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From SCIENCE FICTION EYE #6
CATSCAN 6 "Shinkansen"

Let me tell you what the 21st Century feels like.

Imagine yourself at an international conference of industrial designers in Nagoya, Japan. You're not an industrial designer yourself, and you're not quite sure what you're doing there, but presumably some wealthy civic-minded group of Nagoyans thought you might have entertainment value, so they flew you in. You're in a cavernous laser-lit auditorium with 3,000 assorted Japanese, Finns, Germans, Americans, Yugoslavs, Italians, et al., all wearing identical ID badges, except for a trenchant minority, who have scribbled "Allons Nagoya" on their badges so that everybody will know they're French.

There's a curved foam plug stuck in your ear with a thin gray cord leading to a black plastic gadget the size of a deck of cards. This is an "ICR-6000 Conference Receiver." It's a five-channel short-range radio, with a blurry typed serial number stuck to it with a strip of Scotch Tape. You got the receiver from a table manned by polite young hostesses, who were passing out vast heaps of these items, like party favors. Of the five channels offered, Number 1 is Japanese and Number 2 is, purportedly, English. You get the strong impression that the French would have preferred Number 3 to be French, but the Conference offers only two "official languages" and channels 3, 4 and 5 have static.

Muted festivities begin, in the best of taste. First a brief Kabuki skit is offered, by two expatriate Canadians, dressed in traditional robes. Ardent students of the Kabuki form, the two Canadians execute ritual moves of exacting precision, accompanied by bizarre and highly stylized verbal bellowing. They are, however, speaking not Japanese but English. After some confusion you realize that this piece, "The Inherited Cramp," is meant to be a comic performance. Weak culture-shocked chuckles arise here and there from the

more adventurous members of the audience. Toward the end you feel that you might get used to this kind of thing if you saw enough of it.

The performance ends to the warm applause of general relief. Assorted bigwigs take the stage: a master of ceremonies, the keynote speaker, the Mayor of Nagoya, the Speaker of the City Council, the Governor of the

Prefecture. And then, accompanied by a silverhaired retainer of impressive stolid dignity, comes the Crown Prince of Japan.

Opening ceremonies of this kind are among the many obligations of this patient and graceful young aristocrat. The Crown Prince wears a truly immaculate suit which, at an impolite guess, probably costs as much as a small car. As a political entity, this symbolic personage is surrounded by twin bureaucracies of publicity and security. The security is not immediately evident. Only later will you discover that the entire building has been carefully sealed by unobtrusive teams of police. On another day, you will witness the passage of the Prince's motorcade, his spotless armored black limousine sporting the national flag, accompanied by three other limos of courtier-bodyguards, two large squads of motorcycle policemen, half-a-dozen police black-and-whites, and a chattering surveillance helicopter. As you stand gawking on the sidewalk you will be questioned briefly, in a friendly fashion, by a plainclothes policeman who eyes the suspicious bag you carry with a professional interest.

At the moment, however, you are listening to the speeches of the Nagoya politicians. The Prince, his posture impeccable, is also listening, or at least pretending it with a perfect replica of attention. You listen to the hesitant English on Channel Two with growing amazement. Never have you heard political speeches of such utter and consummate vacuity. They consist entirely of benevolent cliché. Not a ripple of partisan fervor, not a hint of ideological intent, colors the translated oratory. Even the most vapid American, or even Russi

an, politician cannot resist a dig at a rival, or an in-crowd reference to some partisan bit of political-correctness--but this is a ritual of a different order. It dawns on you that nothing will be said. These political worthies, sponsors and financiers of the event, are there to color the air with harmless verbal perfume. "You're here, we're here"--everything that actually needs to be said has already been communicated nonverbally.

The Prince rises to deliver a brief invocation of even more elevated and poetic meaninglessness. As he steps to the podium, a torrent of flashbulbs drenches the stage in stinging electrical white. The Prince, surely blinded, studies a line of his text. He lifts his chin, recites it, and is blinded again by the flashes. He looks back to the speech, recites a paragraph in a firm voice with his head lowered, then looks up again, stoically. Again that staccato blast of glare. It dawns on you that this is the daily nature of this young gentleman's existence. He dwells within a triple bell-jar of hypermediated publicity, aristocratic decorum, and paramilitary paranoia. You reflect with a mingled respect and pity on the numerous rare personages around the planet who share his unenviable predicament. Later you will be offered a chance to meet the Prince in a formal reception line, and will go out of your

way to spare him the minor burden of your presence. It seems the least you can do.

Back in your hotel room, the vapid and low-key Japanese TV is interrupted by news of a severe California earthquake. By morning swarms of well-equipped Japanese media journalists will be doing stand-ups before cracked bridges in San Francisco and Okran. Distressed Californian natives are interviewed with an unmistakable human warmth and sympathy. Japanese banks offer relief money. Medical supplies are flown in. No particular big deal is made of these acts of charitable solidarity. It's an earthquake; it's what one does.

You leave Nagoya and take the Shinkansen bullet-tr

ain back to Tokyo. It's a very nice train, the Shinkansen, but it's not from Mars or anything. There's been a lot of press about the Shinkansen, but it looks harmless enough, rather quaint actually, somewhat Art Deco with lots of brushed aircraft aluminum and stereo ads featuring American popstars. It's very clean, but like all trains it gets too cold inside and then it gets too hot. You've heard that bullet-trains can do 200 miles an hour but there's no way the thing tops 130 or so, while you're aboard it. You drink a ten percent carbonated peach soda and listen to your Walkman. The people inside this purported technical marvel demonstrate the absolute indifference of long habit.

A friend meets you in Tokyo. You board a commuter subway at rush-hour. It is like an extremely crowded rolling elevator. Everyone hangs limply from straps with inert expressions suggesting deep meditation or light hypnosis. Impetus rolls through the tightly-packed bodies like currents through a thick stand of kelp. It occurs to you that this is the first time you have been in Japan without attracting vaguely curious glances as a foreigner. Nobody is looking at anybody. Were any physical threat or commotion offered on this subway, the situation would swiftly be nightmarish. But since nobody stirs, the experience is actually oddly soothing.

You have a dinner appointment with a Japanese rock band. You meet in a restaurant in a section of Tokyo somewhat akin to, say, Greenwich Village in 1955. Its narrow, crooked streets are full of students, courting couples, coffee-shops. There's a bit of graffiti here and there--not the lashing, crazed graffiti of American urban areas, but enough to convey a certain heightened sense of dissidence.

You and your friend meet the two rock stars, their A&R man, and their manager. The manager drifts off when he realizes that there is no threat of any actual business transpiring. You're just a fan. With some translation help from your friend you eagerly question the music

ians. You long to know

what's cooking in the Tokyo pop-music scene. It transpires that these particular rockers listen mostly to electronic European dance music. Their biggest Japanese hit was a song about Paris sung in English.

One of the rockers asks you if you have ever tried electronic brain stimulation. No, you say--have you? Yes, but it wasn't much good, really. You recall that, except for occasional problems with junior yakuza bikers high on cheap Korean speed, Japan hasn't much of a "drug-problem." Everyone sighs wistfully and lights more cigarettes.

The restaurant you're in offers an indeterminate nonethnic globalized cuisine whose remote ancestry may have been French. The table is laid like, say, London in 1880, with butterballs in crystal glass dishes, filigreed forks as heavy as lead, fish-knives, and arcanelly folded cloth napkins. You ask the musicians if this restaurant is one of their favorite dives. Actually, no. It's 'way too expensive. Eating in posh restaurants is one of those things that one just doesn't do much of in Japan, like buying gift melons or getting one's suit pressed. A simple ham and egg breakfast can cost thirty bucks easy--thirty-five with orange juice. Sane people eat noodles for breakfast for about a buck and a half.

Wanting to press this queer situation to the limit, you order the squid. It arrives and it's pretty good. In fact, the squid is great. Munching a tentacle in wine-sauce you suddenly realize that you are having a **really good time**. Having dinner with a Japanese rock band in Tokyo is, by any objective standard, just about the coolest thing you've ever done!

The 21st Century is here all around you, it's happening, and it's craziness, but it's not bad craziness, it's an **adventure**. It's a total gas. You are seized by a fierce sense of existential delight.

Everybody grins. And the A&R man picks up the tab.

Shinkansen Part Two:

The Increasingly Unstrange Case of
Lafcadio Hearn and Rick Kennedy

I was in Japan twice

in 1989--two weeks in all. Big deal. This jaunting hardly makes me an "Old Japan Hand."

But I really wanted to mimic one in this installment of CATSCAN. So I strongly considered beginning with the traditional Westerner's declaration that I Understand Nothing About Japan or the Japanese: boy are they ever mystical, spiritual and inscrutable; why I've been a-livin' here nigh twenty year with my Japanese wife, Japanese job, Japanese kids and I'm just now a-scratchin' the surface of the baffling Yamato kokutai . . .

These ritual declarations by career Nipponologists date 'way back to the

archetypal Old Japan Hand, Lafcadio Hearn (aka Yakumo Koizumi) 1850-1904. Not coincidentally, this kind of rhetoric is very useful in making *yourself* seem impressively mystic, spiritual and inscrutable. A facade of inscrutable mysticism is especially handy if you're anxious to hide certain truths about yourself. Lafcadio Hearn, for instance--I love this guy Hearn, I've been his devotee for years, and could go on about him all day--Hearn was your basic congenital SF saint-perv, but in a nineteenth century environment. Hearn was, in brief, a rootless oddball with severe personality problems and a pronounced gloating taste for the horrific and bizarre. Born of a misalliance between a British officer and a young Greek girl, Hearn passed a classically miserable childhood, until fleeing to America at nineteen. As a free-lance journalist and part-time translator, penniless, shabby, 'declassé' and half-blind, Hearn knocked around all over for years--Cincinnati, New Orleans, the Caribbean--until ending up in Japan in 1890.

There Hearn made the gratifying discovery that the Japanese could not tell that he was a weirdo. At home Hearn was alien; in Japan, he was merely foreign. The Meiji-era Japanese respectfully regarded the junketing Hearn as an influential man of letters, an intellectual, a poet and philosopher, and they gave him a University position teaching literature to the rising new generation. H

earn (a man of very genuine talent, treated decently for perhaps the first time in his life) responded by becoming one of Japan's first and foremost Western popularizers, emitting reams about Shintoism and ghosts and soul-transference and the ineffableness of everythinghood.

Hearn had always been pretty big on ineffableness, but Japan seemed to fertilize the guy's eccentricities, and he became one of the truly great fantasy writers of all time. If you don't know Hearn's work, you owe it to yourself to discover it: *_Kokoro_*, *_Gleanings in Buddha-Fields_*, *_Shadowings_*, *_Kwaidan_*, *_Kotto_*, all marvelous books (thoughtfully kept in print by Tuttle Books, that paragon of crosscultural publishers). Hearn's dark fantasies rival Dunsany and Lovecraft in their intense, brooding idiosyncrasy; and as a bonus, his journalistic work contains long sustained passages of close observation and penetrating insight, as well as charming period flavor.

What did the Japanese make of all this? Well, after many years, the authorities finally caught on and fired Hearn -- and they had one of the first Tokyo University riots on their hands. Hearn was impossible to deal with, he was a paranoiac with a mean streak a mile wide, but his students genuinely loved the guy. Hearn really spoke to that generation--the generation of Japanese youth who found themselves in universities, with their minds permanently and painfully expanded with queer foreign ideas. Here was one sensei who truly knew their paradoxical sorrows, and shared them. Hearn's

appeal to the new Japan was powerful, for he was simultaneously ultramodern and sentimentally antiquarian--an exotic patriot--a Western Orientalist--a scientific mystic.

Lafcadio Hearn loved Japan. He married a Japanese woman, had Japanese children, took a Japanese name, and was one of the bare handful of foreigners ever granted Japanese citizenship. And yet he was always a loner, a congenital outsider, viewing everyone around him through ever-thickening lenses of h

is peculiar personal philosophy. Paradoxically, I believe that Lafcadio Hearn chose to stay in Japan because Japan was the place that allowed him to become most himself. He reached some very personal apotheosis there.

But now let's compare the nineteenth-century Hearn to a contemporary "Old Japan Hand," Rick Kennedy, author of *_Home, Sweet Tokyo_* (published, rather tellingly, by Kodansha Books of Tokyo and New York). Rick Kennedy, an employee of the globe-spanning Sony Corporation, writes a weekly column for the English-language "Japan Times." *_Home, Sweet Tokyo_* is a collection of Kennedy's columns. The apt subtitle is "Life in a Weird and Wonderful City."

Compared to Hearn, Kennedy has very little in the way of philosophical spine. This is a magpie collection. Kennedy has an eye for the peculiar that rivals Hearn's, but no taste at all for the dark and horrific. *_Home, Sweet Tokyo_* is in fact "sweet" and rather cute, with all the boisterous charm of the upwardly mobile bourgeoisie. There are satires, parodies, in-jokes, vignettes of daily life in the great metropolis.

And there are interviews, profiles, of the people of Tokyo. Folks of all sorts: professional pachinko-players, the white-gloved guys who scrub the subway trains, the dignified chefs of top Tokyo restaurants, office-girls gamely searching for a rung on a very male corporate ladder.

Hearn did a similar sort of exploratory prying in Japan's nooks and byways, but the flavor of his reportage is entirely different. Hearn's Japanese subjects tend to be elfin, evasive personages, alluding to grave personal tragedies with a flicker of an eyelid and a few stoic verses. Hearn's subjects are not fully individuated men and women, but incarnated principles, abstractions, a source for social insights that can degenerate at a careless touch into racist or jingoistic cliché'.

Kennedy, in stark contrast, treats people as people, hail fellows well met. As a consequence, his Japan comes across rather like a very crowde

d but well-heeled Kiwanis Club. He lacks a morbid interest in life's extremities; but at least he never lashes his subjects to the Procrustean bed of stereotype. He

looks clear-eyed at postmodern Japan in all its individual variety: eldritch rural grannies and megalopolitan two-year-olds, uptight accountants and purple-haired metal kids, Shinto antiquarians and red-hot techno-visionaries, rarefied literati and dumb-ass TV stars.

This is a Japan which can no longer be tidily filed away under "I" for "Inscrutable" by a WestCiv Establishment with the self-appointed task of ordering the world. Japan today is an intensely globalized society with sky-high literacy, very low crime, excellent life-expectancy, tremendous fashion-sense, and a staggering amount of the electronic substance we used to call cash. After centuries of horrific vicissitudes and heartbreaking personal sacrifice, the Japanese are fat, rich, turbo-charged, and ready to party down. They are jazzing into the 21st-Century global limelight in their velcro'd sneakers, their jeans stuffed with spare film-packs and gold-plated VISA cards. Rick Kennedy's book makes it absolutely clear why the Japanese *fully deserve* to do this, and why all those Japan-bashing sourpuss spoilsports ought to lighten up and give 'em room to shine.

Like Hearn, Kennedy has a Japanese wife, Japanese children, an intense commitment to his adopted home. What has happened in the meantime (i.e., during the 20th century) is a slow process of "un-strange-ing," of deromanticism, de-exoticism, a change from watery dream-colors to the sharp gleam of flashbulbs and neon. It is a process that science fiction people, as romantics, are likely to regard with deep ambiguity. We are much cozier with the Hearns of the world than the brisk and workaday Kennedys.

And yet I must return to Hearn's Paradox: that his attempt to "woo the Muse of the Odd," as he put it, was not a true marriage, but a search for self-realization. Kennedy, unlike Hearn, can embrace Ot

herness without seeking

moral lessons and mystic archetypes. Kennedy, unlike Hearn, can imagine himself Japanese. He goes farther yet, for Kennedy knows that if he *were* Japanese, he would not live in Tokyo. A Japanese Rick Kennedy, he says, would head at once for Los Angeles, that weird and wonderful city, with its exotic Yankee luxuries of crowd-free tennis courts and private swimming pools.

And this, it seems to me, is a very worthy insight. This is a true, postmodern, global cosmopolitanism, rather than Hearn's romantic quest for Asian grails and unicorns. Cosmopolitanism offers little in the way of spine-chilling visionary transcendence. Instead, the glamour of Otherness is internalized, made part of the fabric of daily life. To the global cosmopolite--an eternal expatriate, no matter what his place of birth--there are no certainties, no mystic revelations; there are only fluctuating standards of comparison. The sense-of-wonder is not confined to some distant realm of Zen or Faerie, safely idealized and outside oneself; instead, *normality itself*

seems more or less disjointed and disquieting, itchy with a numinous glow of the surreal, "weird and wonderful," as Kennedy says--with the advantage/drawback that this feeling **never goes away**.

I would urge on every science fiction person the rich experience of reading Lafcadio Hearn. I share his fascination with the culture of historical Japan, the world before the black ships; like Hearn I can mourn its loss. But it's dead, even if its relics are tended in museums with a nervous care. SF people need to dote a little less on the long-ago and far-away, and pay more robust attention to the living: to the elaborate weirdness at work in our own time. Writers of serious science fiction need to plunge out there into the bustle and do some basic legwork and come up with some futures people can believe in. We need to address a new audience: not just the usual SF faithful, but the real no-kidding folks out there, the global populace,

who can see an old world order disintegrating every time they turn on the TV, but have no idea what to make of it, what to think about it, what to do. We need to go beyond using exotic foreigners as templates for our own fantasies; we need to find the common ground of common global issues. At the very first and least, we need to demand more translation-work within our own genre. We need to leap the Berlin Walls of national marketing and publishing. We need to get in touch.

The walls are going down all over the world, and soon we'll all be in each other's laps. Japan's just one country, it's not the be-all and end-all. But Japan is very crowded, with strictly limited resources; because of that, Japan today is a dry run under 21st-century conditions. It's not the only such model; Lebanon and El Salvador are small and crowded too. These places model possible futures; they are choices we can make. It's all the choice between a sake bash in the Tokyo Disneyland and a hostage-seizure in a bombed-out embassy. We must learn from these successes and mistakes; learn about other people, learn from other people, learn to **be** other people.

We can do it. It's not all that hard. It's fun, even. Everybody can help. It doesn't take transcendent effort or coaching by cultural pundits. Do one six-billionth of the work of global understanding, and you have every right to feel proud of yourself.

The subworld of SF has the advantage of (limited) international appeal, and can do good work here. If we don't do something, some earnest attempt to understand and explicate and shape the future--the **real** future, everybody's future, starting **now**--then in all honesty we should abandon "Science Fiction" as a genre. We shouldn't keep the rags and tatters of the thing, while abandoning its birthright and its best native claim to intellectual legitimacy. There are many worthy ways to write fiction, and escapist genres aplenty for people who want to write amusing nonsense; but this genre

ought to stand

for something.

SF can rise to this challenge. It ain't so tough. SF has risen from the humblest of origins to beat worse odds in the past. We may be crazy but we ain't stupid. It's a little-known fact (in which I take intense satisfaction) that there are as many subscribers to *SF Eye* in Japan as there are in the US and Canada. It's a step. I hope to see us take many more. Let's blunder on out there, let's take big risks and make real mistakes, let's utter prophecies and make public fools of ourselves; we're science fiction writers, that's our goddamn job. At least we can plead the limpid purity of our intentions. Yoroshiku onegai itashimasu.