

“Your Poor Servant Ever”: In Honor of Yasuko Shiojiri  
—*Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto.*

Mark Richardson

I called Yasuko Shiojiri for the first time early in 2004. I was in a fix. I can't remember how I knew to ring Yasuko and not someone else. An intuition maybe, or a stray remark a colleague let fall in the reverberating chamber of that stairwell of ours, the one in Tokushokan, where nothing, not even a wisp, really whispers. “Some nebulae cling to stars like wisps of cloud,” said Mary Somerville. Yasuko was something like a star the clouded wisp I'd become could hold to. As I say, I was in a fix. But never have I been better fixed in friendship than on that day in 2004 when I bought a ¥1000 NTT card at a Family Mart near Nishi-Otsu Station and “phoned home,” as has been said in the movies. I am far more fortunate in my friendships than I deserve to be.

When I tell Americans back home I've lived in Japan for nine years, an observation often follows: by now I must be fluent in Japanese. I don't know whether that inference is made on logical or on moral grounds. But I wish I were forever young, like Yasuko, and had the Japanese to sit in on one of her classes. As it is, and without knowing it, she's taught me as much about the life in literature, and the literature in life, as anyone I can name. But place me, in thought, in her classroom in Neiseikan, the only building in Kyoto with a 34th floor. Let's make it 1983, the first time I read *King Lear* and saw the lines the Beatles stole from it for “I Am the Walrus” (“Is he dead?” “Sit you down father, rest you”). I'd get Professor Shiojiri talking

about how Shakespeare puts commendable sentiments in the mouths of uncommendable characters (confounding propriety, the way the world does).

Enter the bastard, *solus*:

Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law  
 My services are bound. Wherefore should I  
 Stand in the plague of custom, and permit  
 The curiosity of nations to deprive me,  
 For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines  
 Lag of a brother? Why bastard? wherefore base?  
 When my dimensions are as well compact,  
 My mind as generous, and my shape as true,  
 As honest madam's issue? Why brand they us  
 With base? with baseness? bastardy? base, base?  
 Who, in the lusty stealth of nature, take  
 More composition and fierce quality  
 Than doth, within a dull, stale, tired bed,  
 Go to th' creating a whole tribe of fops  
 Got 'tween asleep and wake?

Wherefore indeed, Edmund? I don't subscribe to the quaint idea (parodied at the start of *Tristram Shandy*) that lovers' moods affect the composition and fierce quality of their issue. But Edmund, my man, I'll take stealthy Nature for my goddess any day. The curious pedantry of nations, and the plague of custom, should deprive you of nothing. Get to the bottom of it, and morals are only mores in vestments. Is the evil in Edmund resident or induced? Has some insubordinate truth been given voice in a play that now

must undertake to damn it utterly? Edmund’s too much the Bolshevik even for me. But change is the rule no regime is an exception to. And rightly so. I wonder if an anti-foundationalist line of argument would earn me at least a “B” in Yasuko’s seminar. Something in the lightness with which she wears her cosmopolitanism tells me it might. All I do here anyway is rehearse such conversation as we have over dinner. So you see, I *have* been her student. Haven’t we all?

Of course, Yasuko wrote the book on *Lear*. It was my honor to be the first soul on earth to read it. (If I’m wrong about that, Yasuko, don’t tell me.) All the world’s a stage and occasionally the gods do stand up for bastards, as when I entered Kyoto proper, *solus* and very much at odds. I trust I’m being more playful than confessional. I also trust Yasuko to shade it the right way. She sorted me out when I was out of sorts, *deus ex machina*, and Horace’s advice to the contrary notwithstanding: *nec Deus intersit, nisi dignus vindice nodus inciderit*. “Neither let a god interfere, unless a difficulty worthy a god’s unraveling should occur,” as C. Smart and T. Buckley English it. Needless to say, I had to look all that up at Project Perseus. How *dignus* or worthy I was, or ever will be, of Yasuko’s kindness I’ll not say. I say only that she unraveled the difficult *nodus* I found myself in. The rest followed.

Robert Frost says we need “insurance against two things: failure and success, that is to say, being made a fool of by either, or of making too much of either. Philosophy is that insurance. So is an inner circle of friends. We must have those we can be merely whimsical with, unguarded and undesigning.” Yasuko has been better insurance than any free market or enlightened government ever contrived. Her observations as to *my* failures and successes anyway—and as to my foolishness in both—are candor and absolution alloyed. She has the knack of never making anyone feel

conspicuous—effortlessly she has that. We've spent hours in good talk, unplagued by custom and the petty curiosities of nations. We've phoned in pizza, as our students do. I hear in my mind's ear, even as I write, the way she pitches her sentences in talk when she's emphatic and heading for a laugh.

More than once I've gone grocery shopping with her. I never knew how fun grocery shopping could be. That's another thing Yasuko taught me: what it means to have an appetite for life. Spring is the mischief in her. So is grace.

One year she rearranged the furniture in her condominium at least three times. I took that for an objective correlative: I'm always on tour when I visit her brave new worlds, world upon world of them. Dicing Time and Crass Casualty can never undo Yasuko. She tells me about Pinter and Beckett while cooking spaghetti, and about Pirandello while dishing it up. I can hardly bear to think of Yasuko as a "colleague," given what hems that inoffensive title in; but I've neither known nor had a better one. Others whose good fortune it's been to work alongside her for decades will say, "Hear, hear!" I sin in envy of them.

There's nothing Yasuko and I can't talk about, and few things we haven't. Her native generosity allows for that. What a liberating presence she must have been in the classroom. I haven't a doubt the right students always knew it. On the title page of *The World as Will and Representation*, I copied out the following sentence: "Death is for the species what sleep is for the individual." I like to think the species, such as it is, will wake up refreshed after I die; my chronic insomnia will then have meant something. Yasuko and I can talk about that—with laughter we can talk about it. I have a theory about parties: no one should ever bring a guitar to one. About that, too, we

can laugh and know why. I say with some presumption that Yasuko and I *both* find it heartening that philosophers concern themselves with “the paradox of future individuals.” I *think* Yasuko even knows why I invariably lose umbrellas. (If I’m wrong about that, Yasuko, don’t tell me.)

I’ll always have 草津. With a little license, I take the first kanji for pastures new to labor in, both in and out of Doshisha. I take the second for safe harbor. Yasuko Shiojiri gave me both. Frost says “wisdom may be left to your keepers, your friends, and relatives to provide. You can trust them to keep you from falling off a roof or getting into jail.” I herewith consign what little wisdom I have to Yasuko. It can add nothing to her great store. But from time to time I still need to be kept from falling off a roof.