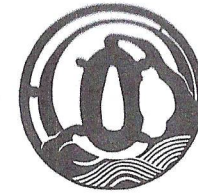


From  
Autumn Lightning  
By JANE LOWRY



# 1.

## Meeting with the Past

Surrounded by the pines that closed in his yard, the swordsman crouched motionless. His gray kimono and black, skirt-like *hakama* grew damp in the predawn mist, but his attention was focused on the drops of water that collected first on a branch above his head, then dripped to the ground with noiseless regularity. He seemed to be waiting for a particular drop, his expression reflecting a profound patience. The bead of water finally fell, and with perfect celerity, his right hand tore the samurai sword from its scabbard at his side. Still kneeling, he slashed a wide arc in the heavy, wet air, stopping the weapon as abruptly as if it had struck some invisible barrier. Then slowly, methodically, he pulled a cloth from a fold in his kimono and wiped moisture from the blade's surface, for he had cut through the descending drop, shattering it into smaller droplets that sparkled on the steel like diamonds in the morning's new light.

While the swordsman continued the solitary exercises with his weapon, I wriggled farther under the handquilted covers my great-grandmother had patched together, burrowing to find a few more minutes of sleep.

*Get your motor runnin'  
Head out on the highway  
Lookin' for adventure  
And whatever comes our way  
Born to be wild . . .*

The music swelling from the alarm clock-radio by my head promised a heady freedom in that early autumn of 1968, but the blasting noise was also a reminder that I had to get up and get ready for another day of junior high school.

Nothing in the morning indicated that the day would be different. On the long bus ride ahead, I would have to fabricate a believable excuse for not finishing a math assignment, already two days overdue. I would have to sit through eight hours of uninspired attempts at educating myself, hurry home afterward to stuff the bulky jacket and pants of a judo uniform into a bag, and then be off to practice at the state university gym. For a thirteen-year-old boy of the Midwest, it wasn't a day—or a life, for that matter—too much out of the ordinary at all. In those days, judo was an unlikely sport for a Missouri boy, but my adolescent passion might just as easily have been loosed upon cars, or stamp collecting, or girls. As it happened, I had always had interests both in things Japanese and in the avoidance of getting beaten up, so three evenings of my weeks were taken with the art of judo, learning how to fall and how to make my classmates at the gym fall.

In fact, what had been the only disruption in my life that year was becoming so much a routine that I hardly considered it outstanding anymore. Walking to judo practice, I would take a detour down a street near the university, where many of the professors lived. It was a street of monstrous old houses with towering ceilings and three, or even four, stories, a street where sounds much louder than the strains of Bach or Vivaldi were hushed by oaks and

pinus and maples, as impressive in size as were the houses beside them. I walked along the quiet street until I came to a house nearly hidden by trees, with a front yard full of iris and lily beds that probably never saw the sun until all the trees around them were bare of leaves.

This was the house where a Japanese guy lived, as my judo friends had heard it, who was supposed to be an expert in swordfighting. While we were all intrigued by the idea of a modern day samurai living in the middle of the Ozarks, I was the only one persistent and impudent enough to find out more. I did it by going to the front door, knocking, and telling the Oriental woman who answered that I had come to learn swordsmanship. What I noticed immediately about her appearance was that, even though she looked to be well into her fifties, her skin was creamy, like weathered ivory, and she had the most wonderfully slitted eyes.

"You must have the wrong address," she said. "There is no one here who teaches fighting with a sword."

That's not exactly the way it sounded. Her accent made the words come out, "You mus hava wrongu address. Dare isa noone here who teacha fighting wisa sword," and her voice stayed in the air between us, the way a note played on a fine piano will hang on and on if it's struck in the center of a big, empty room. I think I might have kept coming back to that house, just to hear her voice. It was that pleasant. But from my reading I also knew it was a custom in old Japan for prospective fencing students to be forced to beg for instruction several times to insure their sincerity. So to listen to a voice that continued on even after the words were finished, to see if she knew something about "fighting wisa sword" that she wasn't telling me, and to prove I was as stubborn as any Japanese pupil might have been, I came back. Three nights a week I went to her door to ask the same question and, without a trace of annoyance or amusement, the woman assured me that no one there taught fencing. I would nod and be on my way to judo practice. In nearly a month's worth of visits the only clue I had that I wasn't at the "wrongu address" was that she hadn't yet called the authorities to come and haul me away. It was not the most encouraging of consolations.



Just when our thrice-weekly exchanges had grown into a pleasant sort of game that I was beginning to expect to last into the following spring and beyond, they stopped without the slightest notice. I was still trying to sleep through the radio's morning nagging—failing as usual; and still presenting novel excuses for not completing my homework—failing as usual. And, as usual, I stopped by the house on the quiet street to ask the woman with the creamy skin to teach me how to use a sword. This time, I succeeded. Well, partially anyway.

"You come back a tomorrow," she said, her voice lingering in that delightful way. "Mebbe dar be someone who can herp you."

A change in the scheme of things it certainly was. As it turned out, I had no idea what a change it was going to be.

To the average Occidental, the Japanese martial arts are most often thought of in terms of *judo*, *karate-do*, and *aikido*. That's an understandable connotation, for those methods of combat are the ones most successfully transplanted from their Asian homeland. Collectively, they are known there as the *budo*, a Japanese word meaning literally "martial ways," and indicating that judo, karatedo, and aikido are spiritual paths for approaching a particular way of life. The originators of the *budo* intended for them to be means of physical and self-defense training, of course, but also, and more importantly, the martial ways were meant to instill moral values in a practitioner, improve his personality, and make him an asset to society. Because of the insistence upon morality and virtue, these *budo* have produced some of the greatest thinkers and political leaders in the history of Japan, and they are often considered by the Japanese to be the bright, *yang* side of the country's martial spirit. If they are, then by the tenets of Oriental philosophy, there must also be a darker, *yin* side. Surely this facet of *yin* is revealed in the nature of the *bugei*.

The *bugei* are the traditional martial arts of the samurai (as distinguished from the more recently created *budo*, or martial *ways*), rarely practiced anymore in modern-day Japan and almost completely unheard of outside of it. Superficially, they might look alike, but the *budo* and *bugei* are really quite different. The former are

pretty much limited in scope to judo, aikido, karatedo, *kendo* (fencing with bamboo staves), and *kyudo* (archery). The *bugei*, on the other hand, represent a startlingly wide diversity. Almost a limitless array of techniques were codified into *bugei*, or "military arts," as that word can be translated. *Hojutsu*, for instance, is the art of binding an enemy with a short cord. *Sueijutsu* is the art of swimming and treading water while clad in the light wooden armor once worn by the samurai. Spitting needles into an opponent's eye (*fukumijutsu*), methods of deflecting flying arrows from his bow (*yadomejutsu*), even hypnotizing him into defeat (*saiminjutsu*)—all were crafts familiar to the feudal warriors of Japan, but as woodblock prints of that era still show, the samurai's favorite art was in the handling of his long, two-handed sword, by ways he referred to as *kenjutsu*, the techniques of the blade.

All of this was explained to me the next day as I sat at attention, eager and uncomfortably erect in the living room of the house on the quiet street. The man doing the talking was Japanese, slightly built except for the heavily muscled forearms he folded across his chest. In a polo shirt and slacks, he didn't look like my idea of a fierce samurai, but even when relaxed, his posture had a formidable bearing about it, as if he were capable of commanding respect by his bodily presence alone. Clearly, he was as old as the woman I'd met so often at the front door, yet just as clearly, he was not a man you could ever slap on the back and call "Pops." No way.

Without speaking further for a moment, he poured the steaming contents of a teapot into two cups on the table between us, and I took in the surroundings. The inside of the house was of a style I have to label as Gothic. I don't know a more apt description for the sort of place that has a minor maze of rooms and hallways and alcoves—so many that you wonder if the house isn't so much inhabited, as it is gradually explored. In the living room, braided rugs protected the floor's dark finish from the furniture: a plump sofa and overstuffed chairs that all looked to be as comfortable as the one I was in (even ramrod straight, as I was, it's hard to sit *on* furniture like that). There were high bookshelves, and windows even higher, a couple of them opaque with stained glass designs. To my right yawned an enormous fireplace that could have accommo-

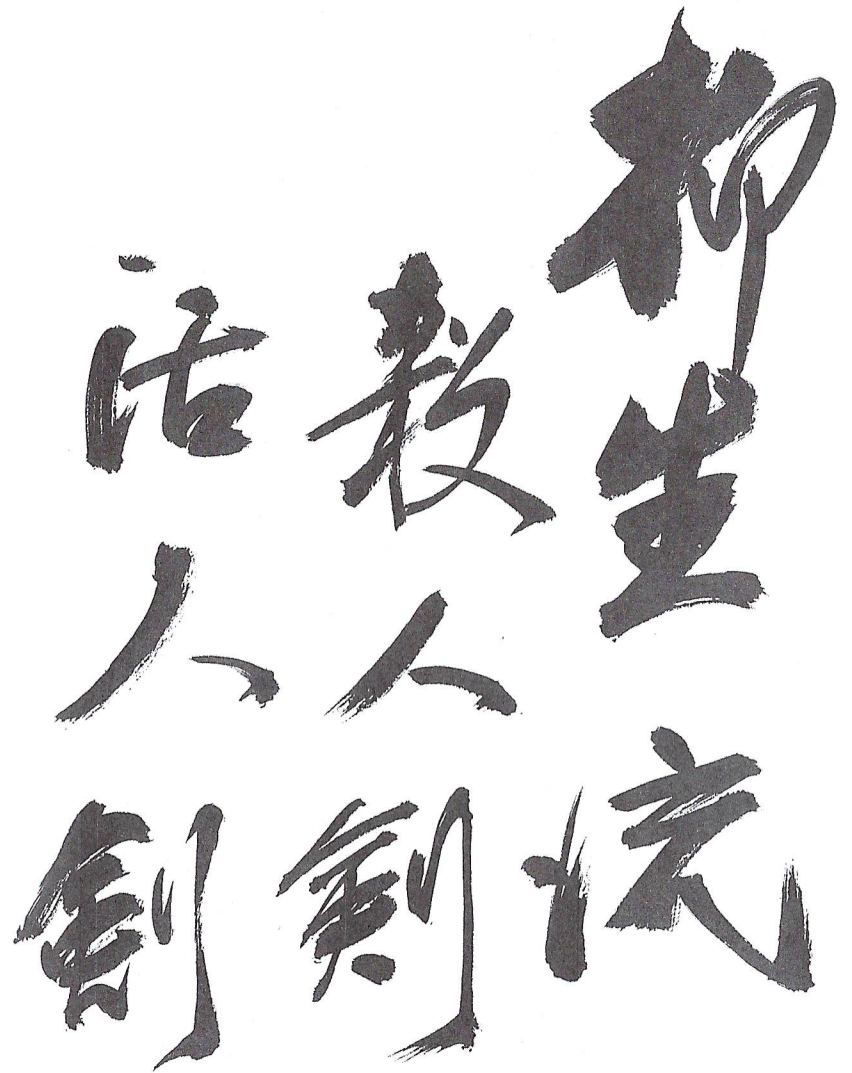


dated more logs than a man might carry in both arms. Only a couple of wispy ink paintings displaying brushed calligraphy, and the books on the shelves, titled in indecipherable Japanese characters, distinguished the room from any other of similar architecture and decor.

My host handed me a cup of tea and watched while I took a sip, trying not to grimace at its green bitterness. "Being a *bugeisha*, a pupil of the bugei, is not something you . . ." he searched for the right word, ". . . *adapt* to your life. It means changing your life, almost in every way, to adapt to the bugei." As an afterthought, he added, "More is expected of a bugeisha than of an ordinary person."

He paused, sensing, I suspected, that his advice wasn't having much effect on the enthusiasm of his teenage guest. "So 'ka," he sighed. "We will give it a try, though, *neh?* In the meantime, I've forgotten to introduce me." He tilted his head fractionally and, with a hint of teasing, a touch of pretend grandeur, said, "I'm Kotaro Ryokichi, of the Yagyū Shinkage style of the bugei."

But I could never be so informal as to address him by his first name, or even as Mr. Kotaro. To me, he would be Kotaro *Sensei* or "revered teacher," for I was on my way to becoming a martial artist now, meaning I would have to watch such things as manners and politeness. As Sensei had warned me, more is expected of a bugeisha.

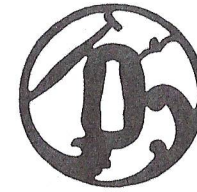


活人剣  
殺人剣

Katsujinken, satsujinken.

"The sword that gives life, not the sword that takes life,  
is the goal for the Yagyū swordsman."





### 3.

## Matters of Concentration

“Osu!” Kotaro Sensei murmured a greeting as he strode through the door.

The mystery lady who had refused so many of my requests for instruction, and who was Kaoru, I discovered, Kotaro Sensei’s wife, had a voice that intrigued. Sensei’s voice, on the other hand, possessed a quality of controlled power that, more than anything else, intimidated. He spoke softly, deliberately punctuating his words.

The polo shirt and slacks he had worn at our previous meeting were gone, replaced by a quilted kimono jacket tucked into the black hakama that rustled with his step. A *bokken* was in his hand. (The wide-legged hakama are the same kind of trousers once worn by the samurai; a bokken is a sword made of hard oak, shaped and balanced like a real one. This sword is used in kenjutsu practice to avoid the injuries that would soon result from wielding a sharp steel blade.)

Following Mrs. Kotaro's instructions, I was waiting for my first lesson in what I guessed was originally the house's dining room; it had been converted into a *dojo*, a "place for learning the Way." It was expansively empty, bare except for a rack of wooden poles and bokken on one wall. On the other side, the space of a second doorway was walled up with planks and remodelled into a small alcove of the kind the Japanese call a *tokonoma*. Above the *tokonoma* sat a shelf with a miniature, steep-roofed house perched upon it.

Sensei paused in front of the shelf to bow slowly from the waist. He straightened, stood silently, then turned to me.

"Seiza," he said, gesturing to the floor in front of where I stood.

"Sir?"

"Seiza," he repeated briefly. "You understand? Seiza is sitting down bow."

I understood. The *seiza*, or formal, seated bow is done by kneeling down, first on the left knee, then on both and sitting back to rest the buttocks on one's heels. In judo and karate *dojo*, classes are customarily started and concluded this way.

Sensei waited for me to begin. When I did, dropping onto my left knee, I caught the smallest movement in the corner of my eye, a twitch, I thought, of Sensei's shoulders. *Wham!* The bokken smashed into my side with such force that I was pitched over, sprawling onto the floor.

"What the hell is going on?" I wondered while I stumbled to my feet. One of my elbows took the impact of the fall and I worked it back and forth gingerly, trying also to suck air back into lungs that were emptied by the force of the sword's strike. The throbbing in my side reached from hip to armpit. Sensei's command allowed no more than a couple of seconds for me to wonder what manner of sin I had committed to deserve the assault.

"Try again."

A lot more stiffly, still hurting, I tried again, getting no further than before when the bokken came at me in the same unseen way, whacking against my arm, knocking me down again. And again and again. That first afternoon as a *bugeisha*, I learned that pain concentrated on a specific spot can only be centralized for so long

before it will become more general and so, more bearable. In fact, Kotaro Sensei wasn't really hitting me all that hard. It was the terrifying speed of the bokken and the helplessness I felt against it that made me flinch with anticipation. On the fourth or fifth try, I finally glimpsed from where Sensei's sword was coming and, jumping to the side, I succeeded in ducking out of its path. After I managed to bob out of the way when he swung at me a few more times, he nodded, indicating for me to go on. Hands at my sides, I knelt on both knees and, as I expected, Sensei struck hard with the bokken, thrusting it this time so the end of the weapon punched into my chest like a sharp fist. Once more it took repeated tries and several jolting shocks before I could twist away from the blunt point of the sword when it stabbed out at me. Sensei's gaze remained obdurate, expressionless. Still there was no explanation from him and I didn't have a chance to wonder much about it now that my senses were taking over, tuning themselves for self-preservation.

On both knees, I went ahead with the final posture of *seiza*, easing back to sit on my heels. Since I was facing Sensei fully and wary for the slightest movement, I figured I would be able to dodge any thrust or swing of the bokken, yet just as I pressed my bottom to my heels, my teacher reversed his grip on the sword, striking with it upward at my chin. I jerked my head aside spastically. Even though the bokken wasn't sharp, it was as dangerous as any club and with the speed and force he used, I was certain my jaw would be crushed if hit. The other blows I had begun to anticipate, but the angle of the last attack was completely unexpected. The blood in my temples pumped. Panting, every muscle strained, I waited for Sensei to bring the oak blade down. Instead, he stepped back.

"Good. Now try again."

I stood shakily to begin the whole process again. Kneeling, I pivoted away from the sword's lateral strokes. On my knees, I twisted to let the thrusts go past. Sitting back, my head cocked away in time for the upper cuts to whistle by.

"Now, not so much movement," Sensei commanded. "No need to jump a foot—" he mimed my wide, frantic dodges, "—when sword is only an inch wide." I tried to follow his advice, shifting myself as little as possible to avoid the strikes, and by the end of



an hour I could often escape from the bokken without losing my balance or posture. Finally, when I made it all the way to the floor and bowed without being hit once, Sensei returned the bow and slipped into the position of seiza beside and at a right angle to me. It is customary for a Japanese of higher status to be seated at such an angle to an inferior, allowing the former to observe the latter without being watched too carefully himself. In a culture where attitudes are measured by discerning the slightest of reactions, that arrangement gives the more respected individual a considerable advantage in conversation.

Sensei sighed. "For the bugeisha," he said, "it is not enough to be alert just when holding a weapon. He must be ready for the unexpected every moment, always ready. Sitting down, getting up, eating, sleeping—all the same. The bugeisha has to be aware all the time. We call this, say in Japanese, '*zanshin*'."

Along with the tremendous social and political turbulence of the Sixties there came a plague of crime. Riots erupted in most cities and with the climate of lawlessness they produced came increasing incidents of rapes and muggings and random violence. More and more Americans began looking for, if not a solution to the problems, at least a personal measure of protection from them. Many turned to the martial arts in the fanciful hope that those disciplines could mold them into invincible masters of self-defense. (Amidst their number, no doubt, were countless males partially motivated by the film exploits of the spy/playboy James Bond, who was the best-known martial artist of that era.)

In community-sponsored classes or privately run studios as well as in a variety of books published on the subject, teachers of self-protection advocated a consistently similar approach. If such and such an attack was made, they taught, such and such a response was appropriate. It was a clever assortment of joint locks, strikes, and throws that were practiced until they could be recalled at a moment's notice by the student who then went on his way, secure in the knowledge that he was safe from any threats short of a full-scale Soviet invasion.

As some of those students later discovered to their dismay, the

flaw in their instruction was that muggers and rapists have always had the disconcerting habit of assaulting victims in ways that might not have been covered in self-defense courses. Then too, while adroit kicks and acrobatic throws could be impressive enough in the gym where they were taught, trainees found that their tactics could be a lot more difficult to execute with an armful of groceries in tow, or while bent over, loosening the nuts on a flat tire. When I started my own martial arts training, newspaper stories appeared almost daily recounting incidents of men and women attacked while they were preoccupied with those ordinary tasks, dredging purses and pockets for car keys or waiting absentmindedly for a streetlight to change.

A principal reason why so many of those criminal assaults were successful was not because victims were unable to defend themselves physically—in many incidents they were, or would have been—but because they were unprepared mentally. Under Sensei's tutelage, I learned that the bugeisha of old faced exactly the same problem. He could be superbly skilled with a score of different weapons, but if he was caught off guard, his skills wouldn't have done him any good at all. That is why, in addition to his regular training, the bugeisha made it a constant practice to cultivate *zanshin*, literally, "continuing mind."

Zanshin can take many different forms. One afternoon, a couple of months after I had started the study of the bugei, I was upstairs at Sensei's home in the bathroom. Among the first tasks Sensei and his wife had undertaken upon moving into the house on the quiet street was to disconnect and haul out the claw-footed, cast iron tub in the second floor bathroom, to replace it with a Japanese *furo*. The wooden tub, made of slats bound together with metal bands, was compact, barely wide enough to hold two bathers. A traditional Japanese bath is filled with water heated by a fire built underneath it (a piece of sheet metal forms the tub's bottom, with a wooden rack set over it to prevent the soakers from being burned), and Mrs. Kotaro told me that her husband took considerable convincing before he decided that an open fire was not the most advisable addition to a second story bathroom in a Western home.



The toilet was on the opposite side of the room from the tub and partially screened off by a waist-high panel, but if I leaned over in the squatting, feet-on-the-floor posture nearly all Americans take when emptying their bowels, I could admire the soft, umber-stained finish of the furo's sides and wonder what it would be like to sit and soak in it. Lost in reverie, that's what I was doing when Sensei walked in unannounced to rummage for something in the bathroom closet. He ignored me, as he often did in those days when he wasn't actually teaching me. He found the towel he was looking for and left, leaving me red-faced to finish my business hurriedly.

The next day I found Sensei sitting at the living room table, drinking tea. We talked for a bit and then he pushed back his chair.

"When you use toilet, is like this?" He bent over and propped his elbows on his knees, an Oriental version of Rodin's *Thinker*.

I nodded. "Yes, Sensei."

"What would have happened yesterday," he asked, straightening up, "if I had been bad guy, come breaking in to kill you? Pants down, no way to make strong stance or defend. No zanshin. Too bad, you would have died."

Kotaro Sensei went on to show me how a bugeisha sat properly on the toilet so that even at that awkward moment he retained zanshin. I learned to pull the right leg of my pants completely off and then to sit upright, spine stretched, with my right leg folded over and that foot resting on my left thigh. In that posture he showed me how it was possible to stand quickly. Without the hobble of my pant legs flopping around my ankles, I could move freely to defend myself. Sitting straight, one leg bent in what yoga practitioners might've described as a half lotus position was also a healthy way for the body to be emptying its wastes, Sensei pointed out, allowing abdominal muscles to be strengthened and taking strain off the lower back.

"Martial arts in the toilet!" I groaned inwardly as he lectured on. When Kotaro Sensei had told me the bugei would change my life, I hadn't guessed it would include instructions for potty training, but he calmly insisted that every action of a bugeisha reflected his quality of zanshin, so I listened carefully.

Though Sensei's lesson was animated and comical—"This the way old men in Japan sit at *benjo*, squatting so not hurt bad knees. . . . Fat men bend over this way, too lazy to do right"—his intent was perfectly serious, for in the days of the samurai, bathrooms and toilets seemed to have been awfully hazardous places. At his castle in Kai Province, Takeda Shingen kept a bokken in a corner of the Japanese version of an outhouse, to insure against surprise attacks there. His precaution wasn't all that paranoid in light of the circumstances surrounding the death of Uyesugi Ken-shin, his lifelong enemy. An assassin secreted himself in the open space underneath the toilet of Uyesugi's private chamber one night and while the general was sitting there the following morning he met what must have been a painful demise when he was stabbed with a short spear. To guard against similar kinds of ambushes in their baths, many samurai customarily soaked with a dirk or short sword in the steaming water beside them—a measure of security, according to annals of the time, that saved more than one life.

Actually, in the bath or anywhere else, my efforts at maintaining zanshin in those early days of my training were not spectacularly successful. An entertaining program on television, an injury at judo practice, or the passing by of a young and braless lady would instantly divert my mind from thoughts of self-defense. But I kept on practicing, imagining myself to be the modern counterpart to Matajuro, the hero of a tale told by generations of Yagyu swordsmen.

I first heard of Matajuro from Mrs. Kotaro after I absentmindedly walked through the corner of one of her iris beds and she clipped me on the back of my head with the handle of her hoe. (Between Sensei and his wife, I was beginning to take a lot of whacks with various objects around the house, and while none of them caused any real injury, the bruises they produced were difficult at times to explain to my parents and friends, who couldn't imagine what I kept bumping into.)

Matajuro was born into the Yagyu family after their clan had already gained a reputation as talented bugeisha. As a boy, his interest in the art of the blade was encouraged. He proved to be a





promising but lazy pupil, in danger of never realizing the limits of his potential. In an attempt to shake him from his lethargy, his father banished him from the dojo.

Matajuro was stung by the harshness of the punishment. He was determined to dedicate himself to mastering kenjutsu—even if only to show his family how wrong they had been—so he set off to find a worthy master. The young fencer's travels took him to the province of Kii, to a region of mountains there threaded with forty-eight magnificent waterfalls, some of them cascading over four hundred feet into a rock-bordered pool where mists swirl constantly. In a thick forest at the foot of the Nachi Falls, the tallest and most beautiful of the cataracts, sits the Kumano Nachi Shrine, the site of ancient and mysterious rituals since time began in Japan.

More importantly, as far as Yagyū Matajuro was concerned, was that, according to rumors he'd heard in sake shops and inns along the highway, a sword master of incomparable skill was living near the Shrine. After a long journey, the young Yagyū reached the Kumano Shrine, where he was told by the priests to follow a barely visible path even further back into the forest. At the end, the priests said, was a senile hermit named Banzo who was reputed to have once been a swordsman. The track led Matajuro to a ramshackle hut.

"I've come to learn swordsmanship," Matajuro announced confidently, although to no one in particular since there wasn't a sign of another person about. Nervously, he softly added, "How long will it take?"

In the doorway of the hut Banzo appeared. "Ten years," he said.

"That's too long." The young Yagyū shook his head. "How about if I work extra hard and practice twice as much?"

"Twenty years," answered Banzo.

Matajuro could guess in what direction the conversation was leading, so wisely he argued no further but simply requested that he be taken as a student, to which the master readily agreed.

It was a peculiar apprenticeship. Matajuro was forbidden to handle a sword or even speak of fencing. Instead he was put to work cutting firewood, cooking for Banzo, and cleaning the hut,

chores that lasted every day from before dawn until after he lit the lanterns that chased away the forest's darkness. Rarely did his master speak and never did he mention anything about teaching the boy swordsmanship.

Finally, after a year of ceaseless work, Matajuro grew frustrated, suspecting at last that he had been tricked into becoming nothing more than a servant for the surely demented Banzo. Angrily chopping at a log one day, he nearly convinced himself to find instruction somewhere else. There were plenty of teachers around who would be honored to have a member of the famous Yagyū family as a student—and plenty of conniving old swordslingers who made slaves of eager, would-be disciples, he concluded bitterly as he eyed the stack of wood still left to be cut. He sank the blade of his axe into a log, as if the cutting could remedy the problems absorbing him. He failed to notice that he was no longer alone until he was sent reeling into the woodpile by a vicious blow. (It was pleasing to me, as Sensei told me the tale of Yagyū Matajuro, to know that we had both had an initial experience in kenjutsu that included being knocked senseless.) Dazed, he looked up from the ground to find the master brandishing a length of hard green bamboo above him. Wordlessly, Banzo left as silently as he had come, leading Matajuro to conclude that his beating was for an inattentiveness to his chores.

The offspring of samurai blood was ashamed of slighting his responsibilities, even if he was plotting to leave the crazy old man. He decided to make the next chore of the day, washing Banzo's clothes, his last, but he would do such a good job of it that his master could find no fault with his work. It was a couple of hours later, while the boy was scrubbing clothes near the Falls, that Banzo struck again, harder this time, driving Matajuro splashing into the water. Behind him, Banzo roared over the crashing of the Falls.

"You expect to learn of swordsmanship, but you cannot even dodge a stick!"

Yagyū Matajuro's aristocratic pride was once more inflamed. Just as he had left his home to show his father that he could become a great fencer, he resolved to stay at the Nachi Shrine to prove the old master wrong. He began to concentrate, no matter what else



he was doing, on keeping himself ready for an attack. Banzo struck five times a day, then ten, then twenty, always when his student was busy at his chores. He was so stealthy that Matajuro's only warning would be a rustle of hakama or the whoosh of the bamboo stick cutting down. Weeding in the garden, washing at the Falls, mending the hut's leaky roof, Matajuro would be occupied with one task or another, to find himself suddenly jumping at the slightest unusual noise and missing more and more of the swipes aimed at him.

When Banzo failed to connect his stick to Matajuro's head or shoulders or even to touch him with it a single time for a period of many months, he switched his strategy. In addition to the daytime assaults, he started slashing at Matajuro while the boy slept. Matajuro was forced to redouble his efforts, teaching himself to sleep lightly with his subconscious remaining alert. Grimly, he realized that the more successful he became at avoiding the bamboo stick, the more frequently it was lashed at him. Seventy, eighty, a hundred times day and night his master would appear like a ghost, swinging at him. It was growing increasingly harder for Banzo to catch him unaware, though, for his instincts were sharpened to a level almost supernatural.

On an evening four years after he had first come looking for the sword master at the Nachi Shrine, Matajuro was preparing a meal of *chirashizushi*, a steamed mixture of rice and vegetables. He was carefully peeling a burdock root for the dish when Banzo struck from behind. Matajuro didn't move from his crouching position by the fire. With one hand, he snatched up a pot lid and fended off the blow, then returned to his cooking without a pause.

That night, Banzo presented his student with a certificate of full proficiency in the art of fencing and a fine old sword. Matajuro needed neither. Without ever having taken a formal lesson or even handling a weapon, he had reached the highest peak of the bugei—the mastery of zanshin.

The walk between Sensei's house and my own home took me through a couple of acres of neatly manicured grass and trees that were preserved as a park on the homesite of the city's first resident.



Even in the heat of the September evening, when I began my training in the bugei, the park's air was pleasantly fresh. Squirrels scampered about, hiding walnuts for the coming winter. Toddlers explored with faltering steps only to be called back by parents who lounged on blankets spread under the trees, listening to the impromptu concerts of university music students. Along the border of the park ran a stream contained by WPA workers during the Depression into a channel made of natural stone and mortar. Bridges of the same construction spanned the stream.

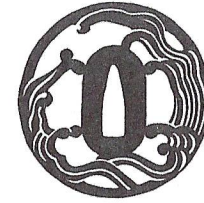
I made it to one of the bridges before fatigue dragged me down and I slid down the face of the channel and stretched out with my back to the coolness of the bridge's concrete base. Above me hummed the tires of cars. Beyond my feet the dark ribbon of the stream trickled softly. Inside, I ached. My arms were still numbed with the battering they had taken from Sensei's bokken, and my calves and thighs throbbed from the unaccustomed exertion of crouching in seiza. In addition to the physical pain, Sensei had overwhelmed me by delivering all his instructions in a pidgin mixture of Japanese and English that continued to reel in my mind long after I had bowed a final time and left the dojo. Since his English wasn't normally that poor, I imagined that it was a plan to confuse me and cause me to quit in discouragement. Kotaro Sensei's final words to me that evening, though, were a lift.

"Next time you try make zanshin again," he said. "More practice, more practice, get better. So, hakkeyoi."

From judo, I knew "hakkeyoi" was a colloquial expression that meant "Keep at it." Alone under the bridge massaging my bruised legs until they felt good enough to carry me home, I hoped that I would.



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### Autumn and Other Things Japanese

On a nameless sand spit in the swift straits of Kanmon, which separates Kyushu from Honshu, Miyamoto Musashi, Japan's most famous samurai folk hero, won the duel that was to secure him a place of honor in stories, romantic novels, and eventually on the movie screen. Musashi's opponent in the match was Sasaki Kojiro, whose phenomenal talent in swordsmanship was accentuated by the distinctive weapon he used, a blade nearly two feet longer than those carried by most swordsmen of the era. Given the reach of his sword and his fearsome reputation—according to one legend he proved his expertise to fellow passengers on a ferry crossing of Lake Biwa by shearing the topknot off a samurai who had gotten into an argument with him, drawing and cutting before the samurai had time to duck—the odds were stacked heavily against Musashi, who, at that time, was still relatively unknown, a shabbily dressed country bumpkin from Mimasaka Province.



Not only did Musashi kill Sasaki, however, he did it with a wooden sword he carved from a spare oar while being rowed out to the site of the duel. Musashi knew, as did many other of Japan's best swordfighters, that the bokken, far from being a supplemental training aid in kenjutsu, was every bit as lethal as a sharp steel blade.

The bokken in my hands was a curved piece of oak, three feet long and polished to a warm smoothness. Kotaro Sensei was drilling me in the simplest movement of the Yagyu ryu's curriculum: raising the sword above my head and bringing it down along the same path in an uninterrupted motion. He had to stop and correct me constantly. At first I held the bokken the same way one would grip a baseball bat or a golf club, with my hands as close together as possible. Sensei showed me that by separating them, right hand on top near where the guard would be on a *katana*, or real sword, and my left hand almost on the knob at the end of the hilt, I could move my wrists more freely and give the sword a wider range of play. Then he transformed my jerky chopping into a more natural swing, all the while adjusting the parts of my body that refused to cooperate.

"Feet turned so. Legs bent for springing to take shock like shock absorbers for car. Elbows same way. Both feet slide same time forward. Sword up"—not up, but exactly parallel to the floor—"cut now, cut, cut, cut."

Even though I was only slashing at the air in front of me, if my knees and elbows didn't remain flexible my body would wrench against the force of the bokken as it came down. As it was, my wrists were already aching with the unaccustomed weight of the weapon and instead of looking as if I was tugging on a bell rope like Sensei wanted, my cuts resembled those of an arthritic and inebriated woodchopper.

The details—as well as the repetition required to learn them—were endless. Kotaro Sensei's warning to me that more was expected from a bugeisha caused me to think he meant I would be forced to endure the tedium of training and to devote myself to the study of the sword or spear or whatever. As my education in the

bujutsu progressed, I found that the expectations were far wider. In a variety of subtle ways, I began to conform to a Japanese manner of doing certain things; this manner was further refined by Kotaro Sensei and his wife into the samurai way of doing them. They were the sort of lessons that turned a quiet evening meal into an obstacle course of mental alertness and manual dexterity.

I learned how to eat with *hashi* (chopsticks) at the Kotaros table, chasing wriggly pieces of vegetables across plates and picking rice grains from my bowl. When I had achieved a presentable level of skill with hashi, I was instructed in how a bugeisha must use them. Normally, hashi are pushed straight into the mouth along with the piece of food held between them. After a couple of times of observing me eat in that fashion, Sensei casually reached over and popped the chopsticks on the ends with his palm, jamming them against the back of my throat like the tongue depressor of a maniac physician. Not looking forward to another impromptu tonsillectomy, I straightaway mastered the knack of turning the sticks sideways as they approached my mouth—not as a precaution against a dinnertime assailant, but to conduct myself with a samurai bearing.

The rice bowl became the object of the next lesson. A Japanese with normal eating habits grasps his bowl on its underside with his fingertips and lifts it to the level of his mouth. When I did it that way, Sensei calmly tipped the bowl into my face. Then he showed me how to hook my thumb and forefinger over the bowl's rim, just as samurai in Japan had done centuries before to eliminate the danger of being attacked while eating.

Ordinarily, martial artists don't have to spend a lot of time studying knots. The belt worn in judo or karate is wrapped twice around the waist and tied in a simple square knot. For the bugeisha, though, knotcraft was one more art to be practiced and my expertise at it was soon elevated to that of an Eagle Scout's. Instead of the narrow sash of judo or karate, my jacket was kept closed by a wide band of cloth like a kimono's obi that was twisted around my middle several times and then fastened in a complicated "figure ten" knot. (The name comes from the Japanese character for ten, which resembles a cross or a "plus" sign.) Over



the obi I wore a hakama like Sensei's, with four cords of differing lengths that had to be knotted and wrapped in exactly the right way to prevent the skirt from loosening and falling down during practice. There were specific knots used for tying shut the bag where swords are stored, knots for attaching the silk cord *sageo* to a sword's scabbard, and knots for fastening the *sageo* to the obi once the scabbard is placed there.

Not all the details heaped upon me during those first few months with Sensei were so technical. Some involved the etiquette of the dojo, manners and courtesies that had little application in the twentieth century but were a function of the bushi's society and therefore important to the continuance of his martial arts. Still, for a boy raised with the informality of jeans and junk food, the rigid conventions of feudal Japan were often hard to fathom.

Besides his left and right foot, for instance, a bugeisha in the dojo must also bear in mind that he has a *shimo ashi* and a *kami ashi*. The foot nearest the left side of the dojo is the *shimo ashi*; the one on the right side, the *kami ashi*. (*Kami* means "upper." The little house I saw on the wall of the dojo before my first lesson was the home of the spirits of Sensei's ancestors and so was called the *kamiza*, or "seat of the upper deities.") In entering or leaving the dojo or approaching the *kamiza*, I had to be careful about having the correct foot in the correct place. After being reprimanded for forgetting to keep my steps in proper order, I once suggested to Sensei that he put down the footprints like those on dance studio floors. The flippancy failed to make the transition between our cultures. Perhaps, for my sake, it was just as well.

After Sensei's bokken had taught me the folly of bowing without remaining alert, I went on to learn Oriental etiquette in its diverse forms. From a fractional lowering of the eyes with a nod to a forehead on the floor prostration, the wide range of bowing methods was a way of establishing rank or social position for the bushi and everyone else in Japan. One family, the Ogasawara, became the Emily Posts of the fifteenth century, codifying and providing instructions for bowing in a huge volume of etiquette procedures. Every movement of the bows was intended to convey meaning and every meaning was full of subtlety.

Not all the details of an education in the bugei were as minor as leaving the dojo with the appropriate foot or inclining my head at the right angle when bowing. Language was very important, for Kotaro Sensei and his wife spoke little English at home. Even when spoken slowly and with deliberate emphasis, the simplest of words in Japanese can be terribly difficult to understand, and, unlike many European tongues that share a common ancestry in Latin, there are no dependable clues available for translating meaning. To hear a conversation between husband and wife carried on with rapid-fire staccato and imperious brusqueness and be unable to detect even the general intent of the exchange was stunning and frustrating—and frequently led me to the wrong conclusions.

"Uchi no hito!" Mrs. Kotaro would snap briskly from upstairs.

Sensei, puttering in the kitchen, would fire back, "Nan dai?"

"Ima nanji des'ka?"

"Sanji-han!"

"So'ka."

Alone in the dojo, I would be rolling my eyes in acute embarrassment at overhearing what I took to be the opening volleys of a wicked fight, but what sounded to me to be the onset of a bickering quarrel was only Mrs. Kotaro asking the time and Sensei telling her it was half past three. And it could be worse. Listening to them making up a shopping list was enough to make one want to suggest a marriage counselor.

Some of the details of my education in the bugei were equally prosaic, though they were perhaps even more important to my growing up than training itself. Little, for instance, prepared me for life around a middle-aged Japanese woman. And even had there been, Kaoru Kotaro was not always the typical woman of her generation.

Kaoru's great grandfather, Masao Yoshioka, had been one of Kyoto's most renowned painters and calligraphers, a direct descendant of a warrior clan and a samurai himself. His marriage to a daughter of a prosperous Kyoto sake merchant secured the financial position of the Yoshioka family, and so Kaoru was born and raised in wealth. As a young girl, she took for granted everything from her spacious home in Kyoto's garden district to her elegant



silk *furisode* kimono. Her days were filled with the preoccupations of the offspring of Kyoto's privileged; lessons in flower arranging and in learning to pluck with a polished bone plectrum, the long twanging cords of that most Japanese of musical instruments, the *koto*. She was carefully shielded from the harsher realities of the world outside Kyoto, shielded from the atrocities her countrymen committed against China in the twenties and thirties and shielded from all the other events that brought Japan into a world war in the forties.

Kyoto was spared virtually all of the terrible bombing that ravaged most of the rest of Japan during that war, and so through Bataan and Guadalcanal and the Battle of Okinawa, life continued on with some measure of normalcy for Kaoru. But while Kyoto survived, the Yoshioka's sake-brewing facilities in Osaka were reduced, along with the rest of that port city, to a burned-out skeleton. For her family, the Occupation and the emergence of a new Japan meant a desolate period of privation and near bankruptcy until they could reestablish their business. Kaoru remembered that time for me one afternoon, recounting the day the antiques buyer from down the street came to visit the Yoshioka home.

"That first time, he didn't take so much, just some lacquerware. But then he came back, and then again, maybe twice a month, and he left with more and more." Her eyes softened in recollection of furniture, and kimono, and finally her great-grandfather's paintings, all carried away to raise money to pay growing debts.

"Mother and Father sold much of what they owned," she told me, "but never the belongings of their children. So even though I was old enough to understand what was happening, and I should have, I was very selfish. I tried just not to think about it." Then one day Kaoru's older brother brought her face-to-face with the desperation of their situation. After demanding a promise of secrecy from her, he told her that he was going to sell the Cherry Tree Sword to the antiques buyer to contribute to the family's meager finances.

The Yoshioka's Cherry Tree Sword was a family secret and a private joke among them. It was a beautiful weapon, six generations old, and had been given to Kaoru's brother on his fifth birthday.

After the war's end, rumors began circulating that the American authorities would soon be around to confiscate weapons in private homes, to insure the safety of the Occupation Forces. Like other fine swords all over Japan, the Yoshioka blade was wrapped in cloth, sealed in a wooden box, and hidden in the hollow of an old cherry tree in the back yard. It was from there that her brother retrieved it, while Kaoru stood lookout for parents who they both knew would never have allowed so important an heirloom to have been sold. She went with him to hand the sword over to the dealer, who paid for it a price slightly less than what amounted to fifty cents for every year of the weapon's age.

"Then I knew what losing the war was all about," she told me simply. Two days later, she made her own trip to the dealer, carrying her most precious possession, a Yuzen kimono, its delicate pattern of maple leaves dyed in the Ebanui process.

The privations and hardships of the Occupation left their mark on Kaoru. While she never lost the gentility of her upbringing, deep inside she was somehow tempered by the experiences of the postwar poverty, I think, resulting in a woman who was an enigma to me. Often Japanese women of Kaoru's age tend to be gregarious, gathering at one another's houses for the flimsiest of reasons to talk. Kaoru, though, kept to herself; other than her husband, she had few people who could have been called friends. She had learned to live within herself, it seemed, to endure and to experience life's pleasures and pains, never showing any more feeling about either of them than she wanted to. On occasion, we would go for hikes along an Ozark stream bed together and there she would explain to me, with the most perceptive sensitivity, why this rock had qualities of shape and hue that would add to the beauty of a Japanese-style garden, and that one did not. Yet I approached subjects like loneliness or love with trepidation, for she was rarely willing to talk about them. As she told me once, "It isn't that we are without feelings, it is only that we prefer to cultivate them in private."

Mrs. Kotaro went on cultivating her feelings in a private, hidden way, with the same care in which she cultivated her iris in the yard. Even though she would never be openly affectionate toward



me in public, she gradually developed a kind of signal aimed at me when she was proud of me or happy with what I'd done. Looking at me without a word, she would slowly close both eyes, then open them, with the faintest trace of a smile on her face. It was barely noticeable, and always silent, but in her own way, I came to know that Kaoru was speaking volumes to me.

Mrs. Kotaro was forced to speak volumes to me in another area of our relationship, though, when she undertook the task of teaching me to speak Japanese.

As hard as Sensei pushed me in training with the bokken, his wife was even more relentless in teaching me *Nihongo*—Japanese—once I expressed an interest. Her method was to sit across from me at the dining room table and pronounce a word, getting me to repeat it exactly. I mean *exactly*.

"Sake," she said with labored emphasis.

"Sake," I replied for the fifth time.

"No, no. *Sake* is word for alcohol drink. Word for salmon fish is *sake*. Try to say sake, make 'ke' part come out lower, like you are sad."

"Sake. *Sake*. Sake," I repeated, though my "ke" was never once mournful enough to please her.

Strangely, while Mrs. Kotaro demanded that my Japanese be painfully correct, she rarely made any attempt to improve her marginal English and, in fact, became miffed at the mildest hint that her accent was irregular. We were at a MacDonald's restaurant one evening and it was her turn to place her order with the girl at the counter.

"May I help you?" the girl bubbled.

"Please," replied Mrs. Kotaro. "Duburo hamabuguru an' a miriku shaku."

"I beg your pardon. Could you repeat that?" She looked at Mrs. Kotaro as if reading her lips would be an aid. Irritated at MacDonald's practice of hiring workers who didn't understand perfectly good English, Mrs. Kotaro repeated the order with the same results. I interrupted.

"She'll have a double hamburger and a milk shake."

"Oh . . . What flavor is that shake?"

Without the slightest hesitation Mrs. Kotaro answered confidently.

"Banirra."

Following a stubbornly resisted bout with compulsory Spanish in primary school, my opinion had been pretty much that if anyone had anything worthwhile to say, they would say it in English. Sensei, though, had a knack that I would later come to realize he shared with all gifted teachers. He didn't order me to study Japanese with his wife, didn't suggest I get one of the university's Japanese students who visited at the Kotaro household to tutor me. He just made it clear he considered fluency in the language a necessary requirement for training in the *bujutsu* and that I wouldn't be taken seriously until I did as well. He *expected* it.

The pressures Kotaro Sensei exerted in this indirect way were very traditionally Japanese and they were successful because I wanted so badly to be accepted as a *bugeisha* of the Yagyu Shin-kage ryu. Sensei had only to note that most Westerners, due to diets high in fatty meats, have an unpleasantly rancid odor detectable at once to the Japanese nose and I immediately diverted my afterschool route to the university gym to shower before going on to the dojo. I scoured myself to a chafed pink with the gym's industrial soap to avoid the *bata kusai*, "butter stinker," pejorative I had heard him and other Japanese use sometimes in describing Westerners. Unconsciously, I adopted the same kinds of conforming behavior the bushi were subjected to in their feudalism. It was the same kind of conforming that would lead them to slit open their bellies rather than risk disappointing their masters.

My daily practice remained centered around the bokken. I attacked invisible enemies, splitting them in half with the vertical stroke that began with the sword raised above my head. When I could execute that cut with some accuracy, I moved on to the diagonal strokes and the more powerful horizontal slashes of the Yagyu style that started at waist level and were driven like a home run hitter's swing with the force of the hips. Through thousands of repetitions, I progressed slowly in the basics of *kenjutsu*: footwork, rhythm, and timing. Cut, step forward, cut. Turn, cut, cut.



Turn, cut, turn. Whatever Sensei's directions, I could move, my arms and legs starting and stopping at the same instant as my sword. I grew more efficient at clenching my abdominal muscles to let them do the work. According to Yagyū teaching, the arms would make a sword *hit*, while the mass of the hips and abdominal muscles would *cut*, all the way through the target. In every lesson, the emphasis was on delivering a clean blow capable of killing instantly. I was learning to do it and I soon came to fancy myself quite a swordsman.

Then Sensei took me into the backyard where he had set up an old automobile tire fixed to a wooden frame, with the top of the tire about waist level. Sensei explained that swinging a sword in the air was fine for practicing correct motion, but without the actual contact of the sword striking a resilient object, a bugeisha could never develop the strength to make a cut that would be able to cleave an opponent at one stroke. When I first struck down at the tire, I had the sensation that an electrical current was running through it, traveling up the length of my bokken and into me. My wrists had once ached with the effort of learning the cut, but now, when I applied it against the hard rubber, I flinched as a reverberating shock stung from my fingertips to the deepest muscles of my shoulders. I had to be tutored all over again in making the correct body actions: sinking my hips and keeping knees and elbows flexible in order to take the concussive lash that came back when I chopped against the tire.

Under the pewter skies of November, starlings wheeled from the wind, searching for the flock with which they would roost at night and paying no attention to the whacking sounds of the worn tire absorbing my blows. The splashy oranges and scarlets of autumn faded to a resigned brown. Leaves fell around me, gathering in heaps in Mrs. Kotaro's iris beds, defying her attempts to keep them out. At last, she gave in and even helped, mounding them against the sides of the beds as protection from the coming cold.

Sensei's insistence on a thorough understanding of the basics of swordsmanship was well-founded. My legs were toughened by the hours of churning up and down the dojo floor, and when practicing outside I could feel my feet gripping the cold ground under-

neath them, melding muscle and bone into an extension of the earth when the sword cut. My body hardened.

My mind, too, underwent a change. It wasn't anything like arrogance. If ever I showed the slightest inclination toward becoming, as the Japanese adage goes, "a nail sticking up from the roof," Kotaro Sensei was there to pound me back into place. The change in my attitude came as an inkling sense of meaning I found in the monotonous movements of the Yagyū style of fencing that germinated in me a little at a time under Sensei's watchful guidance. My bujutsu skills were to be an added attraction to me, as I had it figured—another of my prized things, like my French running shoes and my plastic inflatable chair. They weren't, of course. The practice was boring (even more so, in retrospect, than those damnable Spanish lessons in fifth grade), Sensei was frequently harsh and distant, and neither girls nor happiness seemed threatening to smother me just because I was spending each afternoon smacking the hell out of a four-ply radial. Yet increasingly, I was compelled to continue.

My involvement in the bugei in no small way set me apart from many of my friends who were caught up in the social maelstrom of the sixties, flung from protests at the war in Vietnam to the alluring refuge of drug experimentation to the dizzying euphoria of dances and drinking parties—all of which were features of high school life then. For others, those years might have been reddened with the hate for an unjust war or blurred by the vertigo of a pharmacopoeia of recreational chemistry, but for my generation, too young to be drafted, too old to be shielded from all that was deliciously new, the sixties were a crazy kaleidoscope of image and sensation. It was the mad modness of Carnaby Street fashions, the far-outness of Woodstock ("and there were guys and girls right on the news, swimming in a pond, *naked*"); it was frayed jeans, incense, beads and headbands, and hair. It was the burnt rope pungence of marijuana, pizza's biting spice, the metal clash of rock music.

Although a marvelously exciting time to be squeezing out of childhood's shell into the dangerous freedom of the unknown, it was not idyllic. Along with the glamor and glitter of the new, there





was that which was threatened merely for being old. In the opinions of my classmates, the meaningful and worthwhile could often be sacrificed wholesale for the chic. Being "with it" was regarded as vital, though "it" was largely undefinable. Nothing was so passé as yesterday's items. Last season was nostalgia; last year, ancient history.

The classical swordsmanship of the Yagyū ryū was hardly modern, and having to conform to ways considered obsolete a century before I was born couldn't very well complement the popular dictum of doing one's own thing. Yet perhaps because of my family roots, sunk into the granite bordered fields of Massachusetts with all their staid and enduring neatness, I felt no hard tugging toward unconviction. A New England identification with the past steered me away from that and into the realm of the bugei of old Japan. The inherited Puritan sense of discipline kept me there despite every shift of fad and fashion the sixties had to offer.

Like most of my adolescent peers, I devoted much of my high school years to finding out what I wanted for myself. I wasn't sure what that was going to be, but between November's frosts and December's snows, somewhere around the one hundred thousandth crack I took at the furrowed tread of the Firestone, I decided the place to look for it was going to be in the dojo of Kotarō Ryōkichi of the Yagyū Shinkage ryū.



*An illustration from the Heihokadensho, recounting the transmission of secret techniques of the Yagyū school by a tengu, or winged mountain goblin.*

