm not sure, Ichiro. I should think we have to see the film to find out.'

'When do we see the film then?'

'Hmm. You'd best discuss it with your mother. You never know, it may be too frightening for young children.'

I had not meant this remark to be provocative, but its effect on my grandson was startling. He rolled back into a sitting position and glared at me, shouting: 'How dare you! What are you saying!'

'Ichiro!' Setsuko exclaimed in dismay. But Ichiro continued to regard me with the most fearsome look, and his mother

was obliged to leave her cushion to come over to us. 'Ichiro!' she whispered to him, shaking his arm. 'Don't stare at your grandfather like that.'

Ichiro responded by falling on to his back again and waving his feet in the air. His mother gave me another nervous smile.

'So bad-mannered,' she said. Then seemingly at a loss for further words, she smiled again.

'Ichiro-san,' Noriko said, getting to her feet, 'why don't you come and help me put away the breakfast things?'

'Women's work,' Ichiro said, his feet still waving.

'So Ichiro won't help me? Now that's a problem. The table's so heavy I'm not strong enough to put that away on my own. I wonder who could help then?'

This brought Ichiro abruptly to his feet, and he went striding indoors without glancing back at us. Noriko laughed and followed him in.

Setsuko glanced after them, then lifting the teapot, began refilling my cup. 'I had no idea things had come so far,' she said, her voice lowered. 'I mean as regards Noriko's marriage negotiations.'

'Things haven't come far at all,' I said, shaking my head. 'In fact, nothing's settled at all. We're still at an early stage.'

'Forgive me, but from what Noriko said just a moment ago, I naturally supposed things were more or less . . .' She trailed off, then said again: 'Forgive me.' But she said it in such a way that a question was left hanging in the air.

'I'm afraid this isn't the first time Noriko's spoken like that,' I said. 'In fact, she's been behaving oddly ever since these present negotiations began. Last week, we had a visit from Mr Mori – you remember him?'

'Of course. He's well?'

'Well enough. He was just passing and called to pay his respects. The point is, Noriko began to talk about the marriage negotiations in front of him. She took much the same attitude as just now, that everything was settled. It was most embarrassing. Mr Mori even congratulated me as he

was leaving, and asked me the groom's occupation.'

'Indeed,' Setsuko said, thoughtfully. 'It must have been embarrassing.'

'But it was hardly Mr Mori's fault. You heard her yourself just now. What was a stranger supposed to think?'

My daughter did not reply, and we sat there in silence for a few moments. Once, when I glanced over at her, Setsuko was gazing out at the garden, holding her teacup in both hands as though she had forgotten it was there. It was one of several occasions during her visit last month when – perhaps because of the way the light caught her, or some such thing – I found myself contemplating her appearance. For there can be no doubt, Setsuko is becoming better looking as she gets older. In her youth, her mother and I had worried that she was too plain to make a good marriage. Even as a child, Setsuko had rather masculine features, which seemed only to grow more pronounced with adolescence; so much so that whenever my daughters quarrelled, Noriko was always able to get the better of her elder sister by calling her 'Boy! Boy!' Who knows what effect such things have on personalities? It is no coincidence, surely, that Noriko should have grown up so headstrong, and Setsuko so shy and retiring. But now, it seems, as she approaches her thirties, Setsuko's looks are taking on a new and not inconsiderable dignity. I can recall her mother predicting this – 'Our Setsuko will flower in the summer,' she had often said. I had thought this merely my wife's way of consoling herself, but then several times last month, I was struck by how correct she in fact had been.

Setsuko came out of her reverie, and cast another glance inside the house. Then she said: 'I would suppose what happened last year greatly upset Noriko. Much more perhaps than we supposed.'

I gave a sigh and nodded. 'It's possible I didn't pay enough attention to her at the time.'

'I'm sure Father did all he could. But of course, such things are a terrible blow to a woman.'

'I have to admit, I thought she was play-acting a little, the way your sister does sometimes. She'd been insisting it was a "love match", so when it fell through, she'd be obliged to behave accordingly. But perhaps it wasn't all play-acting.'

'We laughed at the time,' Setsuko said, 'but perhaps it really was a love match.'

We fell silent again. From inside the house, we could hear Ichiro's voice shouting something repeatedly.

'Forgive me,' Setsuko said, in a new voice. 'But did we ever hear any further as to why the proposal fell through last year? It was so unexpected.'

'I have no idea. It hardly matters now, does it?'

'Of course not, forgive me.' Setsuko seemed to consider something for a moment, then she spoke again: 'It's just that Suichi persists in asking me from time to time about last year, about why the Miyakes should have pulled out like that.' She gave a little laugh, almost to herself. 'He seems convinced I know some secret and that we're all keeping it from him. I have to continually reassure him that I have no idea myself.'

'I assure you,' I said a little coldly, 'it remains equally a mystery to me. If I knew, I wouldn't keep it from you and Suichi.'

'Of course. Please excuse me, I didn't mean to imply . . .' Again, she trailed off awkwardly.

I may have appeared a little short with my daughter that morning, but then that was not the first time Setsuko had questioned me in such a way concerning last year and the Miyakes' withdrawal. Why she should believe I am keeping something from her, I do not know. If the Miyakes had some special reason for withdrawing like that, it would stand to reason they would not confide in me about it.

My own guess is that there was nothing so remarkable about the matter. True, their withdrawal at the last moment was most unexpected, but why should one suppose from this that there was anything peculiar in it? My feeling is that it was simply a matter of family status. The Miyakes, from what I

saw of them, were just the proud, honest sort who would feel uncomfortable at the thought of their son marrying above his station. Indeed, a few years ago, they would probably have withdrawn more promptly, but what with the couple claiming it was a 'love match', and with all the talk these days of the new ways, the Miyakes are the kind of people who would become confused as to their correct course. No doubt the explanation is no more complicated than that.

It is possible, too, that they were confused by my apparent approval of the match. For I was very lax in considering the matter of status, it simply not being my instinct to concern myself with such things. Indeed, I have never at any point in my life been very aware of my own social standing, and even now, I am often surprised afresh when some event, or something someone may say, reminds me of the rather high esteem in which I am held. Just the other evening, for instance, I was down in our old pleasure district, drinking at Mrs Kawakami's place, where – as happens increasingly these days – Shintaro and I had found ourselves the only customers. We were as usual sitting up at the bar on our high-stools, exchanging remarks with Mrs Kawakami, and as the hours had gone by, and no one else had come in, our exchanges had grown more intimate. At one point, Mrs Kawakami was talking about some relative of hers, complaining that the young man had been unable to find a job worthy of his abilities, when Shintaro suddenly exclaimed:

'You must send him to Sensei here, Obasan! A good word from Sensei in the right place, your relative will soon find a good post.'

'What are you saying, Shintaro?' I protested. 'I'm retired now. I have no connections these days.'

'A recommendation from a man of Sensei's standing will command respect from anyone,' Shintaro had persisted. 'Send the young man to Sensei, Obasan.'

I was at first a little taken aback by the conviction of Shintaro's assertions. But then I realized he was remembering yet

again that small deed I had performed for his younger brother all those years ago.

It must have been in 1935 or 1936, a very routine matter as I recall – a letter of recommendation to an acquaintance in the State Department, some such thing. I would have given the matter little further thought, but then one afternoon while I was relaxing at home, my wife announced there were visitors for me at the entryway.

'Please show them in,' I had said.

'But they insist they won't bother you by coming in.'

I went out to the entryway, and standing there were Shintaro and his younger brother – then no more than a youth. As soon as they saw me, they began bowing and giggling.

'Please step up,' I said, but they continued simply to bow and giggle. 'Shintaro, please. Step up to the tatami.'

'No, Sensei,' Shintaro said, all the time smiling and bowing. 'It is the height of impertinence for us to come to your house like this. The height of impertinence. But we could not remain at home any longer without thanking you.'

'Come on inside. I believe Setsuko was just making some tea.'

'No, Sensei, it is the height of impertinence. Really.' Then turning to his brother, Shintaro whispered quickly: 'Yoshio! Yoshio!'

For the first time, the young man stopped bowing and looked up at me nervously. Then he said: 'I will be grateful to you for the remainder of my life. I will exert every particle of my being to be worthy of your recommendation. I assure you, I will not let you down. I will work hard, and strive to satisfy my superiors. And however much I may be promoted in the future, I will never forget the man who enabled me to start on my career.'

'Really, it was nothing. It's no more than you deserve.'

This brought frantic protests from both of them, then Shintaro said to his brother: 'Yoshio, we have imposed enough on Sensei as it is. But before we leave, take a good look again at

the man who has helped you. We are greatly privileged to have a benefactor of such influence and generosity.'

'Indeed,' the youth muttered, and gazed up at me.

'Please, Shintaro, this is embarrassing. Please come in and we'll celebrate with some sake.'

'No, Sensei, we must leave you now. It was the greatest impertinence to come here like this and disturb your afternoon. But we could not delay thanking you for one moment longer.'

This visit – I must admit it – left me with a certain feeling of achievement. It was one of those moments, in the midst of a busy career allowing little chance for stopping and taking stock, which illuminate suddenly just how far one has come. For true enough, I had almost unthinkingly started a young man on a good career. A few years earlier, such a thing would have been inconceivable and yet I had brought myself to such a position almost without realizing it.

'Many things have changed since the old days, Shintaro,' I pointed out the other night down at Mrs Kawakami's. 'I'm retired now, I don't have so many connections.'

But then for all I know, Shintaro may not be so wrong in his assumptions. It may be that if I chose to put it to the test, I would again be surprised by the extent of my influence. As I say, I have never had a keen awareness of my own standing.

In any case, even if Shintaro may at times display naïveté about certain things, this is nothing to be disparaged, it being no easy thing now to come across someone so untainted by the cynicism and bitterness of our day. There is something reassuring about going into Mrs Kawakami's and finding Shintaro sitting up there at the bar, just as one may have found him on any evening for the past seventeen or so years, absent-mindedly turning his cap round and round on the counter in that old way of his. It really is as though nothing has changed for Shintaro. He will greet me very politely, as though he were still my pupil, and throughout the evening, however drunk he may get, he will continue to address me as

'Sensei' and maintain his most respectful manner towards me. Sometimes he will even ask me questions relating to technique or style with all the eagerness of a young apprentice – though the truth is, of course, Shintaro has long ceased to be concerned with any real art. For some years now, he has devoted his time to his book illustrations, and his present speciality, I gather, is fire engines. He will work day after day up in that attic room of his, sketching out fire engine after fire engine. But I suppose in the evenings, after a few drinks, Shintaro likes to believe he is still the idealistic young artist I first took under my supervision.

This childlike aspect of Shintaro has frequently been a source of entertainment for Mrs Kawakami, who has a somewhat wicked side to her. One night recently, for instance, during a rainstorm, Shintaro had come running into the little bar and begun squeezing his cap out over the doormat.

'Really, Shintaro-san!' Mrs Kawakami had shouted at him. 'What terrible manners!'

At this, Shintaro had looked up in great distress, as though indeed he had committed an outrageous offence. He had then begun to apologize profusely, thus leading Mrs Kawakami on further.

'I've never seen such manners, Shintaro-san. You seem to have no respect for me at all.'

'Now stop this, Obasan,' I had appealed to her after a while. 'That's enough, tell him you're just joking.'

'Joking? I'm hardly joking. The height of bad manners.'

And so it had gone on, until Shintaro had become quite pitiful to watch. But then again, on other occasions, Shintaro will be convinced he is being teased when in fact he is being spoken to quite earnestly. There was the time he had put Mrs Kawakami in difficulties by declaring cheerfully of a general who had just been executed as a war criminal: 'I've always admired that man since I was a boy. I wonder what he's up to now. Retired, no doubt.'

Some new customers had been present that night and had

looked at him disapprovingly. When Mrs Kawakami, concerned for her trade, had gone to him and told him quietly of the general's fate, Shintaro had burst out laughing.

'Really, Obasan,' he had said loudly. 'Some of your jokes are quite extreme.'

Shintaro's ignorance of such matters is often remarkable, but as I say, it is not something to disparage. One should be thankful there are still those uncontaminated by the current cynicism. In fact, it is probably this very quality of Shintaro's – this sense that he has remained somehow unscathed by things – which has led me to enjoy his company more and more over these recent years.

As for Mrs Kawakami, although she will do her best not to allow the current mood to affect her, there is no denying she has been greatly aged by the war years. Before the war, she may still have passed for a 'young woman', but since then something inside her seems to have broken and sagged. And when one remembers those she has lost in the war, it is hardly any wonder. Business too has become increasingly difficult for her; certainly, it must be hard for her to believe this is the same district where she first opened her little place those sixteen or seventeen years ago. For nothing really remains of our old pleasure district now; almost all her old competitors have closed up and left, and Mrs Kawakami must more than once have considered doing likewise.

But when her place first appeared, it was squeezed in amidst so many other bars and eating houses, I remember some people doubting if it could survive long. Indeed, you could hardly walk down those little streets without brushing against the numerous cloth banners pressing at you from all sides, leaning out at you from their shop fronts, each declaring the attractions of their establishment in boisterous lettering. But in those days, there was enough custom in the district to keep any number of such establishments thriving. On the warmer evenings particularly, the area would fill with people strolling unhurriedly from bar to bar, or just standing

talking in the middle of the street. Cars had long ceased to venture through, and even a bicycle could only be pushed with difficulty past those throngs of uncaring pedestrians.

I say 'our pleasure district', but I suppose it was really nothing more than somewhere to drink, eat and talk. You would have had to go into the city centre for the real pleasure quarters – for the geisha houses and theatres. For myself though, our own district was always preferable. It drew a lively but respectable crowd, many of them people like us – artists and writers lured by the promise of noisy conversations continuing into the night. The establishment my own group frequented was called 'Migi-Hidari', and stood at a point where three side streets intersected to form a paved precinct. The Migi-Hidari, unlike any of its neighbours, was a large sprawling place with an upper floor and plenty of hostesses both in Western and traditional dress. I had played my own small part in the Migi-Hidari's coming to so dwarf its competitors, and in recognition of this, our group had been provided with a table in one corner for our sole use. Those who drank with me there were, in effect, the élite of my school: Kuroda, Murasaki, Tanaka – brilliant young men, already with growing reputations. They all of them relished conversation, and I remember many passionate arguments taking place around that table.

Shintaro, I should say, was never one of that select group. I would not myself have objected to his joining us, but there existed a strong sense of hierarchy amongst my pupils, and Shintaro was certainly not regarded as of the first rank. In fact, I can recall one night, shortly after Shintaro and his brother had paid that visit to my house, my discussing that episode around our table. I remember the likes of Kuroda laughing at how grateful the brothers had been over 'a mere white-collar appointment'; but then they all listened solemnly as I recounted my view on how influence and status can creep up on someone who works busily, not pursuing these ends in themselves, but for the satisfaction of performing his tasks to

the best of his ability. At this point, one of them – no doubt it was Kuroda – leaned forward and said:

'I have suspected for some time that Sensei was unaware of the high regard in which he is held by people in this city. Indeed, as the instance he has just related amply illustrates, his reputation has now spread beyond the world of art, to all walks of life. But how typical of Sensei's modest nature that he is unaware of this. How typical that he himself should be the most surprised by the esteem accorded to him. But to all of us here it comes as no surprise. In fact, it may be said that respected enormously as he is by the public at large, it is we here at this table who alone know the extent to which that respect still falls short. But I personally have no doubt. His reputation will become all the greater, and in years to come, our proudest honour will be to tell others that we were once the pupils of Masuji Ono.'

Now there was nothing remarkable in all this; it had become something of a habit that at some point in the evening, when we had all drunk a little, my protégés would take to making speeches of a loyal nature to me. And Kuroda in particular, being looked on as a sort of spokesman for them, gave a fair proportion of these. Of course, I usually ignored them, but on this particular occasion, as when Shintaro and his brother had stood bowing and giggling in my entryway, I experienced a warm glow of satisfaction.

But then it would not be accurate to suggest I only socialized with the best of my pupils. Indeed, the first time I ever stepped into Mrs Kawakami's, I believe I did so because I wished to spend the evening talking something over with Shintaro. Today, when I try to recall that evening, I find my memory of it merging with the sounds and images from all those other evenings; the lanterns hung above doorways, the laughter of people congregated outside the Migi-Hidari, the smell of deep-fried food, a bar hostess persuading someone to return to his wife – and echoing from every direction, the clicking of numerous wooden sandals on the concrete. I

remember it being a warm summer's night, and not finding Shintaro in his usual haunts, I wandered around those tiny bars for some time. For all the competition there must have existed between those establishments, a neighbourly spirit reigned, and it was quite natural that on asking after Shintaro at one such bar that night, I should be advised by the hostess, without a trace of resentment, to try for him at the 'new place'.

No doubt, Mrs Kawakami could point out numerous changes – her little 'improvements' – that she has made over the years. But my impression is that her little place looked much the same that first night as it does today. On entering, one tends to be struck by the contrast between the bar counter, lit up by warm, low-hung lights, and the rest of the room, which is in shadow. Most of her customers prefer to sit up at the bar within that pool of light, and this gives a cosy, intimate feel to the place. I remember looking around me with approval that first night, and today, for all the changes which have transformed the world around it, Mrs Kawakami's remains as pleasing as ever.

But little else has remained unchanged. Coming out of Mrs Kawakami's now, you could stand at her doorway and believe you have just been drinking at some outpost of civilization. All around, there is nothing but a desert of demolished rubble. Only the backs of several buildings far in the distance will remind you that you are not so far from the city centre. 'War damage,' Mrs Kawakami calls it. But I remember walking around the district shortly after the surrender and many of those buildings were still standing. The Migi-Hidari was still there, the windows all blown out, part of the roof fallen in. And I remember wondering to myself as I walked past those shattered buildings, if they would ever again come back to life. Then I came by one morning and the bulldozers had pulled down everything.

So now that side of the street is nothing but rubble. No doubt the authorities have their plans, but it has been that

way for three years. The rain collects in small puddles and grows stagnant amidst the broken brick. As a consequence, Mrs Kawakami has been obliged to put up mosquito wiring on her windows – not an effect she thinks will attract customers.

The buildings on Mrs Kawakami's own side of the street have remained standing, but many are unoccupied; the properties on either side of her, for instance, have been vacant for some time, a situation which makes her uncomfortable. If she became suddenly rich, she often tells us, she would buy up those properties and expand. In the meantime, she waits for someone to move into them; she would not mind if they became bars just like hers, anything provided she no longer had to live in the midst of a graveyard.

If you were to come out of Mrs Kawakami's as the darkness was setting in, you might feel compelled to pause a moment and gaze at that wasted expanse before you. You might still be able to make out through the gloom those heaps of broken brick and timber, and perhaps here and there, pieces of piping protruding from the ground like weeds. Then as you walked on past more heaps of rubble, numerous small puddles would gleam a moment as they caught in the lamplight.

And if on reaching the foot of the hill which climbs up to my house, you pause at the Bridge of Hesitation and look back towards the remains of our old pleasure district, if the sun has not yet set completely, you may see the line of old telegraph poles – still without wires to connect them – disappearing into the gloom down the route you have just come, And you may be able to make out the dark clusters of birds perched uncomfortably on the tops of the poles, as though awaiting the wires along which they once lined the sky.

One evening not so long ago, I was standing on that little wooden bridge and saw away in the distance two columns of smoke rising from the rubble. Perhaps it was government workers continuing some interminably slow programme; or perhaps children indulging in some delinquent game. But the

sight of those columns against the sky put me in a melancholy mood. They were like pyres at some abandoned funeral. A graveyard, Mrs Kawakami says, and when one remembers all those people who once frequented the area, one cannot help seeing it that way.

But I am digressing. I was trying to recall here details of Setsuko's stay with us last month.

As I may have said, Setsuko spent much of the first day of her visit sitting out on the veranda, talking with her sister. At one point towards the latter part of the afternoon when my daughters were particularly deep in women's talk, I recall I left them to go in search of my grandson, who a few minutes earlier had gone running off into the house.

It was as I was coming down the corridor that a heavy thump made the whole house shake. Alarmed, I hurried on into the dining room. At that time of day, our dining room is largely in shadow, and after the brightness of the veranda, it took my eyes a moment or two to ascertain that Ichiro was not in the room at all. Then came another thump, followed by several more, together with my grandson's voice shouting: 'Yah! Yah!' The noise was coming from the adjoining piano room. I went to the doorway, listened for a moment, then quietly slid back the partition.

In contrast to the dining room, the piano room catches the sun throughout the day. It fills with a sharp, clear light, and had it been any larger, would have been an ideal place in which to take our meals. At one time, I had used it to store paintings and materials, but nowadays, apart from the upright German piano, the room is practically bare. No doubt this lack of clutter had inspired my grandson in much the same way as the veranda had earlier; for I found him progressing across the floor with a curious stamping movement, which I took to be an impersonation of someone galloping on horseback across open land. Because his back was turned to

the doorway, it was some moments before he realized he was being observed.

'Oji!' he said, turning angrily. 'Can't you see I'm busy?'

'I'm sorry, Ichiro, I didn't realize.'

'I can't play with you just now!'

'I'm very sorry. But it sounded so exciting from out here I wondered if I could come in and watch.'

For a moment, my grandson went on staring at me crossly. Then he said moodily: 'All right. But you have to sit and be quiet. I'm busy.'

'Very well,' I said, with a laugh. 'Thank you very much, Ichiro.'

My grandson continued to glare at me as I crossed the room and seated myself by the window. When Ichiro had arrived with his mother the previous evening, I had made him a gift of a sketchpad and a set of coloured crayons. I now noticed the sketchpad lying on the tatami nearby, three or four of the crayons scattered around it. I could see the first few leaves of the pad had been drawn on and was about to reach over to investigate, when Ichiro suddenly recommenced the drama I had interrupted.

'Yah! Yah!'

I watched him for a while, but could make little sense of the scenes he was enacting. At intervals, he would repeat his horse movement; at other times, he appeared to be in combat with numerous invisible enemies. All the while, he continued to mutter lines of dialogue under his breath. I tried hard to make these out, but as far as I could tell he was not using actual words, simply making sounds with his tongue.

Clearly, though he did his best to ignore me, my presence was having an inhibiting effect. Several times he froze in mid-movement as though inspiration had suddenly deserted him, before throwing himself into action again. Then before long he gave up and slumped on to the floor. I wondered if I should applaud, but thought better of it.

'Very impressive, Ichiro. But tell me, who were you pretending to be?'

'You guess, Oji.'

'Hmm. Lord Yoshitsune perhaps? No? A samurai warrior, then? Hmm. Or a ninja perhaps? The Ninja of the Wind.'

'Oji's completely on the wrong scent.'

'Then tell me. Who were you?'

'Lone Ranger!'

'What?'

'Lone Ranger! Hi yo Silver!'

'Lone Ranger? Is that a cowboy?'

'Hi yo Silver!' Ichiro began to gallop again, and this time made a neighing noise.

I watched my grandson for a moment. 'How did you learn to play cowboys, Ichiro?' I asked eventually, but he just continued to gallop and neigh.

'Ichiro,' I said, more firmly, 'wait a moment and listen. It's more interesting, more interesting by far, to pretend to be someone like Lord Yoshitsune. Shall I tell you why? Ichiro, listen, Oji will explain it to you. Ichiro, listen to your Oji-san. Ichiro!'

Possibly I raised my voice more than I had intended, for he stopped and looked at me with a startled expression. I continued to look at him for a moment, then gave a sigh.

'I'm sorry, Ichiro, I shouldn't have interrupted. Of course you can be anyone you like. Even a cowboy. You must forgive your Oji-san. He was forgetting for a moment.'

My grandson continued to stare at me, and it occurred to me he was about to burst into tears or else run out of the room.

'Please, Ichiro, you just carry on with what you were doing.'

For a moment longer, Ichiro went on staring at me. Then he suddenly yelled out: 'Lone Ranger! Hi yo Silver!' and began to gallop again. He stamped more violently than ever, causing the whole room to shake around us. I went on watching him

for a moment, then reached over and picked up his sketchpad.

Ichiro had used up the first four or five sheets somewhat wastefully. His technique was not at all bad, but the sketches – of trams and trains – had each been abandoned at a very early stage. Ichiro noticed me examining the sketchpad and came hurrying over.

'Oji! Who said you could look at those?' He tried to snatch the pad away from me, but I held it out of his reach.

'Now, Ichiro, don't be unkind. Oji wants to see what you've been doing with the crayons he gave you. That's only fair.' I lowered the sketchpad and opened it at the first drawing. 'Very impressive, Ichiro. Hmm. But you know, you could be even better if you wanted.'

'Oji can't see those!'

My grandson made another attempt to snatch away the pad, obliging me to hold off his hands with my arm.

'Oji! Give me back my book!'

'Now, Ichiro, stop that. Let your Oji see. Look, Ichiro, bring me those crayons over there. Bring them over and we'll draw something together. Oji will show you.'

These words had a surprising effect. My grandson immediately stopped struggling, then went to gather up the crayons scattered on the floor. When he came back, something new – a kind of fascination – had entered his manner. He seated himself beside me and held out the crayons, watching carefully, but saying nothing.

I turned the sketchpad to a new sheet and placed it on the floor in front of him. 'Let me see you do something first, Ichiro. Then Oji will see if he can help to make it better at all. What do you want to draw?'

My grandson had become very quiet. He looked down at the blank sheet thoughtfully, but made no move to start drawing.

'Why don't you try and draw something you saw yesterday?' I suggested. 'Something you saw when you first arrived in the city.'