

FALLEN BLOSSOMS

JUST after I took the photo at right, capturing an image of a cherry blossom limb stretching above the Imperial Palace moat, Yoshi insisted on taking a picture of me. Okay, I was dressed better than usual on this April 2009 day in Tokyo's Chiyoda Ward. We had just come from a classy private luncheon hosted by an old friend in the Kohlberg Kravis Roberts corporate dining room, which offered a sixth-floor view of the moat. Hence, my jacket, my dress shirt and my amber bola string tie. With my progressive eyeglasses, I looked like a *gaijin* gangster. On this page, however, the most pertinent photo is the one at the bottom. The always elegant Yoshi stands among piles and scatterings of fallen blossoms. You see, we were too late. We had missed the peak of the short cherry blossom season. Mostly tatters remained. When the blossoms reached

JACKSON SELLERS
Spring 2009



sea-level Tokyo, we were up in the cooler Honshu mountains, where there were still snow patches. If you live in Japan, as we once did, you can never miss the peak. No matter where you are, the glory will find you. If you are just visiting in the springtime, and traveling from place to place, it's a hit-or-miss proposition. From the little moat-side park near the British Embassy, we continued our day's outing, walking streets that were familiar to Yoshi. Long ago, as a high school and college student, she had lived at her father's Tokyo home within Chiyoda Ward. She had strolled these streets before. Eventually, with only minor grumbles from puffing me, we reached our destination, the Yasukuni Shrine, and found more fallen blossoms lying beneath gnarled trees like a thin blanket of snow. *Sakura Fubuki* is what Japanese call it. Such "cherry blossom snowstorms" come when even a light breeze snatches away dying petals. But fallen blossoms are appropriate here. Yasukuni Shrine is the national Shinto resting place for the *kami*, or spirits, or souls, of Japan's war dead. For many centuries, Japanese warriors saw the short-lived cherry blossoms as symbols of the military ideal – the conviction that they would die in their prime in service to the Emperor. On the afternoon of my Yasukuni visit, the bright sun hanging over the shrine



defeated my camera, so I plucked the photo at bottom left off the Internet. At bottom right, visitors pay their respects beneath a hanging banner decorated with imperial chrysanthemum crests. That's Yoshi in the light green jacket at far left in the photo. The Yasukuni Shrine was founded in the 1860s by the current emperor's great-grandfather, known as the Emperor Meiji. The idea was to honor nearly 8,000 soldiers who died in the civil war that overthrew

the Shogunate and restored the emperor to full power. More wars followed, of course, each more bloody than the last. The Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05 enshrined 88,000 *kami* at Yasukuni. The 1937-41 war with China added 191,000. But the biggie was World War II, 1941-45, which put 2.1 million Japanese spirits on the Shinto roster. Included were war criminals identified and executed, as always, by the victors. I admire Junichiro Koizumi,



prime minister of Japan from 2001 to 2006, seen here at right in another image I pulled off the Internet. His flamboyant hairdo and his incongruous love for the music of both Elvis Presley and Richard Wagner are worthy of admiration, but mostly I admire him for his stubborn annual visits to the Yasukuni Shrine in the face of fierce condemnations from China and South Korea. Koizumi was the prime minister, by God or by Buddha, and he would honor the Japanese war dead, regardless of political consequences. Yasukuni compares loosely to Arlington National Cemetery across the Potomac River from Washington. Both were created in the 1860s to honor soldiers killed in a great civil war. Both feature heroic statuary relating to various military conflicts. Ar-



lington now has more than 300,000 graves. No criminals, we Americans might say, but it should be noted that only an act of Congress kept Army veteran Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber who killed 168 innocent civilians, from being eligible for Arlington burial. As I said earlier, the sun was a chal-

lenge at Yasukuni, but I positioned myself in the shadow of the main gate leading to the shrine and captured the image below. I like the silhouette of the young woman with the purse. I like the huge gilded chrysanthemum crests on each side. Yes, I'm proud of this photo. But it'd be so much easier if the sun was always behind me.

