

Brush man for brotherhood

By Masamori Kojima

"DADDY, tell me another story!" Tiny four-year-old Momo Yashima was sitting crosslegged on the floor of the small New York studio apartment, looking up intently at her painter father, 40-year-old Taro.

On different evenings Taro Yashima had gone through all the stories he had learned in Japan as a child and had even done a lot of inventing, but for the moment he thought he was stuck.

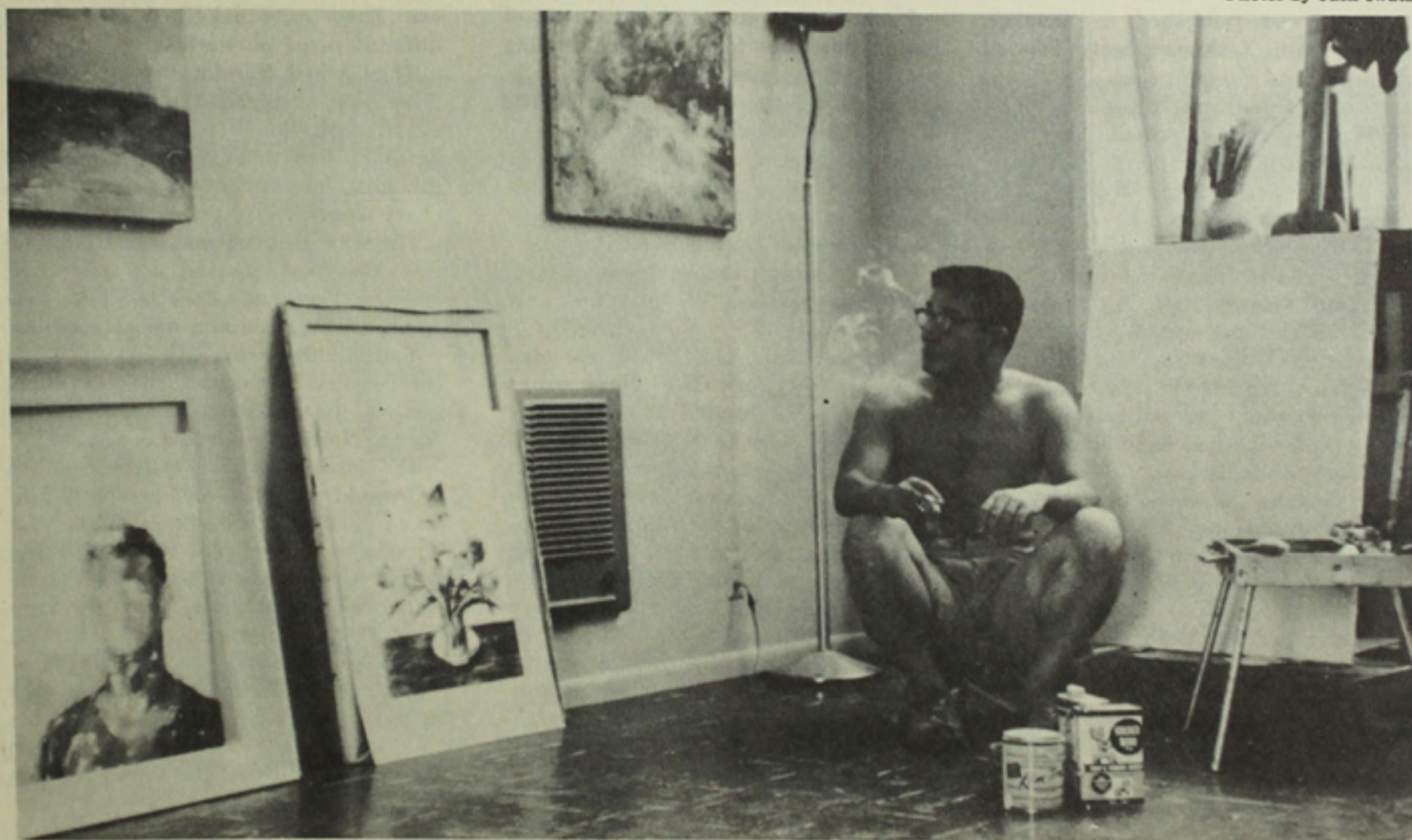
"Daddy, tell me another story," Momo persisted. "What did you do when you were little like me?"

And Daddy's eyes crinkled in remembrance of his happy boyhood, of the abandoned play in the river that flowed through the village, the small uncomplicated joys he had with other children within the branches of the massive village tree by the stream.

He started:

"The village where I grew up was on an island far to the south. A river with plenty of water flowed through the middle of the village, and a huge

Photos by Jack Iwata



TARO YASHIMA, pre-war refugee from Japanese militarism and advocate of neo-realism in art, contemplates several of his works

in various stages of completion. His latest book, "The Village Tree," has been published by the Viking Press.



YASHIMA students absorb just as much of his time and energy as own works.

tree stood on its bank . . ."

And that's how it began, the children's story, "The Village Tree," which Viking Press published in October, replete with Yashima's zesty colored drawings and simple prose.

As a young man in Japan, Yashima's curiosity about militarism was not well received. As a critic of the Japanese ventures in China, Yashima was imprisoned by the militarists. The grim, stark account of this period was told in his first American book, "The New Sun" (Henry Holt, 1943).

In 1939 Yashima and his wife, Mitsu, came to the United States via a cargo boat from Yokohama. Although he planned to study art more extensively in the States, he had another purpose: to escape the militarists.

The first day he landed in New York he was utterly lost. He didn't know anyone. He found himself at a restaurant counter. He couldn't order a thing. He couldn't read the menu, and he couldn't say a word.

The waiter became impatient and pointed roughly to the menu. Yashima could do no more than make a noise like an animal, nod his head and finger a line.

Thus, his first U.S. meal — grapefruit juice. "A sour one without sugar," he recalls. (Today his English is good. The syntax is sometimes incorrect, but Yashima has an accurate "feel" for

English words and conveys his own meanings effectively. He writes the text for his own books).

He has now recovered from most of his anxieties; he laughs easily, finding sources of the good life and humor in all things and people around him. His manner is one of constant optimism, although the task of supporting a wife and two kids on the professional returns of an artist is often bleak.

As a painter, he calls himself a "neo-realist." "Modern realism is too weak," Yashima appraises. "We must find new values."

Yashima has had four one-man shows in New York City. Three of his paintings are exhibited at the Philips Memorial Gallery in Washington, D.C.

Once he did a calligraphy job so rapidly that he worried about the charges. During the war, Fortune magazine had a special issue on Japan. The cover and a number of illustrations were done by Yashima. The cover was the brushed word "Nippon" in Japanese. Yashima did that in one of the Fortune office conference rooms. He asked to be left alone. He closed all the doors, and then stroked the words in about 30 seconds.

It occurred to Yashima that it might be unseemly to reappear with the complete cover so immediately. So he sat and sat and sat, smoking furiously to pass away the time. Thirty minutes

later, nearly choking from the clouds of his own cigaret smoke, he emerged to hand his work to the Fortune editors. They were delighted at a "most difficult piece of work."

They asked Yashima how he did it. After he received the agreed-upon check, \$250 (!) he told them what really happened. Fortune laughed and thought the cover was still worth every cent.

For extraordinary services during the war, Congress enacted a special bill, granting permanent U.S. residence rights to Yashima and his wife, Mitsu.

Yashima drew and wrote propaganda for the Pacific theater. His key effort was a pocket-sized booklet called "Unga Nashizo" (Unlucky Soldier).

The Japanese soldier at first believed he would be tortured and killed if taken prisoner, so he fought with ferocity to the end. The Allies surmised that if the Japanese soldier could be convinced that this was not true, many lives, both American and Japanese, would be spared.

But early Allied propaganda seemed to be missing the point. Prisoners were only infrequently taken. It was later admitted that the propaganda had been more insulting than persuasive. The Yashima booklet marked a turning point.

One of Yashima's most poignant experiences was the search for his son,

Mako, whom he had been forced to leave behind in Japan. The war over, Yashima was among the first to land in Japan. Tokyo was in ruins. How bad was Kobe where Mako and his grandparents lived?

Was Mako alive? Was anyone in the family alive?

Yashima went to Kobe. He searched for the grandparents' house. Nothing was there. The house had been bombed.

Heart pounding and his mind shrinking from its own visions of mangled bodies in the wreckage, he saw a small shop across the way and a man standing. He walked up to him.

"No," the man said, "No one was killed. I heard the family that used to live there went to the Aina village."

It was nearly dusk when Yashima got to Aina village. As he came out of the station he saw little children. He stared hard at every face. In the anxiety he almost caught himself believing that one of the children was Mako. ("But that couldn't be. Mako is not five now!") He asked one little girl, "Do you know Mako?"

"Oh yes, he's a big boy," in the tone that little girls use, admiring older

and bigger boys. "He's playing in the school."

This electrified Yashima. He started towards the cluster of houses where the grandparents were probably living.

As he walked past the school, he heard small, shrill voices, calling out, "Yashima-san! Yashima-san!"

His name. How could anyone know that here? Was it a trick by some of the local militarists?

He slowly turned around. He saw a group of children with pointing fingers. In the center was a shy looking boy with raggy clothes.

Mako!

The boy walked up slowly and with embarrassment.

Yashima didn't know what to do. All he could say was, "Have you eaten?"

"No."

"Then let's go home."

And the two walked toward home. Tears were running down Yashima's face as he felt the presence of his son, keeping step beside him. He wanted so much to look down and peer and examine his boy's face. But he couldn't.

It was one of the greatest moments

in his life.

Later, by a special Congressional Act, Makoto was permitted to come to the States to join the family in New York. Nineteen-year-old Mako is studying architecture there today.

Now on an art grant at the Hartford Foundation in southern California's Pacific Palisades, Yashima sends little gifts to Momo living with her brother Mako and mother in New York. Momo answers by dictating letters to her mother. Yashima can hardly repress his appreciative laughter as he retells a hundred times a sentence in his favorite letter from Momo: "Why did you send me a present . . . because you love me, don't you, daddy?"

The sunshine and outdoors of southern California have caught Yashima. He wants to bring his family out to live there.

Wherever he makes up his mind to live, he will be welcome. His love of life, his stories of rich and engaging experiences, the warmth and generosity of his personality, all bring much to the reservoir of good feeling in the world around him.



Photos by Toge Fujihira

REQUEST for bedtime stories made by daughter Momo, on phone while mother Mitsu listens, led to "The Village Tree."



SON MAKO, now 19, was left behind in Japan when parents fled militarist Japan. He now studies architecture in New York.

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Book tells of boyhood joys

THE illustrations on these two pages are reproduced from "The Village Tree," recently published by the Viking Press, with drawings and text by artist Taro Yashima. In black and white here, the sketches in the book are in color — for the greater enjoyment of the youngsters for whom the book was intended. The book itself is Yashima's happy recollection of a carefree boyhood symbolized by a giant tree that stood beside a river. In recapturing with words and brush the joyfulness of life as it was tasted under the shadow of that tree, he has struck a chord that is recognizable anywhere in the world. Yashima is at work on a sequel, tentatively titled "Plenty to Watch," for publication next year. Earlier Yashima books include "The New Sun" and "Horizon is Calling."



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