THE ROADS TO SATA

A 2000 MILE WALK THROUGH JAPAN

ALAN BOOTH

'Not only the best travel writer on Japan, but one of the best travel writers in the English language' Ian Buruma

PENGUIN BOOKS

The Roads to Sata

Born in 1946 in London's East End, Alan Booth, by the age of ten, had already read most of Shakespeare's works. He studied drama at Birmingham University and went on to join the London Shakespeare Center, where he worked as both actor and director.

Booth went to Japan in 1970 because of his interest in the idea of theater as ritual – an idea very much in vogue in the 1960s – and studied the Noh theater. As time went by, however, Booth grew increasingly disenchanted with Noh, but more and more fascinated by the country in which he had now made his home; he also began to realize his true vocation as a writer. For two decades, he contributed regularly to various English-language publications in Japan with commentaries on Japanese films or socio-political issues. During this time, he also became fluent in the Japanese language and extremely adept at singing Japanese folk songs, *enka*, which endeared him to his Japanese hosts.

What Booth has become known for, and perhaps what he enjoyed most, was traveling to remote corners of the country, visiting rural inns, meeting the local folk, drinking bottles of beer with his hosts, and then using his witty writing style to chronicle the events. Originally published in 1985, *The Roads to Sata* has become a classic of its kind.

Booth died in 1993 of colon cancer and is survived by his wife, Su-chzeng, and their daughter Mirai. Booth's other major work is *Looking for the Lost*.

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A 2000-Mile Walk Through Japan

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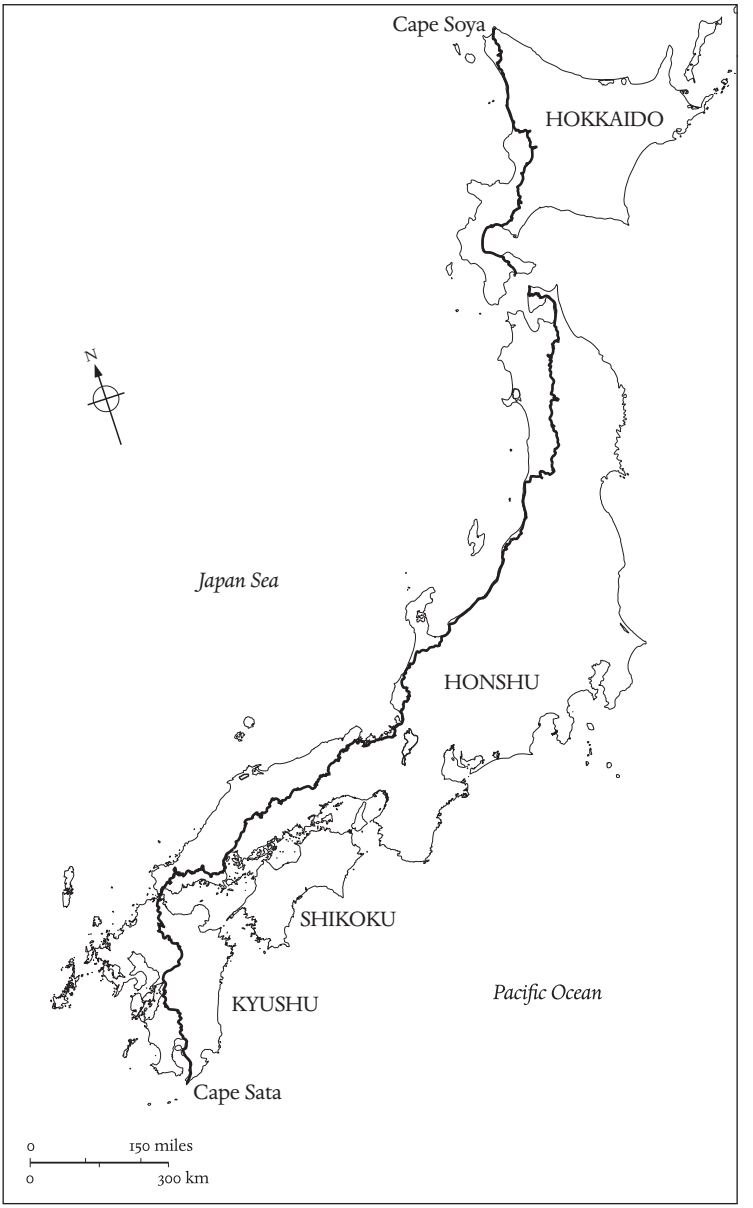
. . . the sundry contemplation of
my travels, which, by often rumination
Wraps me in a most humorous sadness.

Jaques
in *As You Like It*



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Author's Note

Few people (warns the publisher, grumbling) are likely to know where Sata is, so I had better locate it in this note. Sata is the name of the southernmost cape of the southernmost of the four main islands of Japan. I walked there from Soya, the northernmost cape of the northernmost island, and the roads between, and the things I saw and heard and did along them, are the subjects of this book.

Japan is a long country. If I had walked the same distance across the same latitudes in North America, the trek would have taken me from Ottawa to Mobile, Alabama; and if I had started in Europe, I would have marched from Belgrade through the Middle East to the Gulf of Aquaba. The distances I walked are given here in kilometers, not miles, because it is in kilometers that most Japanese think, and that I thought every morning, noon, and evening of my journey.

If I could, I would individually thank the men, women, and children who populate these pages, but I never knew the names of most of them, and I have thought it in their interests to alter those names I did know. Where names are used, they are used in the Japanese manner: family name first, given name last.

I have tried to avoid generalizations, particularly 'the Japanese'. 'The Japanese' are 120,000,000 people, ranging in age from 0 to 119, in geographical location across 21 degrees of latitude and 23 of longitude, and in profession from emperor to urban guerrilla. This book is about my encounters with some twelve hundred businessmen, farmers, grandmothers, fishermen, housewives, shopkeepers, schoolchildren, soldiers, policemen, monks, priests, tourists, journalists, professors, laborers, maids, waiters, carpenters, teachers, innkeepers, potters, dancers, cyclists, students, truck drivers, Koreans, Americans, bar hostesses, professional wrestlers, government officials, hermits, drunks, and tramps.

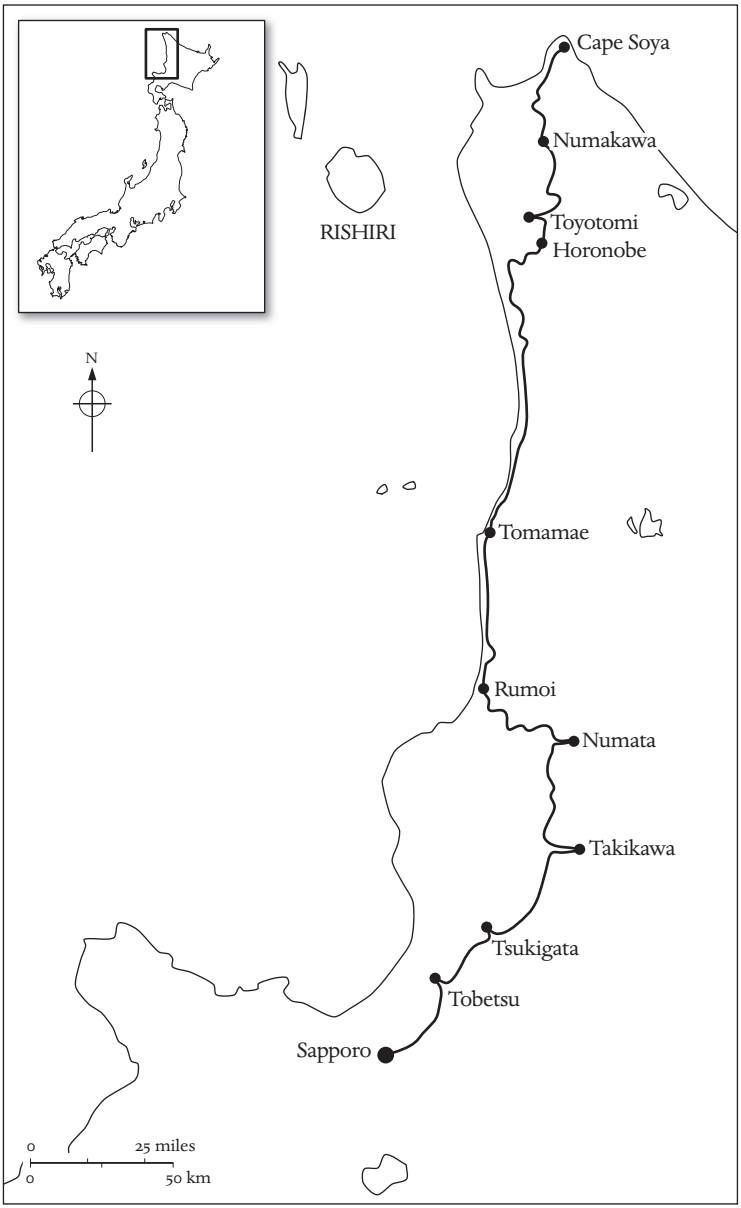
1.

Outposts

One of the noodle shops at Cape Soya had a pair of loudspeakers perched high up above its door and out of these came, every five minutes, a song:

> The ice floes melt, the spring wind blows,
> the sweet brier blooms, the sea gull cries,
> far out to sea the smoke of foreign ships
> delights the eye at Soya Cape.
>
> Snow storms abate, the chill is past,
> the shellfish stir along the shore,
> while men throw wide the doors of their hearts,
> and the sea roars on at Soya Cape.

It was late in June so most of Japan was dripping and gray – the rainy season was at its height. But Hokkaido, the northernmost of Japan's four main islands, was cracking under a heat wave. The sea did not roar or even mutter; it was intense and blinding, like in advertisements for citrus fruit. Only with great reluctance did the people of Cape Soya venture out into the scorching sunshine. Most of them slouched in the shade of their doorways watching the trickle of honeymoon couples vainly trying with the aid of the coin telescopes to pierce the forty-three kilometers of heat-haze that separated their noodle shops from the Soviet Union. Four young motorcyclists in gleaming black leather sat sweating and drumming on a table outside one of the restaurants, picking flies off the rims of their cola bottles, listening to



the taped voice shriek about shellfish, and gazing across at the four brand new Hondas they had parked within a yard of the end of Japan – latitude 45° 30′ N, the latitude of Milan, the Crimea, and Portland, Oregon – the furthest north you can get in Japanese eyes and still count yourself civilized.

When the sun set the flies retired to the hills, the taped voice snapped off in a burst of static, and the northern evening grew a fraction cooler. Through the open door of the *minshuku* – the lodging house – where I was staying, I could see the prawn boats on the flat pink sea, so far away and so still that they looked like matchwood.

'What time do you want to get up in the morning?' asked the owner of the minshuku. He was a tall man, brusque, unshaven, fiddling with his Dunhill lighter.

'I don't know. Seven, I suppose. I'd better get an early start.'

'Are you catching a bus?'

'No, I'm going to walk.'

'Are you walking far?'

'The length of Japan.'

All night the wind blew into my room in the minshuku at Cape Soya and I couldn't sleep. The wind sang as it blew through the stovepipes till I thought there was a nest of birds singing: crafty birds, Japanese birds, transforming the pipes into their own loudspeaker. In the morning the owner of the minshuku gave me a small cotton handkerchief with a map of Hokkaido on it. It would come in handy if I took a wrong turn, he explained. Carefully, he unfolded the handkerchief and stamped the address and telephone number of his minshuku in the top right-hand corner.

'What's the date?' he called out to his wife in the kitchen.

'The twenty-eighth,' she called back.

With great concentration he inked a second rubber stamp and neatly stamped 'June 28' under his address, stepping back to admire the effect. But it still didn't satisfy him, so below the date he wrote in small red characters '7:00 start'.

As though on cue the next-door speakers squealed into life and for the third or fourth time I retied my bootlaces.

'It's the twenty-ninth,' I remembered.

'It's the twenty-ninth!' the minshuku owner howled, scratching through the last figure of the date with his ball pen and scrawling the new figure in on top of it so that the result was a barely legible mess.

'My wife is a donkey,' he whispered.

One of the Japanese friends who celebrated my last night in Tokyo with me had been propped against the sakè shop wall by nine o'clock with bits of grilled liver stuck to his chin. But he contributed to the conversation. 'Count the steps,' he had advised. 'Count all the steps from north to south and you'll know how many there are.'

'What on earth would I want to know that for?'

'Then you could write a book about it. You can't write a book about a walk like that without knowing how many steps you've taken.'

'But I'll have maps and a compass and the road signs should tell me . . .'

'Take my tip and count the steps. No one I've ever met in all my life could tell you how many steps there are from Cape Soya to Cape Sata. I bet no one's ever counted them before. I bet you'd be the absolute first.'

He had gone to sleep after that with the liver still on his chin and two or three other friends had carried him out to a taxi, but the taxi driver had taken one look at him and sped off on a sudden urgent errand.

I never did count the number of steps, but I counted the kilometers as best I could, and on that first extraordinary morning, for fifteen kilometers, I walked beside the bright sea.

The walls and roofs of the sparse coastal villages were painted in what had once been primary colors, bleached to pale pinks and greens by the salt in the Siberian wind. The walls were

made of plywood or cheap tin sheets printed to look like planks, and the roofs were patched with corrugated iron. Ahead of me to the southwest, beyond the invisible city of Wakkanai, loomed the awesome shape of Mount Rishiri, an island mountain far out to sea, its summit still covered with slivers of snow. The red doors of a fishermen's warehouse were open and on the floor sprawled a pile of large dead octopuses. I wished an old man in a kimono and a trilby hat good morning. *'Gokurosan*,' he replied – 'Thank you for taking the trouble.'

Turning inland at midday, I stamped for another eighteen kilometers through fields of dazzling green. The blistering sun struck the bright blue silos and their Dutch barn roofs, the hayricks set out like the squares on a chessboard, the tractor constructing them, the white hood of the woman driving the tractor, the fork of the man's rake as he piled up the hay and waved to me, a cigarette stuck between his teeth.

By midafternoon my mouth felt like sandpaper and the empty beer cans by the side of the road were beginning to plague me like mirages. It was so hot and still that the stinking draft from the one truck that ground by was like a dip in the ocean. Hokkaido is the second largest of the Japanese islands, but it is by far the most thinly populated. A bare five percent of the population lives here – about one person to every four acres of land – and in the north of the island you can slog on for hours and meet only crows. Late in the afternoon a tractor stopped and, without a word, the young driver handed me a bottle of orange juice. I stood and gulped it in the middle of the road while the tractor purred and the driver grinned down at me.

'Where do you come from?'

'England.'

'Ah, wonderful!'

'How far's Numakawa?'

'Just over the next rise.'

And, satisfied that the last drop of orange juice was gone, he took back the bottle and purred off up the road, turning into a

field where the evening wind had just begun to ripple the grass. Numakawa was over five rises and round eight bends, and in the entrance hall of the *ryokan* – the Japanese-style inn – I sat on the step and drank two bottles of beer before finding the energy to unlace my boots, while the owner's wife clapped her hands, wide-eyed with glee, and the maid stood choking on her giggles.

Communities in Japan have effective ways of warning you that you've slept too long. There are sirens that blast you out of your *futon* – your bedding – just as dawn has broken, foghorns in the coastal villages, and complete loudspeaker systems that broadcast favorite melodies like 'Sakura, Sakura' and 'Colonel Bogey'. In Numakawa there is a set of electric chimes that exactly duplicates the bongs of Big Ben and, if you sleep through the bongs, there is 'Anchors Aweigh' for the children to troop into class to. The owner of the ryokan, Mr Obata, was a teacher at the local primary school and had persuaded me to drop in on my way out of Numakawa the following morning to 'show my face' to his pupils. By the time I reached the little single-story wooden school, the strains of 'Anchors Aweigh' had long faded, for the school lay deep among the farms and the detour had taken me an hour out of my way. But the petrified squeaks and the breathless hush were definitely worth the extra boot rubber. The four children in Mr Obata's class – three six-year-old boys and a seven-year-old girl – sat goggle-eyed on the edge of their benches while their teacher introduced them to the Thing from Outer Space.

'Now, children, here's an Englishman who comes from England. Do you know where England is, Kazuko-chan?'

'*Zutto muko* (far away).'

'And do you think you can find it on our map?'

A battered metal globe had been dragged out to the front of the class and the four children clustered round it, wriggling.

'No, Kazuko-chan, that's Saudi Arabia. This is England,' said

Mr Obata, tapping Iceland. Mr Obata rocked back on his heels as he addressed his four pupils, gesturing at them with large sweeps of his arms.

'Now, yesterday this foreigner walked thirty-three kilometers, all the way from Cape Soya. Where's Cape Soya, Kazuko-chan?'

'*Zutto muko* (far away).'

'Yes, and today this American is going to walk to Toyotomi. Where's that, Ryoichi-kun?'

'*Zutto muko.*'

'And after that he's going to walk all through Japan.'

'Oooooooo!'

'How long do you think that'll take him?'

'A week.'

'Two weeks.'

'Six months.'

'Five years.'

And by this time my feet were beginning to tingle, so after the children had each tried to lift my rucksack (the little girl was the only one who succeeded), I drank a cup of thin green tea in the teachers' room, while the headmaster guffawed quietly at his desk, and then set off in earnest for Toyotomi.

The sun glared down on the unsurfaced road, on the white-cowled women constructing a drain, on the large brown snake that slithered miserably out of the way of a snorting tractor, and on me, my head wrapped in a sky-blue towel and my hands swollen to almost twice their normal size with sunburn, the skin slowly turning from scarlet to purple. I called at a farmhouse for a glass of water and received a tray of green tea and crackers and a recommendation that I see a doctor about my hands. In the wooded country above the fields flies clung to my face, and within seconds of taking off my boots and socks to bathe my feet in the exhilarating streams, my legs were mottled with spots of my blood the stream insects had sucked.

By the time – late in the afternoon – that I reached the hot

spring resort of Toyotomi, with its one dusty street and its dozen old ryokans, I could hardly put one foot in front of the other. I had covered more than sixty kilometers in two days, through a heat wave everyone swore was unique and through country where often the only shade was in the clefts carved out of a quarry face. I managed to hobble from the ryokan to the public bathhouse – a feat in itself since the ryokan had provided me with a pair of the square wooden clogs called *geta*, which are not designed to soothe aching feet and which, anyway, were an inch and a half too short. But the sight amused the bathhouse attendants:

'Here, look at this foreigner hobbling along. I told you they can't walk in geta.'

The bathhouse, mercifully, was almost deserted. Like a wall down the center of the huge tiled bathtub a cluster of gray volcanic rocks separated the men's portion from the women's, and out of these rocks trickled the natural hot spring water, a silky, morbid green. The bathhouse attendants had thoughtfully provided a net for skimming off the mosquitoes and flies that had died on the surface of the water, but I was too tired to bother and too badly blistered from the sun to do more than sit slumped on the tiled edge soaking my feet. I spent the best part of an hour in the bathhouse, limping back and forth between the bath and the cold-water tap where I emptied plastic bowl after plastic bowl of icy water over the burns on my face and neck.

The food in the ryokan was meager, the maid surly, the room undecorated, and the black-and-white television would only work if you kept stuffing hundred-yen coins into it. In the morning, as I left, forty or fifty pensioners on crutches were climbing painfully into two large buses, while a loudspeaker in the neighboring ryokan broadcast 'Auld Lang Syne', and a small delivery truck roared past with 'Happy's Coming' in bright yellow English across the back of it.

At ten to twelve the little restaurant opposite Horonobe station was empty. At twelve it was chock full. At one it was empty

again. The third morning of my adventure had been a teeth-gritting twelve-kilometer limp along cinder paths, and I now sat in the restaurant drinking cold Sapporo beer and trying to reach a decision. My carefully plotted itinerary – plotted in Tokyo at a comfortable desk – and the neat little penciled numbers on my map all insisted I go on. My blisters, my sunburn, the joints of my toes, the arches of my feet, the balls of my feet, my ankles, my knees, my thighs, my gastrocnemii and the availability of Sapporo beer were eloquently persuading me to spend the rest of the day in Horonobe. I reached the decision at a quarter past three and passed the next two hours in Horonobe's tiny park, sprawled out under a neatly labeled tree, watching young children poke potato crisps through the bars of a cage at a newborn *bambi* (the post-Disney Japanese word for a fawn).

I had booked myself into a ryokan where the downstairs dining room was decorated with photographs of steam locomotives puffing through gorges and a large brownish reproduction of Millet's 'Evening Knell'. There were also some seashell pendants for sale inside each of which the teenage daughter had carefully glued a little cloth face, and there was a plastic mirror with 'Tour Brings You Smile' printed across it in luminous letters. But, as I soon found out, the chief attraction of Horonobe (population 4,600) is its generous choice of bars (there are twenty-two). The third one I hobbled into that evening had a wonderful antique draft-beer cooling machine that the mama-san had to keep stoking with ice, a twenty-year-old Wurlitzer juke box, and a massive color television on which a red-bearded American wrestler was smashing a Japanese wrestler called Strong Kobayashi over the head with a ringside chair.

I ordered a draft beer but had barely sipped it when a voice at my elbow said 'Hello, please, please, hello', and a bald, beaming gentleman was standing beside me, pouring me a glass of Very Rare Old Suntory.

'That's kind of you,' I just had time to say, 'but I don't drink whiskey. I prefer beer or sakè.'

'Hello, please. You, hello.'

Without any ceremony at all, the beaming man took a thousand-yen note from his wallet and dropped it on the counter, instructing the mama-san as he did so to fetch more beer and a saucer of peanuts. This sort of thing happens occasionally and there is little point protesting. I did not protest.

The beaming man produced his business card, explaining at the same time, since foreigners are not expected to be able to read Japanese business cards, that his name was Ogawa and that he was the town's Director of Public Works. He insisted that we drink together and steered me away from the counter to where his colleagues were seated at a corner table – four young men in white shirts and ties and one older man in Wellington boots and a boiler suit covered with smudges of mud who rose to hug me but fell across the table and upset two whiskeys and an ice bucket. He sat down again, missing the edge of his chair, and when he had scrambled out from under the table, was helped to his feet, dusted down, and conducted to the door, smiling and bowing and knocking over a dish of dried squid on the counter. At the door he turned to wave, dislodging the Playboy calendar, and was finally escorted, giggling, out into the night.

We raised our glasses in a toast. The red-bearded American wrestler was hauling Strong Kobayashi round the ring by his hair, Paul Anka was singing 'Diana'. Apart from that, a lull had settled over the bar. The man in the boiler suit was the Town Clerk.

'Thank you for coming to Horonobe. Thank you for going to see our bambi.'

'It's a quiet town.'

'It's a *peaceful* town,' carefully amended Mr Ogawa. 'I go to Tokyo three times a year and I come back with my ears ringing. Horonobe is peaceful. It has twenty-two bars and a bambi, what's more, and the people of the world must try to be friends. If I may ask, where were you born?'

'In London.'

'Ah, yes. What part of London?'

'Leytonstone.'

'A splendid town! England and Japan have much in common. You have a queen and we have an emperor. We are islands. We have long histories. The Americans don't really understand us at all, but the people of the world should try to be friends. Do you think that Leytonstone might like to have Horonobe for a sister town? We have a bambi and so on.'

'I could ask.'

'It is essential, you see, that the people of the world be friends.'

The red-bearded American had Strong Kobayashi entangled in the ropes and was bouncing the Japanese referee off a corner post. Mr Ogawa slapped me gently on the back.

'It's not often we see a foreigner in Horonobe,' he said. 'It's a clean town, a peaceful town. We do our best. We give our residents the best we can. A bambi for the children . . .'

'And twenty-two bars.'

'Let us drink' – Mr Ogawa raised his glass – 'to the friendship of all the people in the world.'

We drank. Altogether about eight large mugs of beer and two full bottles of Suntory whiskey. And thus passed my fourth evening in Hokkaido. Truly, I thought, the people of the world are friends, for I was not permitted to pay for so much as the saucer of peanuts. It was still quite early when we left, but some of our party, Mr Ogawa explained, had been out drinking till five or six that morning (the twenty-two bars of Horonobe are not subject to licensing laws) and it was felt that if the town hall's principal business of the next day – a baseball match against a team from Rishiri – was to be conducted with proper enthusiasm, the evening had better come to a fairly early end. We left arm-in-arm. The red-bearded American had long since been carried out of the cheering arena with blood all over his face.

The heat wave ended. The sky turned the color of bean curd and the rain came. Out on the lonely coast road where I stamped

through the rain for the next six days, there was at least a sprinkling of bus shelters to rest in – shaky corrugated iron structures with nettles growing up out of the dirt floors and signs tacked to the rusty walls that said, in English and Japanese, 'May Peace Prevail on Earth'. Through holes in the corrugated iron I could watch the sea oozing gray and sullen up these far northern beaches, and in one of the lulls I took off my clothes and swam out till I could look back at the hulk of Mount Rishiri, its slivers of snow like cracks in a gutter.

The noodle shop I stopped in for lunch on the fifth day was run by one frail old lady who both cooked and served, and every time she came out to wait on a table she had to take off the clean slippers she wore in her kitchen and put on the grubby plastic sandals she used for walking on the concrete floor of her shop. She would set down her tray of bowls on the counter, lean back against the doorpost, and shuffle her feet in and out of the sandals without needing to use her hands. But this slowed her down, and at lunchtime in a crowded noodle shop slowing down is rarely tolerated.

'Oi! Where's my noodles?'

'What's up, then, grandma?'

'Why can't you get this table cleared?'

'Don't you give your customers glasses of water?'

'Does it take half an hour to open a beer?'

'You swam?' gasped the old woman incredulously when, on the stroke of one, the shop had emptied and she had flopped down to eat her own lunch of rice and pickles. The weather forecast had announced that morning that the sea off the southern tip of Kyushu, fourteen latitudes further south, was still too chilly to swim in.

'It wasn't any colder than an English sea,' I explained.

'How courageous!' the old lady marveled.

I was finishing off my noodles when the Meiji Ice Cream man arrived to fill up the fridge. 'All Englishmen,' he told me, '*even fishmongers*, wear ties.'

'Are you really from England?' the old lady sighed. 'Is England further away than America? How long would it take to get there? How much would it cost?'

The ice-cream man had finished stocking the fridge and was lounging across the lollipops with a cosmopolitan air, shedding light on various foreign countries.

'What foreign countries are over there?' the old woman wondered, pointing out of the window at the sea.

'Russia,' said the ice-cream man, 'Korea, China . . . ', and then after a pause for thought, 'Bulgaria.'

Before I left he told me how the fishermen of Hokkaido exemplified the Japanese character. 'Foreign fishermen,' he explained, 'will take only the fish they know they can sell and throw the rest back. But Japanese fishermen will keep fishing till their boats are full, even though it means they'll have to sell their catch at half price. We Japanese are *waakaahorikku* (workaholics). We do everything with a vengeance.' And the old woman and the ice-cream man both solemnly nodded.

Perhaps the vengeance of the Japanese fishermen is one reason why Hokkaido's famous herring shoals have almost totally disappeared and why the herring boats have had to turn in recent years to the much less romantic business of netting shrimps and crabs. No one writes ballads about shrimps and crabs, but the former glory of the herring fishers is the subject of Hokkaido's most popular folk song:

> Ask the gull if the herring has come.
> The gull replies: I am a bird in flight –
> ask the waves.

Through the curtain of the rain that still fell on the sixth day I began to make out a range of high mountains ahead of me, the summit of the highest still dismally capped with a gray-white blank of snow. My map, published seven years earlier, showed a road that skirted these mountains along the coast, though the

key to the map, helpfully translated into English, warned that it was 'difficult in traffic of motor car'. This turned out to be a bit of an understatement for, as I was told, the road had yet to be constructed. I decided to give the mountains a wide berth, anyway, and turn inland when I reached the city of Rumoi, but Rumoi was still a good three days away and the rain showed no sign of letting up. I walked with the hood of my anorak zipped tight round my head, but the rain spattered into everything – boots, clothes, the cracks in the asphalt – dripping through the roofs of the bus shelters, imparting to the sea a texture like pocked lead.

Sometimes I would stop to rest at a small shop or to ask how many kilometers it was to the next village. And sometimes, especially when the shopkeeper was getting on in years, she would tell me she had no idea how many kilometers it was, but that it was perhaps a *ri* or a *ri* and a half. The *ri*, the old Japanese measure of distance, has disappeared entirely from road signs and maps, and within ten years it will have vanished from the language. One *ri*, say the conversion tables, equaled 3.927 kilometers, but that is nearly irrelevant. One *ri* – as I came to know in practice – was the distance that a man with a burden would aim to cover in an hour on mountain roads. The kilometer was invented for the convenience of machinery. The *ri* was an entirely human measure, which is why it had no chance of surviving. We tell the time in digits and bleeps, and distance is not distance if you can't divide it by ten.

On the long empty road I would walk for hours and meet no one I could stop and talk to. Occasionally a car bounced past, ploughing up the loose pebbles and skidding round the ruts and pits. More occasionally I passed a gang of workmen high up on the protective netting of a cliff face who stared down at me and muttered to each other, too far away for me to hear what they were saying. On these first lonely days the little isolated shops were not only sources of information, but shelters, rest centers, snack bars, and, together with minshukus and ryokans, the only

real indicators I had of how life is lived on the north Hokkaido coast . . .

I unsling my pack and walk into a shop. The middle-aged woman who runs it is watching the midday quiz show on an eighteen-inch color television set. She can change the program by remote control, and in the lower right-hand corner of the screen there is a second screen, a tiny black-and-white one, so that she can monitor what is happening on other channels. Her wares consist of chewing gum, ice cream, soft drinks, cookies, and cellophane-wrapped bread rolls with bean jam in the middle.

'No beer?' I groan.

She does not sell beer but takes instant pity and raids her own massive three-door refrigerator.

'What a life!' she sighs. 'It's ten past twelve and you're the only customer I've had all day. There's no point in having a shop here. All the fishermen and farmers have got cars so they drive into Wakkanai or Rumoi to do their shopping. It's a hard life for the poor like us.' And she sighs again as the quiz show is interrupted by a commercial for digital watches.

In the back of one little shop I stopped in there was a woman with a smile so astonishingly lovely that it shot off her face like a beam of light. I glimpsed her while I was buying an apple. She was very tiny and had a grotesquely hunched back, and she sat in front of a huge electric knitting machine that someone had bought her as a present; a brand-new electric computerized knitting machine – slip in a card and out comes a cushion cover. I don't think I have ever seen anyone look prouder than that little hunchbacked woman sitting there smiling at me, wanting me to notice her knitting machine.

There was a lull in the rain on the seventh day and I walked along the still empty coast road and saw an eagle ripping the guts out of a crow. On the main street of one village, an old woman in a dark kimono with a scarf round her head and no teeth in her mouth came up to me and, to my amazement, put

her arms round my neck and, when I had bent down to her, put her cheek against my cheek and asked me where I lived.

'In Tokyo,' I said, and she hugged me as tight as her shaky little body would let her.

'I have three grandsons in Tokyo,' she said. 'Three grandsons. Thank you. Take care. Good luck to you.' And she patted me on the back, twice, smiling and then sighing, and the rain came down again and I walked on toward the snowy mountains.

It was dark by the time I reached the outskirts of the little town of Tomamae, and the rain was still pelting down, smacking the black gravel of the empty road and bouncing back in millions of crisp white explosions. I sloshed quickly past the rows of thin red-and-white striped poles that had been set up along the road for a festival, and under the strings of pink paper lanterns that bobbed and swung between them. The rain shook and spun the lanterns so that clouds of water cascaded off them. I passed a shrine where stalls had been erected and where one or two stallkeepers sat under their dripping canvas awnings, scowling at the shattered reflections of the lanterns in the puddles that swamped the gravel. I hurried on as fast as I could and met not a single reveler on the drenched streets.

In the ryokan three little children were screaming that they wanted to go out and buy candyfloss. We hung my dripping clothes over a stovepipe and I went down to the bathroom and wallowed for half an hour in water as hot as I could stand it. The hot smooth water nuzzled my thighs and shoulders and stomach, and first stung, then softened, the blisters on my heels and toes. I closed my eyes and the distant sound of a festival drum – a deep sodden thump of a sound practically drowned in the shush of the rain – came floating through the bathroom window. It went on for five minutes. Then it stopped, and there was only the rain thudding on the glass and in the yard and on the tiles.

Occasionally the bus shelters I sat to rest in had posters on the corrugated iron walls. In one, a lively advertisement for gravestones

was stuck up next to a recruitment poster for the 'Self-Defense Forces' (the label coined in 1954 to get round the awkward problem of Japan's maintaining an army, navy, and air force while its post-war constitution specifically forbids them). The poster showed two men stripped to their vests arm-wrestling across a mess-hall table before an admiring audience of four uniformed women all of whom had gunmetal fillings in their teeth.

The mist lay so thick on the hills that it hid them, and the rain continued to flatten the sea. Fronds of dull green and orange seaweed were splattered, rotting on the stony beaches, and between the fronds of seaweed lay the usual beach ornaments: pink plastic detergent containers, a broken umbrella, white polythene bags, tires, beer cans, orange peel, and a rusty bicycle half buried at the line of the tide. I drank coffee at a drive-in that called itself a 'pit-in', and the rain stopped, leaving the sea a silver calm.

The ryokan in which I spent my eighth night was an elaborate affair with an entrance like a Western-style hotel and a carpeted foyer stacked with pinball machines. The bath water had all the signs of coming from a natural hot spring – it was dull with thick black bits floating in it – and the guests ate their dinner in a small communal dining room, the first guests facing the color television set, the latecomers swiveling to watch it over their shoulders.

The program that evening was worth watching. An interviewer was talking to foreign students at a hostel in Tokyo. Most of the students had only just arrived and could speak little or no Japanese, so the interviewer was having a fine old time cracking jokes about their language and the color of their hair, and getting them to play Japanese children's games to the delight of the adult studio audience, who had not played such games since they were toddlers. But one young man from Greece spoke good Japanese and had obviously spent a lot of time studying the country and its culture. When the interviewer asked him about his hobbies, he replied that his main hobby was learning to sing *enka* – popular Japanese ballads.

'*Enka! Enka!*' shouted the interviewer. The studio audience giggled in anticipation.

'And what singers of *enka* do you particularly like?'

'I quite like Mori Shinichi,' said the young Greek.

'Mori Shinichi! Mori Shinichi!' The giggles turned to snorts and nudges.

'Sing us a Mori Shinichi song, then.' And so the brave young Greek took the microphone and, in front of all the cameras, sang:

> Is a flower not a woman,
> a man a butterfly . . .

The rest of his song was lost in the howls of laughter from the studio audience and the noise made by the half a dozen diners in the ryokan who had put down their chopsticks and were chortling at the screen.

'Look at that! Ha ha ha! A foreigner trying to sing *enka*!'

After dinner, in the ryokan's little bar, while the juke box played 'Unchain My Heart' and one of the diners crooned 'Danny Boy', I had an interesting conversation with a myna bird who did a perfect imitation of a slightly hysterical Japanese woman laughing at a myna bird. To anything I said in a polite tone of voice, the bird would reply *'Ah, so desu ka?* (Oh, is that so?)' But if it thought I was being rude, it would screech, bird-like, and on one occasion drew a tasty spurt of blood from my finger.

'*Sayonara*,' it said politely as I went upstairs to get a bandaid.

The menu on the wall of the bar was headed 'Fizz' and included one concoction called Blue Hawaii and another called Tennessee Waltz. There was a bust of Beethoven on the counter, with welts and cracks across its head that I suspect had been inflicted during the myna bird's rages.

'Why don't you teach Kyu-chan (the myna bird) English?' suggested the woman behind the bar. 'He's as gentle as anything if

he thinks you're sincere. And he's a very quick learner.' The woman had stuffed two large dishes down the front of her dress for breasts and was dancing a rumba to amuse the three customers. I didn't want to guess which 'Fizz' she was drinking, and anyway I was so dead tired – and the dishes seemed only to flatten her further – that I quickly decided to call it a night.

'That's all right,' said the woman when I asked for the bill. 'You can pay in the morning before you leave. That will be much more convenient, won't it?'

I supposed it would, and so it proved – convenient, at least, for the ryokan – since it enabled them to charge me for two bottles of beer I didn't remember drinking and a saucer of beans perhaps Beethoven had consumed.

'Sayonara,' said the myna bird, managing to sound wistful and not, I thought, too unlike Mori Shinichi:

> When the flower falls the butterfly dies.
> Ah, how I should love to love so . . .

The sea was ghostly in the mist, separated from the flat coast road by a wire fence that gave it the appearance of no man's land. High up on the cliff above the road a group of elderly workmen drilled the face with stuttering pneumatic drills. And a cannibal crow, its black eyes ecstatic, tore at the corpse of another crow that had been rammed flat to the road in the night. An old man on the island of Rebun once told me that the crows in Hokkaido attack human beings – but only schoolgirls, and only between four and five o'clock in the afternoon. It had something to do with their uniforms, he suspected.

By midafternoon I was sitting on a rocky beach staring down the coast at the first city I had seen for nine days – the city of Rumoi. I could see its chimneys, its cranes along the giant wharves, its antennas, its gas tanks, all shrouded in a mist that on the sea was pristine, but there, as it hovered round the factory stacks, was indistinguishable from the gray-white smoke belching out of

them. I had spent nine days in the wilderness and was coming back to civilization.

'Ziss is a PEN! Ziss is a PEN!' screamed the children as I walked into the city. They giggled as they screamed that first sentence from their English textbooks, and if I answered them, they giggled louder. I came into Rumoi by what seemed to be the back way, trudging past the Mobil Oil tanks, past the *Eastern Fuji* discharging its bilges, threading my way through a maze of narrow streets all of which seemed to be under repair. Drills chewed up the tarmac, and women in white scarves flagged down the cars.

'Amerika? Amerika?'

'England.'

'Eh?'

'England.'

'Wonderful! Wonderful! Thank you for taking the trouble.'

The main shopping streets of Rumoi, as I discovered when I finally found them, are like those of most other Japanese cities – a bewildering exercise in juxtaposition. One shop sells electrical appliances: portable radios with names like Mac, cassette decks and televisions all in one – Zilbap, Cougar, Transam – so many knobs and digital counters they look as if they require a pilot's license. Next door a shop sells lacquered Buddhist altars, incense and candles to burn for the dead. Over the road a pastry shop called Denmark and, next to that, a shop that sells raw squid. A rack of bamboo *kendo* swords outside a toy store stocked with baseball bats. The cinema posters display the same eclectic tastes: Clint Eastwood squinting off one telegraph pole, two mottled dinosaurs locked in combat on the next, and a half-naked Japanese Catholic nun salivating as she fondles a black leather riding crop.

Rumoi seemed a lively enough city, I thought, though curiously subdued in the early morning when I left it, striding off at the beginning of the tenth day of my journey past empty coal trucks and rows of uniformed high school pupils, the girls

babbling excitedly in their neat full-skirted sailor suits, the boys in their shiny black blazers and geta, dragging their satchels along the railings by the roadside and waiting till I was well past before shouting out, 'Hey, yooo!'

The morning brightened further from the city and the sun was soon glinting on the inland rice fields, turning them into small square lakes of green and silver. After more than a hundred kilometers I had left the sea behind me and would not meet it again for a further three hundred, when the sea would be the vast Pacific.

Outside a little railway station the stationmen were busy mowing an already immaculate lawn, picking up the cut grass in their white-gloved hands and placing it in a spotless red wheelbarrow. By the time I turned off the main road into the mountains the blue sky was cloudless and July was back. The road was a real dirt mountain road, twisting and turning, climbing and plunging, crossing and recrossing the single steep railway track that ran through the gorges from Rumoi to Numata.

'Do you want one of these? They're alive, you know,' asked the man who owned the one village grocer's shop I stopped in, and he showed me a sea slug in a fat plastic tube. I opted instead for a packet of dried octopus and a bottle of chilled Sapporo beer: 'Time honoured since 1876' said the label in English.

'You're my very first foreigner, you know,' confessed a little girl on a tricycle, staring up at me with wide, serious eyes. She followed me on her tricycle out of the village until her attention was claimed by the Communist Party's loudspeaker van that was doing the rounds for the local elections, repeating the candidate's name over and over again in the ritual that serves, in Japan, for campaigning: 'My name is Kodama Kenji. Vote for me. My name is Kodama Kenji. Vote for me. My name is Kodama Kenji. Vote for me. My name is Kodama Kenji. Vote for me . . .'

Four little boys on bicycles escorted me into the town of Numata at five o'clock in the afternoon and made me stop to look at their pictures of *suupaa-kaa* ('supercars').

'What *suupaa-kaa* do you have in England?'

I felt boastful: 'Oh, you know . . . Rolls Royces . . . Jaguars . . .'

'Is that all?'

'Well, er . . . there's . . . er . . . Aston Martins . . .'

'It's a shame he's not an Italian. *They've* got *Lamborghinis*.'

And with that accusation ringing in my ears, I was shown to a ryokan and promptly abandoned.

The island of Hokkaido is a comparatively recent addition to the Japanese homeland. Until the middle of the nineteenth century the only permanent Japanese settlements lay huddled in the extreme southwest of the island – at Matsumae, Esashi, and Hakodate – within a day's journey of mainland Honshu. A few loggers ventured further north, and a handful of merchants to trade with the Ainu, the aboriginal inhabitants of the Japanese islands who had been herded into Hokkaido by the close of the ninth century. But the loggers and the merchants returned south in the autumn, leaving the Ainu to brave the winter in their straw-walled huts and the Russians from Sakhalin to come trapping seals. It was not until 1869 that an official 'Commissioner of Colonization' was appointed, and not until six years after that that a treaty with Russia established Japan's sovereignty over the island once and for all.

In the last three decades of the nineteenth century the settlement of Hokkaido became a major government policy. It was partly based on a desire to exploit Hokkaido's mineral and timber resources in the rush to develop Western industries, partly to ease pressure on an already-crowded mainland, and partly to establish a military presence that would serve to deter any Russian incursions. (Japan still bases approximately a third of its 'Self-Defense Forces' in Hokkaido, including its one fully mechanized division.) The authorities engaged American cartographers to map the island, American agronomists to study how best the land could be used, American educators to found and lecture at schools and colleges. They imported steam trains from America