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monkey business

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the monkey business manifesto

Monkey Business is a newly founded journal of new writing from Japan and abroad with a few not-so-new works strategically slipped in. We offer nothing in the way of a "concept" or "lifestyle" aimed at a particular age bracket or social group, no useful information to help you get ahead. And we utterly lack that noble desire to provide a sanctuary from the whirl of daily life. If you gain any of these benefits, so much the better, but they are not our goals. Neither, we must add, do we have a radical agenda. Our intent is not to attack the system, whether it be artistic, political, or social. In fact, we aren't out to pick a fight with anyone, right or left, old or young, conservative or radical.

Our inspiration for the name *Monkey Business* is that immortal Chuck Berry tune, where he rattles off like a machine gun: "Same thing every day—gettin' up, goin' to school / No need for me to complain—my objections overruled, ahh! / Too much monkey business, too much monkey business / Too much monkey business for me to be involved in!" No other work of art that I know of deals with the aggravations we face every day so straightforwardly and with such liberating humor. That is the guiding star we follow on this journey.

Motoyuki Shibata
(from the first issue of the Japanese *Monkey Business*)

So Moto and I decided to create an annual English version in the same spirit. We selected the most suitable pieces from the first year or so, and then set about translating them with not a little help from our friends. And here they are!

Ted Goossen

monkey business

volume 01 | 2011

translated by Michael Emmerich

MONSTERS

HIDEO
FURUKAWA

There is no answer. And why not? Because there's no question. All we've got is the fact that the monster is there. And it's hibernating. That's stage number one. From here, we move on to stage number two, stage number three. The last stage is more or less identical to the first, so the whole thing is sort of a "cyclical motion," you might say. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. There can be no question that first of all we must address—observe, describe—the movement from the first stage to the second. The monster is there, hibernating . . . or rather, it *was* hibernating. It's just woken up. While it was hibernating it was practically dead, so you might say that this represents its return to the world. That's what this awakening is. It goes without saying that the monster is starving. And its body is all twisted up. Specifically, its head, chest, abdomen, and left foot have gotten wrenched to the right, left, left, and right, respectively, vis-à-vis its spinal column. Its two legs resemble a single thick root. The second the monster starts walking, however, that impression is gone. And since I touched on its ravenous hunger, I might add that it's really the thirst that comes first, as it wakes. So the monster begins looking for water. And thus, now that the monster has proceeded to the second stage, we find ourselves impelled to address (after careful observation, in intelligible language) the new question of just what sort of place it is that this monster is in. Well, it's an atrium, an open space in a building that extends up, vertically, some sixty meters. There's a smooth ramp that connects one floor to the next, seven floors in all above ground. A total of thirty-one conference rooms are positioned along the east wall only (each one stacked upon the next). But enough of these tepid words! The time has come to set out some words with a temperature you can feel. From sunrise to sunset, provided the sky is clear, sunlight streams down into this space. The roof over the atrium is

almost all glass, after all. So it's warm. And then, in the evening, it gets cold. No lights burn, all night long . . . or rather, no lights *burned.* Not during the first stage, that is to say, while the monster was hibernating. But here we are in the second stage. The monster has awoken. Ravenously hungry. And thirsty. The humidity was controlled. It was a few hours after sunrise and sunlight had filled the space, this building. The monster started walking. Up the ramp without lifting its feet off the floor, at least at first. Scootscoot, scootscoot, scootscootscootscootscoot. No sounds echoed through the atrium. The monster's footsteps did in fact make sounds, though only little ones. They were, however, absorbed by the warmth of the sunlight. From here, the monster heads for the washroom on the sixth floor. When it arrives, it holds its hands under the faucet. The sensor responds, reacts, and water gushes out *as part of a secret, symbolic ritual.* The water has not been cut off. This is, in fact, a tribute from the space, the building, to the awakened monster. From this moment, the world (to which the monster has returned) is reborn. Thirst quenched, internal organs and every last cell in its hands and feet engorged with water. And the monster washes its face. The monster yawns repeatedly. Then it goes up to the lounge on the seventh floor. The monster holds opera glasses in its hand. It had buried these opera glasses deep in its nest. The lounge offers a good view of the world to the east and west. Of what is outside the space, this building, that is to say. The monster, opera glasses held to his eyes, is looking out to the east. And why is it looking to the east? Because Ginza lies to the east. The name of the place where the monster is is Tokyo International Forum. Its address: 5-1 Marunouchi 3-chōme, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo. The nearest station is Yūrakuchō. But it is Ginza that the monster regards as its territory.

@ GINZA

Take, for instance, the Nichōme intersection. There's Chanel. There's Cartier. There's the Louis Vuitton inside Matsuya department store. There's Bvlgari. All the buildings have been rebuilt. Faint lines of smoke, beacons, drifting up from their roofs. Take, for instance, the Yonchōme intersection. Ceaselessly, day and night, you hear music coming from the corner of the street where Armani/Ginza Tower soars into the sky. The tone changes from time to time, and this is a sign. Take, for instance, the Kabuki-za Theater at the Miharabashi intersection. Ropes dangling from every one of the building's numerous eaves. And on them, laundry hung out to dry. Or take, for example, the area around

back of Matsuzakaya, in Ginza Rokuchōme. Dozens of plaster statues have been set out along the shoulders of all the roads (every road big enough for a car). The statues have been smeared with dogs' blood, making it almost impossible to determine whom they were meant to represent. Take, for instance . . . all of west Rokuchōme, the entire district. The tables in the outdoor cafes are covered with buckets to catch the rainwater. Or take Corridor Street. Hundreds of cigarette lighters, but not more than a thousand, lie discarded in the metered parking lots. Scattered here and there. Or take . . . the real-estate agents with their bodyguards, the sculptures of cephalopods that have appeared at the Sukiyabashi intersection, the parade of motorcycles that keep riding around and around in a loop, four in each row. Radio waves that cover only the northern region. Take Chūōichiba Street, which links Ginza to Tsukiji market. Walk just a couple of steps eastward and you feel the ocean. And yet Tsukiji, Tokyo's central wholesale market, is not part of Ginza. Is there any blank space left at all in this part of town?

THE MONSTER SPEAKS

I'm struggling with all my might just to stay where I am.

Time keeps passing me by.

You get what I'm saying?

Shibuya was abandoned.

Ginza rusted away.

You keep your eye trained on the future. But not me.

You get what I'm saying?

You don't, do you?

Because I'm not there anymore, where you are. Because I got out. Because *here* isn't *there*. You want to know the truth? I didn't really want to get out; I wanted to stay there. There where the future is bound to come. I never wanted to have a will of my own.

But I got out, here.

Here, where the present only ever becomes the past.

You get what I'm saying?

Here, where the future will never supplant the present.

That doesn't mean anything to you, does it?

Listen, I'll be the first to say it, to accuse myself. To say that if things go on like this, I'm going to kill someone. That's okay, right? Only here's the thing. Before I kill them, I

might just kill you. Now that's no good, is it? That hypothetical is just too deeply mired in sin. Already, I am unable to forgive myself that supposed infraction.

So I passed down judgment on myself.

Get out.

Step down from the place where you are.

Don't let the future be, not here. Will it to stop.

That's it.

You go on.

I'll stay here.

I have no future. There is no future, not here. Ginza . . . rusted away.

And the empty rooms. The unslept-in beds. The burning logs. What is it, a fireplace?

All memories. All, that is to say, the past. And there are others here, besides me. Time just keeps moving on . . . and there are hundreds of us. Thousands of us. Each one imbuing this place with the shades of his own "past." Corroding it.

Memories.

No, I won't go back. I'll kill the people right here. Let my sinfulness rest in this place.

Stop.

You would find tens of thousands of them if you looked, I'm sure. With no memory at all of the last season. I hibernate, and it makes me completely new. Only words that mark what is possible remain engraved there. Maybe, just maybe, it is arrogance that I am facing. Just maybe it is the lasciviousness, for instance, of past desires. People engaging, again and again, in promiscuous abandon. Kill them. Kill it. All of this.

Do you get what I'm saying?

It means nothing to you, does it?

I'll make you understand. C'mon, let's step outside.

At first, the monster does not believe the sound of hooves. This is on Sotobori Street. And then the monster finds itself witnessing the appearance of a horse. First it recognizes that it is, in fact, the clip-clopping of a horse, simply walking. Then a horse alive, heading north (toward the north, it goes without saying, of Ginza) along the Tokyo Expressway. You can tell because it turns onto Ginza Sakura Street from Sotobori Street. For a moment, the monster is thrown into confusion. Is it a wild horse? Nothing supports this intuition. For a moment, the monster hesitates. Is that the sort of thing I could eat or not? And then

the monster is pulled in two directions, into two distinct trains of thought. A: Should I try to catch it? B: Can I butcher it? A': If I don't try to catch it, what should I try to catch? B': I'd need some sort of tool with which to butcher it, but even assuming I happen across something, will I be able to cut it? A": Don't forget: *people* are your prey. B": Whatever, I'll eat the horse sooner or later, and I'll be *at one with the horse*.

Once again, a note about the monster's hunger. We have already described (and thus observed) how the monster dealt with its thirst. *The water is not cut off in this world* in the presence of the monster. All that remains is the question of how it will deal with its pure hunger, to satisfy it. And I would like to draw your attention, once again, to the fact that the monster has only just moved to the second stage. This is a posthibernation hunger. In the end, however, this doesn't pose all that much of a problem. Why, you ask? Because it was able to find, here and there in the broad expanse of Ginza, sources of nourishment (stores in every case, without exception). Allow me to cite just a single specific example. Even in this world, the food floor that connects the B1 floor of the Yūrakuchō Itocia Plaza to Ginza Station was open 24-7. And then there was the horse. As the monster made its way even further east from Itocia Plaza, it heard the clip-clopping of the horse's hooves, and then observed the living horse itself. And that made it think of food, which is to say of eating. In the spaces that opened up between its divided trains of thought, the monster immersed itself in words that had temperatures. The horse's blood would be warm. The horse's flesh would cool my skin. If it were laid out across my skin, right against it. The monster lets itself sink, ecstatic, into those coolnesses (of the words describing the scene) . . . or rather, let itself. And then the monster inspected Ginza, which is where the horse was. At dusk, the monster looked at the sunset. At midnight, the monster looked at the sky, with its odd superabundance of stars. The sunset impressed upon it the reality of the solar system. If the sun and the earth, as its planet, did not stand in the relationship they do to each other, the phenomenon of the afterglow (an event which can be observed) would not exist. The stars allowed it an intimation of the galactic system's existence. And this world, with its solar and galactic systems, was not without water. That evening, untroubled now by thirst or hunger, the monster set out to wander Ginza. During that first night after it awoke from hibernation, it simply pressed on, forward. Already, it commenced its investigations of the problem of the mirror. In any event, the monster's form was not reflected in a single mirror it found there, in Ginza. Even though everything else was. But was that really true? Might there be other beings as well whose forms were not reflected? This was just a hunch, and the monster had no evidence whatsoever to back it up, and yet the monster became

convinced. In other words, the monster came to feel quite sure of the real existence of "another monster" or perhaps even "monsters." Even though it had not believed the sound of the horse's hooves (even after it had heard them). The problem of the mirror had come to light in a certain restroom whose location need not, I am sure, be named. Even if the monster was excluded from the mirror there, the water was not cut off in that world. And yet another hypothesis might be offered in explaining this problem, for the sake of our pursuit of the truth. Namely, that the monster might be able to find in this place "the one mirror" in which it would be reflected. This place being Ginza, or the world. Or perhaps it would be "mirrors."

@ GINZA

Take, for instance, spring. Time after time, gangsters attack the gas stations. The victims form gangs to defend themselves. The drugstores keep these gangs supplied with certain special goods. The gangs march in the streets, around and around, in eight rows. The monster picks off one row at a time. Seven rows . . . and now six . . . that's early spring. Next, sensing the open antipathy of the men who attack the gas stations, the monster starts picking them off, one at a time, and taking gasoline. Gasoline makes people burn . . . that's late spring. Take, for instance, summer. Birds of prey with wingspans that are easily a meter (the birds are not, however, eagles) fly in groups of four in the wide sky. In July, it rains fish. Twice on Namiki Street, three times on Marronnier Street. The fish were all black bass, right down the last one. Those who cleaned the fish, thinking to eat them, were pleasantly surprised to discover either a few frogs or a single sparrow or a white-eye inside their stomachs; or else they were not pleasantly surprised, and vomited. In August, in Ginza, water would only boil 17.7 meters off the ground. Every so often, the water tanks of office and apartment buildings situated at that height would explode. Take, for instance, autumn. The sunlight shoots off in random directions. Perhaps for that reason, the area around Shinbashi Theater is overrun with sex slaves. By the first days of autumn, the monster has inspected seventy thousand mirrors. It continues in its pursuit. Thus far, it has killed a mere sixty people. They were all lowlifes, and the monster finds this less, somehow, than satisfactory. The monster is filled with indignation. In the end, without having anything to show for all its searching, the monster simply continues its wandering (as its circling of Ginza is called), carrying with it the side mirror of a car, which it has taken from the car, by which to identify *another*

monster. Will the number of victims cross the one-hundred mark at some point, one wonders? It is still autumn.

THE MONSTER SPEAKS

It's hunting season.

You get it?

You understand now, don't you?

You see, don't you, how deeply sinful I am?

It's clear, isn't it, that I'm guilty? I've been convicted? Well, that's okay. Here I am, then, struggling with all my might just to stay where I am.

To stay here. Where you aren't.

And I go on killing.

Sixty people? *Just sixty?*

Not enough. I'll kill more.

I chase my prey into a beauty parlor.

My sixty-first catch.

A candidate for my next victim.

Where am I, Kobikichō? I close in. There's a huge mirror in the beauty parlor. That's why.

I tell my catch about the mirror.

I question my catch, all the while doing things to hurt it.

"So, you know anyone without a reflection?"

Yes, I've asked this question sixty times already. And I've heard the answer 120 times. Each person answered twice. First they say, "I don't." So I ask them, "Do I have a reflection?" And then, at last, they all say, "Yes, I do know someone like that."

Too late.

Anyway, I can't respect a person who answers twice. So I do more to hurt my catch, and I kill it. My stance toward them is utterly sincere.

You get it?

You understand me, don't you?

And what's more, I don't ask them "Do you know of a mirror in which I'll be reflected?" That's . . . that's something I have to look for on my own. That's . . . how sincere I am.

How could you not understand?

And now, catch number sixty-one.

The sixty-first time I ask the question. Once again: "You know anyone without a reflection?"

And the answer comes: "I do."

You do?

"In Shibuya."

Shibuya?

The answer comes: "There was a monster like that in Shibuya."

A monster?

Right, in Shibuya. I get it. Good old Shibuya. Where we used to hang. You and I, we used to go there together, right? All the time? There, before I got out, the two of us, all the time. . . . Not here, but there. There, in that place with a "future."

We were there, right, you and I?

But I thought Shibuya was abandoned.

It was abandoned. I know that. At least, the "future" no longer ventures there. Time just keeps passing, and yet the present . . . corroding, more and more, that's all.

The way Ginza rusted away.

That's why.

And?

It's there, really?

A monster?

Then I'm not the one holding up the world. I'm not the only one. *So I was wrong, after all.* If there's another master of this world, besides me, well then.

I'll catch it.

Then I touched the pulmonary artery of my sixty-first catch. Fresh blood flowed.

By the end of autumn the monster should progress to the third stage. It's not far from here to the final stage. Let us hurry onward. The monster stays in Ginza for a long time and then it moves . . . it moved. To Shibuya. It goes without saying that Ginza and Shibuya are connected by land. And that it is a monster that the monster is searching for. We can leave the observations and descriptions for later. The monster sniffs. Looking for traces of some new secret, symbolic ritual (or some *thing* like it), it sniffs out every passion in every corner of Shibuya. And it endeavors to reduce them utterly to ash. The monster has come, that is to say, to Shibuya. The fire of its wrath burns hot. And the boiling point is extremely low. These, I believe we may say without fear of contradiction, are yet

more words with a temperature you can feel. The screams are all so cold. . . . And yet even as it bathes in the deceptive chill of those screams, the monster goes on sniffing out the burning passions. It becomes clear to it, then. It becomes sharper. Its hunting instincts. Its intuitions. The monster wills it to appear. The monster cries out, as well: Mirror, mirror. This is the sort of form the monster's interiority/impulses/emotions take. And what the monster wants, ever so badly, the thing it wants, is confrontation.

@ SHIBUYA

One in the morning. The monster is outside Wins Shibuya. Numerous statues of horses stand together outside this offtrack betting establishment. The monster reaches out to touch them, one after the other. It checks to see that they are not alive. There are no dogs. Three in the morning. The monster crosses Shibuya River. The surface of the water is covered with racing forms. Fish float in clusters on top of them, exposing their white bellies. Five in the morning. The sun has yet to rise. Seven in the morning. The sun has already risen. At Mark City, the monster discovers a whole slew of goldfish bowls positioned on the floor at seventy-seven-centimeter intervals. The goldfish bowls are full of sand. Every second bowl contains an ant nest. You can see, through the glass, in an *instant*, what each ant nest looks like. The monster ponders: A nest . . . if I had a nest. . . . Eight in the morning. The monster comes across a guardhouse in Miyashita Park. Deciding that a park need not be guarded, it takes two minutes to catch the twin guards. The blood that flows from their bodies is less red than brown. Nine in the morning. In the Shibuya Ward Office, the monster is assailed by a group of old folks without any genitals (the genitalless old folks have no hair on their heads). It takes forty minutes to repel their attack. Inside the monster, a premonition builds. Will it come? Is it, then, going to come? Will I meet it at last . . . perhaps? It . . . us. There is nothing to support this premonition, but it turns to conviction. Ten in the morning. The monster is in motion. On Spain Hill, there is trouble. The stairway is made of stone, yet a number of steps are missing. Through the open holes, you can see all the way down to hell. The monster hesitates to jump over. The monster elects to take a different route. Eleven in the morning. In Maruyamachō, the monster discovers "the Shibuya Stratum." For a second the monster takes it to be something along the lines of tree rings. It counts the layers (one by one). There are twenty-three of them. For a second the monster thinks, startled, So I've been in this world for twenty-three years. . . . The monster rusts away. But then, once again, it begins

moving. Creek, creekeek, creekeekeekeekeek. The monster does not rust. It wants this confrontation, wants it from the bottom of its heart, it is all for that. Eleven forty in the morning. The monster arrives at Cerulean Tower. It peeks into the Noh theater, barks at the reality inside, paneled on all four sides with mirrors. Naturally the monster is not reflected *anywhere*. And then something bursts through it. The sense that this is someone's nest. Eleven fifty in the morning. The monster gets into the elevator. Into the machine that will take it to the top floor of Cerulean Tower. The elevator—and of course this is only to be expected—is paneled on all four sides with mirrors. Nowhere is the monster reflected. The monster shudders. Why . . . why isn't what's behind my eyes reflected in the mirror behind me? This fact alone strikes it as illogical. The monster decides that this must, without a doubt, be the other's nest. The monster prepares itself. The master of this world is here, too. Eleven fifty-three in the morning. The monster steps out of the elevator. Naturally, there is no observation space (a lounge advertising its "sky view," that sort of thing) on the top floor of Cerulean Tower. There is nothing but a mirror. And another one. The monster that the monster has been looking for is here. Waiting for the monster. This is at eleven fifty-seven. Three minutes until noon strikes. The first to open its mouth is the monster that isn't the monster.

"So, you know anyone without a reflection?"

Hey, those are my lines, the monster thinks.

The Shibuya monster waits for an answer. Is waiting.

"I only know two," the monster replies.

Noon.

THE MONSTER SPEAKS

And the showdown at noon begins.

Blood is shed.

Blood dirties the mirror.

Or rather, befouls it.

Even though I myself am not reflected in it.

I had blood in me, after all.

Even though we ourselves were not reflected in the mirror.

It had blood in it, too.

It rotted, just like that.

Our blood.
It's strange . . . I seem to see the blood, reflected.
What about my organs, then?
Hey, I see them.
And my bones?
I see them.
I was the first to notice.
I hadn't yet been torn in two.
I hadn't yet been broken.
Yes, I was stronger.
I get it . . . I have to make it appear in the mirror, is that it?
I have to turn it into "a reflection," is that it?
Change . . . exchange.
Muscle. Digestive organs. Nerves. Ribs. Tailbone. Thighbone. Hair.
Hair on its head and around its groin.
And then.
Look.
It's reflecting.
It's reflected.
I'm a monster.
I'm a monster.
I'm a monster.
You, the one I've caught, you're not. And so.
Look. Shibuya is mine, now, too.
Look.
And then.
Is there . . . more than Shibuya?
Take, for instance, Shinjuku. Take Akihabara. And Roppongi. Are they there?
Are they there, too . . . in those places?
Ah, autumn is coming to a close.
Yes. Shinjuku.
This next season.
I won't let myself forget *it*. I won't forget, as I prepare.
Yes, yes, there's winter.
Winter will come. This time, it will be here. In this part of town.
You get what I'm saying, right?

You got it, huh?
I made you see.

Shibuya. Shibuya is the monster's territory. But there is little time left before it hibernates. Not much time to waste. The third stage passes in the blink of an eye, and the fourth arrives. The final stage, that is to say. The cycle ends. The monster's ecology calls to mind, always, "cyclical motion." Soon the monster will fall asleep. Once it is asleep, it will enter a state that is almost death. Still sleeping, it will grow hungry and thirsty. Twisting its head, chest, abdomen, and so on, and its right or left foot. It can't be helped; these are the natural effects of hibernation. And as it sleeps, the world . . . will the world rust away, will it be abandoned? There is no knowing. Because there is no one to ask that question. Because there is no answer. And no one dreams of this world. The curtain falls on this bit of writing (being written) with the assertion, by someone, that *this world does indeed exist*.

translated by Ted Goossen

PEOPLE FROM MY NEIGHBORHOOD

HIROMI KAWAKAMI

CHICKEN HELL

There's a hell, the man said, for people who are mean to chickens. If you get sent down there, a giant chicken comes and spits fire on you, and pecks you, and tramples you with its claws. And that goes on forever.

I listened. The man was from a branch of what had been the biggest farming family in our area. Now they were farmers in name only—they had sold almost all their land, and apartment blocks and housing estates stood on what had once been their fields. The man still raised goats and chickens in his yard, but no one from the main house had anything to do with agriculture. The young people all commuted to white-collar jobs in downtown Tokyo, to business districts like Shinbashi and Shinagawa.

He was raising about ten chickens. Some were fine roosters with magnificent combs; others looked worn out and bedraggled.

"The strong ones peck the weak ones," he told me. I was dying to see the weak ones get pecked, but it never seemed to happen when I was there, no matter how closely I watched. Instead, each chicken wandered around the yard by itself, quite unconcerned as to whether another chicken happened to be nearby or not.

The man was missing an eye. Lost it in the war, he said. He wore a glass eye in its place that never moved. Sometimes he'd take it out and show it to me. It was bigger than the biggest marble I've ever seen and colored a cloudy white.

"Look here!" he'd say, thrusting it out at me in his right palm. He knew it scared me.

Not long ago I went to a big art museum and saw a painting of Chicken Hell. And all that time, I thought he had made it up! An illustration in a thirteenth-century Kamakura hand scroll. A national treasure. It showed a

scaly-breasted giant rooster with both wings extended.

The man occasionally tormented his own chickens. When he put feed out in their box they'd all come running. Then he'd kick them away. If he was in a really bad mood, he'd chase them around the yard.

His chickens laid lots of eggs, which he piled up in a bamboo basket. I never got a single one, no matter how longingly I looked at them. When a hen stopped laying, the man always let it live. Just can't stand breaking their necks, he said.

I once witnessed him bury a dead chicken in the backyard. Why don't you eat it? I asked. Won't eat 'em if they die of natural causes, he replied.

I haven't a clue what he is doing these days. I stopped visiting him around the time I entered the fourth grade, and that was that. A small white building stands where his house used to be, its ground floor rented to an antique shop and a patisserie—their Mont Blanc cake is delicious.

THE OFFICE

He called it his office, but it was really just a gazebo in the park.

Although he rarely attended school, he always wore a school uniform. It was so old the black had faded to a dull purplish color. If you got close you'd catch a whiff of mothballs.

He was not a big talker. He had three set phrases—"Shall I sign here?," "Final balance, please," and "It's raining hard today"—and that was it.

He would take a cushion and a writing pad with him when he went to his office. Then he would sit there drawing on the pad with a pencil stub.

The cushion wasn't for himself—he sat cross-legged on the gazebo bench. Rather, the cushion was for guests. If someone approached him he would turn it over and push it in their direction. I was afraid to talk to him alone, so I always got Kanae to go with me.

Kanae was pretty nasty. She would boss him around, commanding him to recite the two times table and so forth. "Shall I sign here?" he would mumble and fall silent.

I went to see him by myself only twice. The first time was the day we heard reports that a big typhoon was about to hit. I got worried and went to check in on him, but he wasn't there. The second time was not long after that, when I took him a deep-fried bun left over from my school lunch. I placed it on his knee but he pushed it away. "Final

balance, please," he said. I was upset—I had saved it especially for him—so I stamped my foot. He looked startled. Then he squeezed his eyes shut and held his hands tight over his ears.

I didn't find out he was four years older than I was until I started junior high. By then he had stopped going to the office. Sometimes we would bump into each other on the street. I would say hello, and he would say, "Shall I sign here?" "Alright," I would answer, and he would continue, "Now the final balance, please." Then, whether I nodded *yes* or shook my head *no*, he would just walk away.

He had an exhibition of his drawings at the children's center, so I went with Kanae. He had drawn pictures of animals, boats, flowers, and so forth in crayon on sheets of drawing paper. I couldn't judge their quality, but I still found them amazing.

He made a bit of a name for himself, appearing on TV from time to time. He got rid of the school uniform and started wearing striped shirts and overalls. When we met on the street he would still ask, "Shall I sign here?" Once I didn't answer but just stood there, looking at him. "Deep-fried buns are yummy," he said. It was the first time I heard him say anything other than his three phrases. Then he walked away without waiting for my reply.

He died at thirty-three. A collection of his drawings was published posthumously and apparently sold very well. I leafed through it at the bookstore, but the illustrations seemed terribly flat compared to the real drawings I'd seen at the children's center.

BRAINS

Kanae had an older sister.

Her hair was straight and long, and her eyes had a hint of blue. Although the color was like a westerner's, her flat face was most definitely Japanese.

"That's not my sister, that's a stranger," Kanae would say from time to time. Kanae was a nasty kid. Her sister was two years older, yet she was the one who was clearly intimidated.

Kanae's house had two floors. The kitchen and living room were on the first floor, the girls' room and their parents' bedroom on the second. The parents' bedroom had a double bed, still quite a rarity at that time. I always looked forward to sneaking into the room with Kanae and jumping on it.

One day, we were in there bouncing wildly in the air when we noticed Kanae's sister standing in the doorway, watching us.

"Tell Mom and you'll be sorry," Kanae said darkly. Her sister spun about and ran down the stairs. Not long after, their mother came stomping up from below and flung open the door. By that time, of course, Kanae and I were no longer jumping on the bed. Instead, we were sitting beside it, our faces the picture of innocence, pretending to play with our dolls. The moment we had heard her mother's footsteps on the stairs we'd rushed to Kanae's room to get them.

Expelled from the bedroom, we moved to the girls' room, where we found Kanae's sister. "You asked for it!" Kanae said, and began tickling her. I tickled her too. It seemed like harmless fun at first, but as we kept it up her sister started behaving strangely. Her spasms of laughter turned into strangled cries that hovered halfway between sobs and hiccups.

When we finally stopped, Kanae's sister was facedown on the floor. "She can't take being tickled," Kanae said lightly, pulling her over on her back. A narrow stream of saliva trickled from her mouth. I was relieved to see that she was breathing and her bluish eyes were open. They were wet with tears.

Not long after that, I visited Kanae's house again. She was off playing somewhere—only her sister was at home. "Want to come in?" she asked. I found it somehow impossible to refuse.

She took me to their room, opened the desk drawer, and pulled out a small box. She snapped open the lid. Inside was some kind of white, squishy substance. I asked her what it was. "Brains," she replied. "Doll brains. They're from Tammy, the one lying over there on the shelf."

She was pointing to the yellow-haired doll Kanae had pretended to be playing with in her parents' bedroom the last time I was there. You're a liar, I shot back, but Kanae's sister just gave a faint smile.

I ran down the stairs and out into the street. My shoes were only half on, but I rushed along anyway. When one fell off, I frantically stuck my foot back in it and kept running. Doll brains looked dark and somehow unclean around the edges—they weren't pure white at all.

THE CROONER

Blackie was vicious.

Blackie was the name we gave the black dog that belonged to Kiyoshi Akai. He called his dog John, but there was nothing John-like about it. No, a common black Japanese mutt like that could only be called Blackie.

Blackie was a barker. Not only did he bark, he bit, and not playful little nips, either. His bites were serious, the kind that draw blood. We often saw his victims in front of the Akais' house, complaining. "Look at the blood!" they'd bellow. "What are you going to do about it?" Yet the boy and his mother always appeared quite unperturbed.

Blackie was allowed to run free until sundown. He would go from house to house in the neighborhood as if patrolling his territory, thrusting his snout into the hedges and sniffing furiously. If you crossed his path, he would bark like crazy, and if you tried to run, he would chase you till he caught you. Then he would bite.

Of course everyone detested Blackie. If a much larger dog started barking at him, they all egged the larger dog on. Blackie's response was to bark a few times and then make a quick exit, tail between his legs. "Serves you right!" everyone would shout. But there were few big dogs around, so Blackie was usually king of his world.

The plot to kill Blackie was hatched by my friend Shimizu's older brother and his pals. Their idea was to poison him with pieces of meat laced with laundry detergent. They chose the daytime when he was out and running around, and successfully fed him the meat. But though he gobbled up every last bit, he remained healthy. The detergent didn't affect him at all.

Blackie caught a thief. We heard him barking with all his might at a burglary taking place just two houses down from Kanae's place. When the startled thief tried to flee, Blackie bit him. Usually he would bite and let go, but this time he hung on to the thief's leg for all he was worth. Apparently the thief started to cry. It hurts, it hurts, he kept whimpering through his tears.

Shimizu's older brother and his buddies dismissed the thief as "a loser." Nevertheless, from that point on, they quit trying to poison Blackie.

Blackie died three years later. A dump truck hit him out on the main drag. Kiyoshi Akai dug his grave in the garden with an angry look on his face. Nobody liked Akai either, but when this happened we felt some sympathy for him. That sympathy evaporated, however, when he built a weird-looking statue next to the grave not long after.

The statue was made of Plasticine and seemed to have been modeled on Blackie. Yet Akai was no artist, so it was quite misshapen and didn't really resemble Blackie at all. Exposed to the wind and the rain, it soon began to fall apart. Akai would take the broken pieces and stick them back on, so that the statue came to look less and less like Blackie.

The Akais moved away not long after that. There was a rumor that Akai grew up to be a very handsome man who made the rounds of nightclubs crooning old-fashioned Japanese songs, but I have no idea whether that rumor was true or not.

THE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

A school principal lived in our neighborhood.

A dog school principal that is.

There was a small dirt run in the park where everybody took their dogs. The people would walk in circles around the run while their pets zigzagged back and forth as the spirit moved them.

Whenever the school principal caught a dog pooing on the ground or barking at someone, he would go running over to give them a scolding.

He wore a T-shirt with the words *Dog School* on the back. Across his belly was the word *Principal*. I would say he was in his fifties. He spent pretty much every weekday at the dog run.

The school principal was as bald as an egg. When a child called him *baldie* he would smile and pat him on the head. His eyes weren't smiling though.

I talked to the school principal on several occasions. He always initiated the conversation, though, not me. Whenever I took my dog to the run he'd greet me with a bow, and I would have no choice but to bow back. "That's a mixed breed, right?" he would come up and say. When I gave a noncommittal nod he would go on. "Marvelous. They're a heck of a lot better than those expensive purebreds they sell in pet stores. Give me a mutt any time."

I would nod faintly again and escape. I wanted nothing to do with him. I figured he wouldn't approach me if I wasn't with my dog, so I began taking my walks by myself. The first few times he left me alone, but finally he had to ask.

"Where's your dog?" he said. "Is he sick or something?" I shook my head *no*, but

from then on I couldn't avoid him.

The school principal had a way with dogs—all he had to do was click his tongue to make them obey. Apparently, some people paid him to train their dogs. "It's not cheap, though," he said. "After all, it's a private school we're running."

One time I brought up the story of Blackie, a dog that went around biting people in the neighborhood back when I was a kid.

"Oh yes," he replied. "I know all about him. Belonged to the Akais, if I'm not mistaken."

When I expressed my surprise, the school principal introduced himself by name. It turned out that he and I had been attending the same primary school around the time Blackie was alive.

The principal still hated his classroom teacher. Said she'd made him stand in the school corridor for three hours straight. His crime was stuffing a girl's satchel full of chicken bones he'd carefully collected for her.

"Why would you do something like that?" I asked.

"Every time I ate roast chicken, I licked all the bones clean and kept them for her," he proclaimed. "How could that be seen as anything other than a declaration of love?"

The school principal had a wife and two daughters. His wife was a lawyer and his daughters both worked in banks.

"They lead such boring lives," he laughed, but his eyes weren't laughing.

Occasionally, the school principal wore a wig to the park. It was chestnut brown and parted on the side.

THE LOVE

The middle-aged woman who ran the tiny restaurant-cum-pub Love had the face of a demon.

She didn't scream at people or scold the neighborhood children. Although her face was the spitting image of the demons you see in the old paintings, her personality was actually quite pleasant.

The Love opened at seven-thirty in the morning. Its breakfast special cost three hundred yen. For that you would get two rolls and an iced coffee. Since the coffee came in cartons from the supermarket it was always iced, summer and winter.

Lunch began at noon. There were two set meals on the menu, the Hamburger Special and the Meat Bun Special. Both were store bought and came in vacuum-packed bags, so they tasted exactly the same; the only difference was their shape.

The nights were for karaoke. Few customers ever came. So the woman usually just sang by herself. Since she left the door open we could hear her clearly on the street. When the night was young she would sing "Francine's Song," but when it got late she would change to "The White Butterfly Samba" and "What's the Point of Repenting?"

The Love closed at 11:00 p.m. Since the woman got up shortly before seven-thirty and went to bed right after eleven, her work hours matched her private time. In fact, the Love and her home were one and the same. When she closed shop she simply washed her hair in the sink and scrubbed her body with a well-wrung-out towel. Then she spread her mattress on the raised tatami platform where her supposed customers sat. There were no rooms in the back. The space on both sides of the counter, the raised tatami platform, the toilet, the sink—that was the whole shebang.

The woman's private possessions—clothes, makeup, photo albums, and so on — were packed in a semitransparent plastic box kept on a corner of the raised platform. On those rare occasions when more space was needed and the platform was in use, someone would have to sit on the box.

The woman had a daughter. Sometimes this young woman returned to the Love, her old home, to spend the night. Her mother would have her sleep on the raised platform and spread a straw mat under the counter stools for herself.

"How could I let my young daughter sleep on concrete?" she'd say. "Girls her age should keep warm."

The menu of the Love has recently expanded. Before, the woman basically served everyone the leftovers of what she herself was eating for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Sometimes, when she tired of hamburgers, meat buns, and bread rolls, she would shift to curry, *shumai* dumplings (both from vacuum packets, of course), and melon rolls for a short period of time. As a rule, though, the menu was hamburgers, meat buns, and bread rolls, whatever the season.

The new, expanded menu includes stewed squash, rice porridge, and mashed spinach. The woman's daughter has a child now, you see, and these are the foods the baby is being weaned on. It goes without saying that they are purchased in vacuum packets, and that what the sign in the Love trumpets as "Brand New Offerings" are essentially leftovers, too.

No one from our neighborhood ever enters the Love. When customers do stray in, they come rushing out a few moments later. How the woman ever makes a living running that shop is a mystery to us all.

THE JUVENILE DELINQUENT

Kanae turned into a juvenile delinquent.

No sooner had we entered junior high school than she began sporting long skirts that reached her ankles, a satchel squished flat as a pancake, and hair so bleached it was the color of an ear of corn.

The first year, she'd still respond to my greeting when I ran into her on the street, but by the second year we were total strangers. By then, she was attended by a circle of admirers, girls with skirts as long as hers and boys whose hair was stiff with pomade. Kanae had become the "woman" of the "head" of our local teenage biker gang.

Every evening, a motorcycle would come to Kanae's house. The thought that the head had come to pick her up excited me, but when I ran over to check him out, I found I was mistaken. A head, it seems, never stoops to collect his own woman.

Kanae straddled the back of the bike, her face blank, arms wrapped around the waist of the driver, a huge, powerfully built high school student. Her corn-colored hair fluttered in the breeze. Not long after that, I heard that same student and the head had fought a duel to the death over her. The word *duel* amazed me.

Eventually, the head was arrested by the cops. There had been a spectacular rumble, and one gang member had been killed. A girl in my class told me that the head had been shipped off to Nerima Juvie.

When a new head replaced the old one the circle around Kanae shrank. By our third year of junior high no one was left, and Kanae had taken to dyeing her hair black. I thought that might mean she'd go back to being the same old Kanae and start studying for the high school entrance exams, but instead it seems that she replaced her gang activities with "impure relations with the opposite sex."

That, at least, is what I was told by one of the neighborhood women. According to her, Kanae was going up to the roof of the school each night around ten o'clock to engage in impure relations with a succession of boys. "It's Soeda and Fukushima and Shimizu and more besides," she whispered in my ear. "They're all itching for night to

fall so they can return to the roof." I was amazed she knew all their names when she didn't have a school-age child of her own.

Kanae's bad reputation continued to spread until the day of her graduation. She attended a private high school far from the neighborhood, went on from there to vocational school, and then became a fashion designer. "She's gone to France to study," one of the local women told me. Not the same one who listed the boys with whom Kanae engaged in impure relations.

Kanae's hair was pink when she returned from France. Her photograph began occasionally appearing in magazines. In her thirties, she had her own brand, and her hair had turned from red to green to gold to white. When I bumped into one of the neighborhood women, she praised Kanae to the skies as "the pride of our hometown." It was the very same woman who had told me about Kanae's impure relations. I was amazed at her use of the word *hometown*.

THE TENEMENT

The tenement was home to an old taxi driver. The building looked ancient; the old man liked to boast it had been built before the Meiji Restoration of 1868. It was a total wreck, and he was the only person living there. The structure consisted of a row of four attached residences: the taxi driver lived in the one on the far left, while his taxi occupied the one on the far right, which had been stripped of its floor and walls.

The old man didn't work a whole lot. In fact, he took his taxi out just two days a week. He'd leave around noon and be back by evening.

Once a year, the old man would leave his house for three days straight. That was in mid-January, the period that used to be called the second New Year. He would wake up the morning of his departure and prepare a dozen rice balls. Then he would fill a big thermos with tea and pack six boiled eggs and six mandarin oranges.

The old man would set off around noon, a satchel full of food on the seat beside him. The first afternoon was spent driving all around the neighborhood. Our district was so small he could have covered each and every street in less than half an hour, but the old man stopped to rest at each park or local shrine he passed, and spent nearly an hour parked near the downtown shopping area, so that by the time he had completed his route the day was already over.

Although the old man was presumably alone all that time, strangely, the rice balls, boiled eggs, and mandarin oranges had somehow disappeared when he finished his round. The old man hadn't eaten them. We knew that because he went on, as was his custom, to the downtown noodle restaurant Ramen Five for their ramen-and-fried-rice special.

When night fell, the old man drove to the Chūō Expressway. Where he went from there was anybody's guess. We heard that someone had seen him exiting the expressway near Kōfu to head into the mountains, but that was pure rumor.

"Where do you disappear to, anyway?" the woman who runs Love, the small local pub, finally asked him.

"I go driving with the girls," he replied.

"The girls" were the women he claimed inhabited the empty residences in the tenement. There were three, all of whom had died in the years before the Restoration.

"You mean they're ghosts?"

"Ha-ha-ha. Yep, you could say that, but women are women. They're still fun to have around, even if they look a bit hazy and don't have legs."

Having three must be a problem sometimes, the woman from Love teased. The old man guffawed.

Not long ago I went down to city hall to check their registry. The tenement had been built right after the war, it turned out, and the records showed no one presently residing there.

Yet the old man is still living in the tenement. "Aren't you a ghost yourself?" the woman from Love asked him, but he just laughed. Then he went down to Ramen Five and polished off their ramen-and-fried-rice special with side orders of Chinese chive dumplings and pickled bamboo shoots in the twinkling of an eye.

THE HACHIRŌ LOTTERY

My family lost the Hachirō Lottery twice.

The first time was when I was four years old, the second when I was in the third grade.

The lottery loser was determined by a random draw. That meant there were some families that never lost, and other unlucky families that lost a number of times. The worst

case was the Kawamata family two doors down from Kanae's, who lost the lottery on eleven separate occasions.

Each loss was good for three months. Hachirō would live in your home during that time, and it was your family's responsibility to feed him and make sure he attended school regularly. You were allowed to ask him to perform normal chores but not to keep him home from school to work or to demand he run errands late at night. He was also to be paid an allowance.

Hachirō was a big eater whose mere presence caused a family's food bills to shoot through the roof. He was poorly behaved, too, which meant those looking after him were often called in for teachers' meetings, after which they had to write formal letters to apologize for whatever rules he had broken.

Hachirō always had a ready tongue.

He became a real pest if you said anything at all critical to him—quibbling, talking back, even making false accusations. Not long after the family that ran the noodle restaurant Ramen Five lost the lottery, for example, dumplings temporarily disappeared from the menu. Hachirō's daily complaints about how horrid they were had driven the owner around the bend.

Hachirō was the fifteenth child born to a family called Shikishima. They had seven girls and eight boys, of whom Hachirō—literally "number eight"—was the youngest. It was because the Shikishimas were unable to look after so many children that it was decided that Hachirō should rotate among the families in the neighborhood.

I've been listing Hachirō's defects, but he had his good points, too.

For one thing, he had a green thumb when it came to growing herbs; for another, he had a gift for a certain kind of sculpture.

Huge clumps of mallow, savory, blue star, peppermint willow, and other exotic herbs, planted and nurtured by Hachirō's own hands, filled the yards of all the homes he had lived in. Since no one knew how to cook with them, though, they were left to go wild.

As for sculpture, well, Hachirō was able to turn out exquisitely detailed depictions of the human heart. This was apparently a Shikishima family tradition. They looked so gross that people kept them out of sight.

The second time Hachirō stayed in our home he was in junior high. He was a terrible pain in the neck, peeking at me whenever I took a bath and pestering me, a mere third-grader, to help him with his homework, but every once in a while we'd meet outside

the house and he'd treat me to ice cream.

Hachirō kept rotating among the families in our neighborhood until he left junior high, at which point the Hachirō Lottery came to an end. He continued his studies at night school and worked for a construction company during the day. After graduating from university, he got his architect's license and set up his own business, then offered to renovate or rebuild many of the homes he had stayed in at a special, very low price.

You could always tell which families had taken Hachirō up on his offer. The giveaway was the presence somewhere on their walls or fence of a heart sculpted in realistic detail. Families turned off by this idea would avoid him, however cheap his price. This so infuriated Hachirō that he would begin sneaking into their yards to plant large quantities of flea-killing chrysanthemum. Apart from its insecticidal properties, this plant is known for its powerful stench.

THE MAGIC SPELL

The Kawamata family came back from America.

The father and mother had headed off to America immediately after their marriage to spend ten years running a business in California, then closed shop and returned to Japan with a hefty chunk of foreign currency.

"And they got to know some Hollywood stars, too!" one of the neighborhood women enthused.

As one would have expected, their daughters were thoroughly American. Dolly was the elder, and Romi the younger. Dolly was five and Romi two, and they sported matching lace-up shoes.

Kanae was fascinated by the whole Kawamata family.

"Let's go pick on Dolly," she said to me. "Let's show her how mean Japanese kids can be." So off we went to the park where Dolly was playing.

Dolly had built a mountain in the sandbox and was busy digging a tunnel through the base of it.

"You're going to get it now, Dolly!" Kanae jeered. But Dolly kept working on the tunnel as if she wasn't there.

When we took a closer look we saw that the mountain was much more polished than what a child would normally build. The peak was firmly packed, and the sides

sloped gently toward the bottom in a leisurely arc. Even the tunnel wasn't a simple hole but a deftly shaped horseshoe.

Kanae and I stood there lost in admiration, our plan to torment Dolly forgotten.

Dolly was painstaking in her work. She'd dig out a little sand, toss it away, and pat the sides of the mountain to firm it up. Then she'd scrape out more sand and throw it away. Occasionally, though, a small part of the tunnel would collapse, and Dolly would cry out, "Oops!"

Kanae and I were amazed—we'd never heard the word *oops* before.

"What did she say?"

"Maybe it's a magic spell."

Dolly patiently completed the repairs, then returned to her digging. But the tunnel suffered another partial collapse.

"Oops!" she cried again. We jumped out of our skins. By the end of the day she had uttered "Oops!" a total of twenty times.

Dolly was still digging when Kanae and I visited the park the next day. This time there were seventeen "Oops!" There were nine the following day, but the day after that was Sunday, so we didn't go to the park.

From then on, Kanae and I took to chanting "Oops!" whenever we buried treasure or placed a curse on someone.

The Kawamatas eventually settled into the neighborhood. Before long Dolly and Romi's mother was calling them Midori and Hiromi, and no one could tell they'd once lived in America; yet Kanae and I continued to intone "Oops!" whenever the need arose.

The very last time we used it was in third grade. "Make our breasts big!" we implored, then solemnly chanted "Oops!" twenty times each. Kanae and I wanted to grow breasts as quickly as possible so that we could fight aliens, wicked religious sects, and other forces of evil.

translated by Ted Goossen

The Sleep Division

MINA ISHIKAWA

Apparently, no one has ever seen it. The rumor persists, however, that there is a section called the Sleep Division, nowhere to be found on the organizational chart, which pulls the strings in our company.

Eyelids
Sagging down over the eyes
Eyelids. Afternoon in a haze.

Thanks to the Sleep Division's invisible hand
Agenda Five is gracefully on its way
To the dreamland

When an overworked colleague known for falling asleep at his desk disappears all of a sudden one day, the whispering begins: "He's been transferred to the SD!"

The lunch bell gives a woozy ring
Whereupon the Section Manager vanishes
The Department Chief vanishes

Aborted projects
Shimmer here and there
Like oil on water

Stripped bare
A dream lies still
Not the way it started

translated by M. Cody Poulton

SANDY'S LAMENT—FROM THE MEMOIRS OF THE SRAMANA WUJING

ATSUSHI NAKAJIMA

"Sandy's Lament" is part of a cycle of stories Atsushi Nakajima (1909–1942) wrote based on the popular sixteenth-century Chinese novel Journey to the West *by Wu Cheng'en, a rollicking saga very loosely based on the true story of the monk Tripitaka's journey to bring Buddhist scriptures back from India.* Journey to the West *has spawned a number of popular manga, including a series with the same name by Kazuya Minekura and Akira Toriyama's* Dragon Ball. *In Nakajima's story, as in the original, Tripitaka has three companions: Sun Wukong (alias Monkey), Zhu Bajie (alias Piggy), and Xia Wujing (alias Sandy), three creatures who possess magical powers but also very human foibles. Nakajima has chosen the straight man of the tale, Sandy, as narrator for this whimsical portrait of his feckless companions on the road.*

After our midday meal, while Master Tripitaka was taking his siesta in the shade of a roadside pine, Monkey led Piggy into a nearby field to instruct him in the art of transformation.

"Show me!" said Monkey. "If you want to be a dragon, then you *really* have to want it. Understand? Really, *really* want to be one, with every fiber of your being. Throw out every other thought. No fooling, now. You have to give it all you've got."

"Here goes!" Piggy closed his eyes, made the sign of a mudra, and vanished. In his place lay a snake about five feet long, the garden variety we call "green generals." Watching all this from the sidelines, I let out a guffaw.

"Idiot! You can't do any better than a little green general?" scoffed Monkey.

The snake vanished and Piggy returned. "What's the matter with me? I just can't seem to get the hang of it," he grunted, downcast.

"No! No! No! You're just not concentrating. Try again.

This time, be serious. I mean *serious*. Think: 'I want to be a dragon, I *really, really* want to be a dragon.' Make it so all you contain is the desire to be a dragon—then what you are now will disappear. It's that simple."

"Here goes!" Piggy made a mudra again. This time he turned into something weird. It was a python—no doubt about that—but one with little forelegs, like a big lizard. Yet its belly was plump and swollen like Piggy's. What a ridiculous sight when this creature waddled two or three steps forward! I burst out laughing again.

"Enough already! Stop!" yelled Monkey. Piggy reappeared, scratching his head.

MONKEY: You still haven't grasped what it means to want to be a dragon. That's why you fail.

PIGGY: That's not true! The only thing running through my mind is "I want to be a dragon! I really want to be a dragon!" That's all my brain's got room for.

MONKEY: The fact that you're unable to do it is proof your powers of concentration are still incomplete.

PIGGY: That's not fair! That's *post hoc propter hoc*!

MONKEY: To wit, the argument fails when we seek causes from consequences. True enough, not the best way of reasoning. But the world being what it is, it's the most practical kind of logic we've got to explain stuff. I mean, look at what happened to you just now!

According to Monkey, the art of transformation works as follows: If your will to become something is purer and more powerful than anything else, then you simply become that thing. If you don't, it's because your will hasn't developed far enough. Ergo, wizardry training consists of learning how to make your will pure, unadulterated, and, what's more, *fierce*. To be sure, such training is far from easy, but once you've achieved that level of skill you no longer need to expend the same amount of effort: you carry off a task by simply directing your mind to where it needs to go. This is like all other arts. Humans can't transform themselves like foxes and badgers can because humans are beset by too many distractions to focus their spirit on one thing alone, while beasts are free of such cares. Et cetera, et cetera.

Without a doubt, Wukong is a genius. I felt that the moment I first laid eyes on him. Even I, who at first found his ruddy, hairy face ugly, was so bowled over by his aura that

I quickly forgot all about his appearance, so that now his countenance seems beautiful to me. (Maybe that's going too far. Magnificent, at least.) In the way he speaks, his very demeanor, Monkey glows with the faith he has in himself. He's a fellow incapable of lying—to anyone, most of all to himself. An eternal fire burns within him. An intense, violent fire that spreads to all who are near him. Listening to his words, one can't help but believe what he believes; his proximity somehow fills one with self-confidence. He's a spark, and the world a torch waiting to be ignited by his touch.

What are mere trifles to us are in Monkey's eyes invitations to grand adventures, opportunities to show off his most heroic capabilities. It's not the inherent meaning of the outside world that interests him; rather, *he* makes things significant. His inner fire ignites the gunpowder that sleeps cold and wasted in all things. Not with the eyes of a skeptic, but the heart of a poet (a rough and ferocious poet, mind you), he heats the earth. And though that heat can burn, it also gives birth to astonishing buds and plants bearing wondrous fruit. Nothing is ordinary or trivial in Monkey's eyes. Almost every morning I watch him worship the sun at dawn, sighing as if seeing it for the first time, praising it with all his heart. He gazes on the shoots of a pine sprouting from a pinecone as if gawking at a miracle.

How innocent this portrait of the monkey Wukong—yet watch how he faces down his fiercest enemies! How fine and complete he is. A powerful tension animates the very core of his body. How deft his use of the staff, not a wasted move. Peerless flesh that does not tire, but strains and leaps and storms. A surging, indomitable spirit, prepared to face any hardship joyously. A pure, selfless, and incandescent beauty, brighter than any sun, more radiant than any sunflower or cicada, takes possession of this wretched little monkey when he wages war.

I still see in my mind's eye the duel a month ago against the Ox Demon King in the Jade Cloud Mountains. I was filled with such awe that I jotted down a record of their battle:

> . . . The Ox Demon King transformed himself into a musk deer and proceeded to tranquilly munch on the grass. Seeing this, Wukong turned into a hungry tiger and leapt at the musk deer, ready to eat him. The Ox King suddenly became a great spotted leopard and launched himself at Wukong, who turned into a tawny lion and pounced on the leopard, whereupon the Ox King became a brown bear and, with a roar like a thunderclap, made as if to tear the lion limb

> from limb. Wukong appeared to crash to earth, only to become a gigantic pachyderm. His trunk was like a serpent, his tusks like bamboo shoots. Unable to better him, the Ox King reassumed his true form, a white bull. His head was like a lofty peak, his eyes bolts of lightning, his twin horns towers of iron. From the tip of his nose to the end of his tail he measured more than a thousand paces, and eight hundred paces from his hooves to his back. He hailed Wukong with a deafening roar: "Foul ape, what would you have done with me?" In the twinkling of an eye, Wukong let out a bellow and likewise returned to his original form. Behold! He stood ten thousand paces high, his eyes like the sun and moon, his head like Mount Tai, his mouth a veritable Lake of Blood. He brandished his iron staff and vehemently struck at the Ox King. The Ox King parried with his horns. As the furious battle moved deeper into the mountains, the peaks came crashing down and the sea boiled, such that heaven and earth turned topsy-turvy, so violent was their duel. . . .

Can you imagine such a sight? I heaved a mighty sigh as I stood there watching, but I couldn't lend a hand, not because I wasn't worried that Pilgrim Sun might be defeated, but rather from shame that my poor brushwork would spoil the magnificent scene Monkey was painting.

Disaster is oil to Wukong's fire, setting his whole being aflame with a white heat. Yet when life is calm and peaceful, he falls into a ludicrous despondency. Like a top, he collapses unless spinning at top speed. The gravest challenge is laid out before him like a map, a picture complete with an unmistakable outline of the road he must travel to achieve his purpose. Indeed, it might be more accurate to say he's incapable of seeing anything else. Like phosphorescent letters glowing in the depths of night, his destined path shines before him. While thickheaded creatures like us are fumbling for an answer, Wukong has already embarked on the shortest route to his objective. People celebrate his martial skills, his might, but strangely they know nothing of his astounding wisdom, his fusion of reflection and judgment with physical prowess and action.

It's true, Wukong can't read. I know how ignorant he is. When the Jade Emperor in Heaven dubbed him Bimawen (Guardian of the Imperial Stables), he had no idea the highfalutin title meant no more than a lowly groom.[1] Yet, given a choice, I'd rank

1. *Bimawen* sounds like "horse fever antidote," which, according to the *Anthology of Master Zhao Zhongyi* (1638) by Zhao Nanxing, is comprised of fodder and monkeys' menses.

the harmonious union of Wukong's wisdom and judgment with his physical strength more highly than any other attribute. Indeed, I'm convinced Monkey's a creature of high culture. At the very least, his knowledge of plants and beasts and the heavens is extraordinary. One glance at an animal tells him its nature, how strong it is, the chief features of its defenses, et cetera, and he's well informed on all herbs—which ones are medicinal, which poisonous. Nevertheless, he's got no idea what those beasts or plants are called (that is, the names people have given them). And though he can divine the direction or season or time of day by a glance at the stars, he can't even tell you where Spica or Antares are. What a contrast to me, who knows the names of all twenty-eight constellations by heart, but still can't tell them apart in the sky. Never am I so aware of the poverty of a lettered culture as when I am with this illiterate ape.

Wukong's various parts—his eyes, ears, mouth, legs, arms—itch with life and vitality. When he enters battle, they cry out *Hurray!* in unbridled joy, like bees converging on a summer flower. Perhaps that is why, despite the intensity of Wukong's determination, his fighting style exhibits a sort of playfulness. Folks say "a fight to the death," but Monkey has never fought as if death were a possible outcome. No matter how bad a bind he's got himself into, his sole concern is always the work at hand (vanquishing monsters, for example, or saving Tripitaka). Never has he given any thought to his own life. Whether he was about to be burned in the Great High Lord Lao's Furnace of the Eight Trigrams or entombed under the three holy peaks of Mount Tai, Mount Sumeru, and Mount Emei by King Silver Horn's magic, he never once cried out for his life. The worst was when he was flattened between two bronze cymbals by the Buddha's demon imposter at Little Thunderclap Monastery. He tried all he could, to no avail: push or poke as he might, the cymbals wouldn't budge; when he grew to an enormous size to break free, they only stretched; when he shrank, they shrank with him. He plucked a hair from his head and turned it into an awl to drill his way out, but even so he couldn't scratch them. The cymbals' power to melt whatever was between them meant that Monkey's buttocks were gradually getting softer and softer; yet his one concern was for the well-being of his master, who'd been captured by the monsters. For Monkey had infinite confidence (not that he was aware of it) in his own destiny. Finally, the Metal Dragon of the Gullet Constellation came down from heaven to thrust his ironlike horn into the cymbals. But though he managed to pierce them like human flesh, the cymbals swallowed his horn and wouldn't let go. Had there been so much as a crack to let in a puff of air, Monkey could have transformed himself into a poppy seed and slipped out, but no such luck.

After much trial and toil, his buttocks roasting, Monkey pulled his iron cudgel from his ear and, turning it into a gimlet, drilled a hole in the Metal Dragon's horn; then he turned into a poppy seed and, burrowing into the hole he'd made, bade the Metal Dragon to yank the horn out. Once saved, he forgot all about his burning buttocks and threw himself into saving his master. Not once did it cross his mind that he was in danger or that his days might be numbered. No, Wukong never gave any thought to life or death. Were he to die, he'd drop like a fly without the faintest notion of what was happening to him, having given his all till that very moment. His work was magnificent; yet that very grandeur left no room for him to feel sorry for himself.

They say monkeys imitate humans, but this ape has never deigned to play a man. In fact, Monkey rejects what anyone tells him to think, even if ten thousand people have believed it for a thousand years. He only accepts ideas he's arrived at himself.

He has no truck with any convention, nor does he long for honor in this world.

Another notable thing about Wukong is that he never talks about the past. Or, to be more precise, he completely forgets times gone by. At least specific events. Since he absorbs whatever experience has taught him, he needn't recall every little thing. In strategy, for example, he never makes the same mistake twice, though he's entirely forgotten what taught him the lesson, no matter how painful it was. The ape's mysterious power enables him to unconsciously absorb wisdom whole, turning it into his very flesh and blood, body and soul.

Yet he told me once that there was one encounter he'd never forget. How it filled him with terror! It was when he'd first had the good fortune to meet up with the Tathagata, Sakyamuni Buddha. Monkey was as yet unaware of the limits to his power. With his cloud-stepping shoes of lotus thread, armor of golden mail, and gold-banded iron cudgel (the one he'd stolen from the Dragon King of the East Sea—it weighed 13,500 catties) with its five *vajra* rings, no foe in heaven or on earth could stand against him. His brawling caused the assembly of immortals such grief that they imprisoned him in the Furnace of the Eight Trigrams as punishment, but he broke free and went on such a rampage that heaven itself seemed too small to contain him. He struck down the soldiers heaven had mustered against him, laid them prostrate in the dust, and at the Treasure Hall of the Divine Mists he fought for fully half a day against the great general Youshengzhen and his thirty-six thunder warriors. At that very moment, Lord Buddha happened to be passing by with his two disciples Mahakasyapa and Ananda. Standing in Wukong's way, he put a stop to his fighting. Incensed, Mind-Monkey launched himself at the Buddha.

Laughing, the Tathagata said: "You do seem quite full of yourself, don't you? Tell me, where did you learn all these tricks?"

Wukong replied: "I was born from a stone egg on Flower-Fruit Mountain in the land of Aolai, east of the Holy Continent, and anybody who's never heard of me and the power I wield must be some kind of fool! I've learned the dharma of immortality, can ride the clouds and govern the winds, and can traverse one hundred and eight thousand *li* in a single bound."

"A hundred and eight thousand *li*? That's no big deal," said the Tathagata. "Hop on the palm of my hand and see how far you get."

"Ridiculous!" huffed Monkey, leaping on the Buddha's palm. "I can fly eight hundred thousand *li*, and your hand's not going to stop me!" Wukong hopped on his cloud Somersault. When he'd traveled two or three hundred thousand *li* (or so he figured) he came upon five red pillars of immense size. Standing before them, he wrote on the one in the middle in thick black strokes: "The Great Sage Equal to Heaven stopped here." Then, lighting on his cloud again, he flew back to the Buddha's hand. "Some palm! I flew three hundred thousand *li* and left my mark on a pillar there!"

"Silly monkey!" laughed the Tathagata. "What good is your magic? All you've done is take a little tour around of the palm of my hand. If you think I'm lying, here, have a look at this finger."

Puzzled, Wukong took a good look and there on the index finger of the Buddha's right hand, in letters whose ink was still wet, was written with his own brush "The Great Sage Equal to Heaven stopped here." "What's this?" he thought. Gazing up, he saw the smile on Buddha's face disappear and His eyes turn suddenly stern. They fixed Wukong in their gaze. In a twinkling the Buddha grew so large He might have swallowed heaven itself. Monkey's blood froze in his veins as the Buddha bore down on him. He frantically tried to escape the Buddha's clutches, but the Tathagata made a fist, trapping him. His five fingers turned into Five Elements Mountain, sealing Monkey inside. On the peak of that mountain He affixed a seal in gold letters, the mantra Om Mani Padme Hum. The world turned topsy-turvy, leaving Wukong trembling there in darkness so total he hardly knew himself. From that moment the world became completely strange to him. If he hungered, he swallowed grapeshot; if he thirsted, he drank molten copper. Immured within that rock, he had no choice but to wait for his sentence to end. Wukong toppled from the heights of arrogance into the depths of self-doubt. Succumbing to utter despair, he lost all sense of shame or self-regard and began to wail at the top of his lungs. When, five hundred years later, Tripitaka (who happened to be passing by

Five Elements Mountain on his way to India) peeled off the magic seal, setting Monkey free, once again Monkey wailed and wailed. This time, however, his tears were of joy. Wukong's decision to follow Tripitaka all the way to India was thus based on a joyful thankfulness. Pure though it may have been, however, that joy was also ferocious.

Buddha's capture of Monkey, who hitherto had no knowledge of good or evil, instilled in him for the first time a sense of his own limits. This great spirit (which had taken the form of an ape) needed to be locked up for half a millennium under the weight of Five Elements Mountain before he could be useful to mortals. Still, how magnificent this indomitable little Wukong seems to us now—of another order from us!

Master Tripitaka is a total mystery. He's very weak, shockingly so. The magical art of transformation is completely alien to him. If a monster attacked him on the road, he'd be snatched up in no time. Perhaps *weak* is the wrong word; rather, he lacks an instinct for self-preservation. Why, I wonder, are the three of us so drawn to this feckless little monk? (I must admit, only I think this. Monkey and Piggy are simply and unquestioningly in awe of the master.) Is it not that we are attracted to a certain tragic quality we detect in his weakness, something that we upstart monsters entirely lack? Master Tripitaka has perfect insight into the frailty and precariousness of his own place—indeed, that of all living creatures—within the grand scheme of things. What's more, he bravely seeks that which is true and beautiful in the tragic. I'm quite sure this is what we lack and the master possesses. Indeed, we're stronger than the master, and have acquired a certain facility in the art of transformation. Even should we gain this insight into the tragic nature of our place in the world, however, we could never, ever again live a true and beautiful life. The awesome power lodged within this priest's feeble body astounds us. Something so rare wrapped up in what is so weak: that, I'm sure, is the secret to his appeal. Although—and this is uncouth Piggy's spin on it—just maybe, after all, there's something homoerotic about our love for the master. At least for Monkey.

Compared to Wukong's genius for action, how inept and unworldly is Master Tripitaka! This isn't a problem, though, given the completely contrary purposes of their lives. When confronted with external difficulties, the master doesn't try to cut through them; rather, he turns inward for the answer. In other words, he mentally prepares himself to withstand hardship. He never scrambles to steel himself against any external impediment; instead his mind remains calm and undisturbed. The master has trained his mind to be happy whenever, wherever, even on the brink of death. So, it's unnecessary for him to seek any path outside himself. Which is to say, what we apprehend as his hopelessly indefensible flesh has no real impact upon his spirit. Monkey may look

exceedingly brilliant and strong, but there are still things he can't triumph over, despite his heaven-bestowed talents. Yet such things are of no concern for the master. For him, there's really nothing to overcome.

Monkey may rage, but he doesn't suffer. He knows joy, but not despair. Thus it's hardly strange that he can say yes to this life so easily. But what about Master Tripitaka? Notwithstanding his sickly body, so weak and defenseless, the master can happily affirm life, even on those days he's hounded by monsters. Isn't that amazing!

Yet, extraordinarily, Monkey is completely unaware of what makes Master Tripitaka superior to him. He only knows he can't ever leave him; why, he can't say. In his bad moods he'll sometimes imagine the only reason he keeps obeying Tripitaka is the Incantation of the Golden Vice, that magic metal band around his head, which digs into his forehead whenever he goes against the master's orders, causing excruciating pain. "What a troublesome master!" he mutters then, forced to save the monk from the clutches of yet another monster. "I can't just stand there and watch him walk into danger like this again. What's the matter with him anyway?" he thinks. At such times, it's as if he assures himself he has compassion for the weak. In fact, though, Monkey is blind to the fact that his feelings for the master likely include something all creatures share: an instinctive reverence for those who are better than they, and a yearning for what is beautiful and rare.

I have to laugh too that the master has no notion of his superiority over Monkey. Every time he's plucked from danger, Master Tripitaka pours out his tearful gratitude to Wukong. "Why, if you hadn't saved me, I'd have been a goner!" he cries. Yet even were the most terrible monster to eat him, the master still wouldn't die.

There they both are, then, clueless to the true nature of their relationship, yet each in awe of the other. (Of course, they do have their little quarrels from time to time.) Yet I've come to realize that, as antithetical as they may be, these two still share one characteristic: they both regard their lot in life as wholly inevitable. But for them, that sense of inevitability is freedom itself. Diamond and coal are made of the same substance, I've been told; but what intrigues me about Monkey and Master Tripitaka is that their responses to life—more different even than diamonds and coal—are founded on a common understanding of reality. If it's not this "equivalence of necessity with freedom" that makes these two geniuses, then what could it be?

It's truly funny how different the three of us—Monkey, Piggy, and I—are. When night falls and we've got no place to stay and talk comes down to whether or not we sleep in some ruined temple along the way, we always end up agreeing, but for completely

different reasons. Wukong will propose we stay the night there because a derelict temple is a perfect place to encounter monsters. Piggy, feeling it too bothersome to look any further, will say, "Let's go inside, have dinner and get some sleep!" While I think, "These parts are sure to be filled with evil spirits. Still, we're bound to run into trouble anywhere we stay, so we might as well pick this spot as any other." Could any three animals be more different than us? Nothing is so fascinating as how different creatures can coexist.

Compared to Monkey's flamboyance, there's no doubt something lackluster about Pig of the Eight Precepts. Even so, he's got his qualities. After all is said and done, he's a fellow in love with life. His every sense—smell, taste, touch—is obsessed with the world. "Why are we headed to India?" Pig asked me one day. "Is it so that we'll accumulate good karma and be reborn in paradise? And what sort of place is this paradise, anyway? What's the point of bobbing around on top of some lotus? Can I still enjoy blowing the steam off a hot bowl of broth before I scarf it down or stuff my cheeks with crackling crunchy from the fire? If you expect me to survive sucking on mist like some kind of Taoist immortal, then no way! Forget it! Heaven ain't for me! This world's just fine, 'cause there's always enough pleasure to make you forget about stuff, no matter how bad it gets. At least for me there is." So saying, Eight Precepts rattled off a list of all the things he liked most about this world: a summer siesta under a shady tree; a dip in a cool brook; playing the flute by moonlight; sleeping in on a spring morning; chewing the fat round a winter fire. . . . So many pleasures, and all related with such relish! When he extolled the beauty of a young woman's body or the taste of seasonal delicacies, I felt he'd never run out of words, even if time came to an end. I was bowled over. Never had I dreamed there could be so many pleasures in this world, or anyone who savored them so fully. Aha, thought I, it takes talent to enjoy oneself. Once I realized that, my scorn for the pig disappeared. Yet now that I've had ample occasion to chat with Piggy, I've glimpsed something weird and off-putting about his hedonism. For all his griping that "if it weren't for my respect for Master Tripitaka, or my fear of Monkey, I'd have walked out on this terrible expedition long ago!"—indeed, lurking under all his hedonism—I detect the trepidation of a creature walking on thin ice. There is on this journey to India a thread to which we—even the pig, even myself—all clung, a single strand that has led us through extreme disillusionment and despair. Of that I'm sure.

But let me not obsess over this pig's epicureanism. What's essential right now is to learn as much as I can from Monkey; I've no time to reflect on other matters. Master Tripitaka's wisdom, Piggy's pleasures—those are for when I've graduated from the

School of Wukong. I still feel I've hardly learned a stitch from him. Have I evolved since I emerged from the waters of the Sandy Stream? Why, I'm just like Old A-Meng from Wu in the story![2] My only role on this trip seems to be keeping Monkey in line when things are quiet and chastising Piggy for being lazy. Doesn't that pretty much cover it? I've nothing more to contribute! Wherever or whenever we're born, when all is said and done folks like me end up as mere observers, counselors, regulators. Isn't that so? Can't we ever be the heroes of our own tales?

As I watch Monkey, I can't help but reflect that a flame never thinks to itself, "I'm burning!" If it thought it was burning, it'd never really be on fire! Watching the wild abandon and magnanimity with which he carries out his exploits, I realize that a free act requires that some *thing* inside has no choice but to ripen till it manifests itself of its own free will. Yet I merely think that way. I haven't managed to take a single step in the direction Wukong is headed. "Learn! I've got to learn!" I tell myself, but Monkey possesses a grandeur far beyond my reach, and a roughness (which I can only call "Wukongian") that's so terrifying I'm loath to draw any closer to him. To be perfectly frank, however you look at it, Monkey's not the sort of guy to chum around with. He gives no consideration to your feelings when he lays into you. I can't stand how he demands everyone meet his standards of excellence, and since no one ever can, he just keeps yelling. You might say he's blind to his extraordinary talents. I know he's without malice, but he's unable to grasp the limitations of those who are weaker and, what's more, since he has no sympathy for a weakling's skittishness, vacillation, or ennui (all of which drive him crazy), he ends up throwing a fit. Yet when our gormlessness doesn't make him angry, he's like an innocent child, as sweet natured as could be. Piggy's always getting scolded for sleeping in, for his laziness, his metamorphic blunders. I don't make Wukong so mad because I've managed to keep a respectful distance and never let my guard down. Yet that means there's no way I'll ever learn from him. However much his uncouthness grates on my nerves, I'll just have to let myself be yelled at and mocked, beaten even, and then stand up and give him a taste of his own medicine. Then maybe I'll learn. I'm not going to gain anything by admiring the fellow from afar.

It's night. Only I can't seem to sleep.

Tonight we couldn't find a place to stay, so the four of us bunked down on a bed of grass under a tree in a ravine deep in the mountains. Monkey is sleeping one over from me, and the valley is ringing with the echo of his snores, which shake little showers of

2. "The Tale of Lü Meng" in *The Book of Wu* features a character whose knowledge for a long time never progresses beyond basic strategy; when it finally does, he is praised by a general who says "you're no longer the A-Meng from Wu I used to know.".

dew off the leaves overhead. It may be summer, but night in these mountains is chilly. It's past midnight now, I'm sure. Lying on my back, I've been looking for some time at the stars poking through the leaves above. I'm lonely, oh so lonely. Why, I don't know. I feel as if I were standing all alone on one of those desolate stars up there, looking out at a world of night—black, cold, empty. I've never liked stars—they make me think of eternity or infinity—but since I'm lying on my back I've got no choice but to look at them, even if I don't want to. Next to this big pale bluish star, there's a little red one. Far below, another star with a rather warm and yellowish sheen blinks through the swaying leaves. A shooting star leaves its trail, then disappears. Why, I can't say, but at that moment I suddenly recall Master Tripitaka's gaze, so calm and lonesome. His eyes always seem fixed on the distance and filled with compassion. Compassion for what? Normally I wouldn't have a clue, but tonight it dawns on me. The master's gazing at eternity. And at the fate of each and every thing in this world, cast against that eternity. Eyes filled with mercy, the master looks straight at love and wisdom and any number of other blessings that, for all our inevitable annihilation, send forth sweet blossoms here on earth. Somehow, the stars make me feel that way. Getting up, I go peer at the master's face. As I study that peaceful sleeping face and listen to his soft breathing, I feel a warm flame igniting somewhere deep inside my breast.

THREE STORIES

BARRY
YOURGRAU

SONG

In the small hours before dawn a killer moves along through the crabbed alleys of the entertainment quarter. He's on his way to carry out an assignment. He passes under the last neon signs still lit; their lurid greens and purples glint and gleam on the puddled pavement. It rained for a while around midnight. Dead to the world, lone drunks lie where they sank down against the walls.

The killer wears a stylish trench coat with the collar turned up past his chin. A hat angles nattily low over his eyes. He fiddles in his pocket with the lethal loop of bright metal cord which he'll be employing shortly. Coming by a large darkened shop-front window, he slows. He halts a moment. Personal vanity is common in his line of work. The killer regards his image expressionlessly. He adjusts a wing of his collar in the silence of the predawn. Then the silence gives way. The killer lowers his head and turns slightly. He listens.

Somewhere, behind one of the inert windows, a woman's voice is softly singing. The song is an old one, famously lovely . . . a call to new love . . . tenderness . . . the beauty of life even as it passes. With grace and simplicity the voice sings, so its words are disclosed like beads of rain unprotected and trembling on a green leaf.

The killer stands there in the dim rainy alley, motionless under the late-lit neon, and the transcendent melody floats in the air about him. When it's done, he doesn't move right away. Then he turns his head in the direction where the song came from. Then his attention returns to the dark glass. He readjusts his collar.

He strolls on his way, whistling the tune for a moment. Then silence. The inert drunks lie in their sodden sleep. His hand feels the lethal cord in his pocket.

Note: These stories were written and translated for the Japanese version of *Monkey Business*, whose pages commonly contain as much translated as Japanese literature.

THE OLD WAY

As a gesture to tradition, two feuding gangsters decide to settle their hostilities in the old way.

Their honorable encounter takes place amid blossoms in a flowering peach orchard. The elder gangsters gather around; colored pennants flutter, staking the space.

Out the combatants come bounding, twenty yards apart, not a little self-conscious in their long decorated gowns belted with a ritual sash. The fat one of the two wields a tasseled pole, at the top of which gleams a great curved ominous blade. Flushed and perspiring, he rises up on the toes of his plump red slippers. He stamps the butt of the pole on the ground twice. The elder gangsters murmur in approval. The fat man's rival, grim and gaunt with a vicious scar on his dark face, bears a ribboned pole; at the end of it a fine-wrought ax blade glints. He swallows hard and rises on his slippered toes, heels together. He flings one hand up in the air. A lone finger points skyward. The elders exchange a nod. Then he clutches his pole with both hands and twirls it, like you would twirl a plate, so the ribbons whirl in a festive blur. Approving murmurs rise again.

A ceremonial drum starts up a slow inexorable tattoo.

Robe flapping, the fat man commences, leaping heavily toward his scar-faced opponent. As he passes him he slashes out with his pole. He lurches to a halt several yards beyond. He plants the pole and lifts a heavy leg, wobbling, straight out behind.

Blood pours from the side of Scarface's head. His ear lies on the grass.

Elderly hands break into a soft spray of applause.

Scarface trembles and flinches, silent, as required. Then he jumps straight upward, scissoring his feet. He whirls forward in blood-spattering arcs. His ax blade flashes as he passes the fat man. Applause chases him as he continues whirling on, up to a peach tree, where he spins to a stop. He snaps off a blossom, thrusts it in his teeth, and points a finger at the heavens.

Applause flares at this tour de force.

The fat man blinks at the severed half a hand on the turf. Blood gushes from his shorn extremity over the skirts of his robe. He gasps, then somehow, laughs. He charges forward, wielding his pole with gory awkward intensity. At the last moment he lunges into a fencer's stiff-legged thrust. His curved blade sweeps clumsily across the midriff of the other gangster's robe.

The peach blossom falls from Scarface's teeth to the ground. The elders clap in admiration. The inexorable drum beats on. Scarface sinks to his knees, ashen, one

hand clutching at the loosened disorder of his guts. He hacks out with his poled ax blade, then slumps over onto his side. A slippered foot stretches out feebly behind him, toes pointed.

The fat gangster topples backward onto the grass. The bottom part of one leg stands by itself, pulsing crimson.

The applause rises over the gory scene, the combatants' unstifled moans now mingling with it. There is some last mutilated stirring left, some twitches of attempted combat. But quite soon, there is nothing.

The drum carries on its one note dirge. Peach blossoms wobble in the humid breeze. The pennants lift. The elders nod to each other, satisfied, and sigh. Their harsh wrinkled hands, pink from clapping, smooth and pat the silken finery of their robes (which they rarely have opportunity to wear) as they move off through the orchard, murmuring, savoring the details of this admirable observance of tradition by earnest and respectful participants.

Suddenly one of them turns and comes hurrying back to the drummer to give him his gratuity. The drummer accepts the decorated envelope with both hands. He bows rapidly, many times, eyes suitably downcast.

Then he carefully packs up the drum in its beautiful case.

BOUGAINVILLEA

A hoodlum takes a vacation, much needed. Down where it's hot all the time and the waves roll in and flop below a curved swimming pool. The sea breeze flaps the skirts of the café tablecloths.

In a bar, the hoodlum overhears something about a local operation that's turning quite a profit. So, even though he's on holiday, he ambles along one night out to a certain beach. From the cover of some ratty palms he watches small motorboats creep in, idling low, as flashlights wink back and forth like fireflies. He sees the dark bulks of trucks, headlights off. He scratches his chin, nodding in cool appreciation.

A couple of questions here and there, and he's calling unannounced on a certain bungalow draped in a riot of bougainvillea in a run-down flowery neighborhood. He is led into a room in the rear. A man with a long slick ponytail at the back of his head and a frosted zigzag in the front stares up at him from a flimsy table. He wears a cheap yellow T-shirt advertising a Scandinavian vodka. Like a tourist. But under one of his eyes

is a tiny tattoo; his eyes are slanted, Indian, bloodshot.

Blank, waiting.

The hoodlum introduces himself in a cordial but pointed way. He mentions, for a light touch, that he's enjoying his vacation. He compliments the local operation. He explains the good news that it will now have a silent, appreciative, and very powerful partner from across the border. He invokes the symbol of big-time power by patting the armpit of his jacket. And he smiles.

In the oily light the man with the ponytail stares back at him. Silent. Then he leans forward and props his tilted head slowly in his hand, and he smiles too, slightly, showing a glint of dental gold.

The hoodlum is accompanied back to his hotel room. He keeps his gun. But the local operation retain his little finger, which they've chopped off. *Confiscado* is the expression.

With his bloody bandaged hand in his lap, the wincing hoodlum makes a long-distance phone call, grunting and gritting his teeth as he talks. He hangs up and rolls away on his unmade bed, cursing vengefully.

Fourteen hours later a car from up north roars up to the hotel after driving all night. Five of the hoodlum's associates gather with him in his room. They hear the full account of the outrage, and then they decide exactly what to do about it. What's to be done is simple, of course. They simply unpack their bags. Out come shotguns, semiautomatics, more shotguns—serious firepower from a powerful organization that has been symbolically and palpably offended.

The group from up north check their arsenal, and then climb into the car without more to-do and head out to a certain neighborhood with its stinking dirt sidewalks and sprawling bougainvillea.

Under the muggy stars, a lone faint light shows behind the window shade at the front of the bungalow. Music spills from somewhere toward the back. The hoodlum vigilantes get out with tactical caution. They line up, and at a head nod, trot across the rutted street, crouching low. At the front door the vacationing hoodlum bangs with his gun butt. Then he stands back and a hailstorm of gunfire blasts the door off its hinges.

The crew burst into the bungalow, keeping up their barrage. They unleash a veritable hurricane of booming and gun smoke in all directions. Whereupon the floor caves in under them.

Glossy-haired stony faces peer down from the edge of the pit. Each unblinking face is positioned over the barrel of a cocked gun. The man with the frosted zigzag and the

ponytail pokes the beam of a flashlight back and forth over the occupants of the pit.

The hoodlums regroup in their hotel room. They have their guns still, but now each of them has a bandaged hand. More *confiscado*. The vacationing hoodlum is missing a second finger. He takes up the phone to make another wincing long-distance call, but one of his associates bats it out of his hand.

"We'll take care of this," he hisses. Offended big-time honor stating its credo.

The six hoodlums sit grunting and gritting their teeth as they press fresh shells into their weapons. Someone curses the annoying breeze flapping the window blinds. He throws a glass, smashing the pane. Then he swallows from the bottle they're passing around. They all look at each other, teeth drawn in fury and pain. They climb back into their car.

This time after they pull up near the bungalow, they open the trunk silently and fill empty beer bottles from a jerrican of gas. They cram rags into the necks, like crude party favors. Four of them creep into the darkness around the side to behind the bungalow. The other two clumsily light the bottles and rush forward and heave them through the front window. They scurry around to join the others.

Explosions, leaping flames. In the back the hoodlums crouch in bloodthirsty readiness to ambush the bungalow occupants as they come charging out, away from the flames, guns roaring in disarray.

No one shows.

After a while the ambushers rise up and peer, perplexed. The big yucca fronds behind them clatter all at once. The cold metal of gun barrels presses the backs of the hoodlums' heads. The whole grouping, northerners and locals, remain in tableau for a considerable amount of time, staring at the bungalow burning down, under its tumults of bougainvillea.

Later, the smoke-blackened hoodlums gather again in the hotel room. They hunch forward in humiliated rage and fresh agony. Still clutching their weapons, each one has a bloody towel around his foot. Little toes *confiscado*. Their eyes lock on the phone, briefly. They curse it. The phone stays untouched.

"Whatever it takes, however long it takes," grunts the vacationing hoodlum, amid the bloody welter. *"Teach 'em a lesson."*

His harsh simplicity throbs through the group. They represent, after all, the Big Time. They will take care of these greasy nobodies, these backwater *punks*. Someone even laughs, a bloody ghoulish little laugh at how fate is playing out its hand. "Some holiday, huh?" he jokes to the vacationing hoodlum. The room erupts in a spasm of

quaking laughter, ashen-faced and in medical shock. Someone spills cartridges on the floor. Laboriously he picks them up. Another wisecrack, another squealing uproar of laughter. Then silence, save for the slow arts-and-crafts clicking of men reloading. And then a darker silence, as the dynamite is unpacked.

In back of the charred bungalow in the zone of many flowers, a tarpaulin has been rigged on poles for a makeshift tent. Lanterns stand on the scraggly earth, and the door of the small rough pink-washed garage at the rear of this area is open. The man with the zigzag and the ponytail sits there in a plastic chair, counting his layer cakes of dollars. Everything in dollars. Later, the tarpaulin and the lanterns will be blown to pieces. . . .

But the small garage is sturdy and pretty much impregnable. The great earthen jar, traditionally for storing crude cactus beer, will still sit on the floor in there, undamaged and reeking. The load of *confiscado* in its bloody water will build higher and higher. So that the locals will wave their hands in front of their noses when they come near it, and make grimacing jokes of their own. And every once in a while the man with the zigzag and the ponytail will lean over and spit slowly into the bloody jar.

translated by Ted Goossen

THE TALE OF THE HOUSE OF PHYSICS

YŌKO OGAWA

On my last day at the publishing house, I jotted down the authors' names and titles of the many volumes I had edited during my thirty-two years as a book editor. This was no exercise in self-congratulation—a "Gosh, look how much I got done!" kind of thing. Rather, quite on the spur of the moment, I listed the names and titles as they came back to me on the back of the thick brown manila envelope I'd just received (filled with complicated documents concerning my pension and health insurance plans as well as membership information from the retirees' association, the Auditory Hallucination Club). Yet I must confess that as I sat alone in my study that evening reflecting on the career I had just safely concluded, surrounded by piles of books that had overflowed their shelves, I did grow rather sentimental.

Once I started making the list, I was amazed at how smoothly the individual books came back to me. If I wasn't sure about something a quick glance at my notebooks was all it took to set me straight. Strangely, the writers and poets I remembered most vividly were those who had died long before, or had disappeared, or had broken off with me over some trivial misunderstanding. The conversations we had shared, their gestures, how they held their liquor, their voice on the phone, their red-inked edits on the galleys. And with those things arose a clear image of the books themselves, from their design to their covers to the blurbs on their bellybands. All now duly inscribed on the back of my manila envelope.

I was not someone whose name ever inspired adjectives like *popular*, *gifted*, or *dynamic*. Indeed, I was worlds removed from editors who tend a flock of best-selling authors while orchestrating brilliant debuts for their up-and-coming talent. No, my redeeming points were my steadiness and my dogged determination—apart from those, I had nothing to be especially proud of.

Although most of my writers were strangers to the best-seller lists, their aims were high. The fact that these aims went largely unrecognized, however, left them prone to bouts of lethargy and despair. Whenever I saw them being sucked down into that silent swamp, it was my role to send them the message that everything was fine, that they were heading in the right direction, and that there was nothing to worry about. My unspoken message was: If you give up now, your work will never see the light of day.

There are editors who stand as beacons to light the way for writers to follow. And others who lash their wrists to those of their writers to lead them like sightless runners in a long-distance race. The role that I took upon myself, I must confess, was far less ambitious. My chief fear was that I would become a hindrance to my writers' work. Sometimes that scared me even more than a misprint on the cover.

"Don't get in the way" was the watchword that defined my career as an editor. The more deeply I admired a writer, the more care I took not to draw too close: rather, I occupied the most inconspicuous corner I could find. Yet that corner had to possess a secret path to their inner ear for me to fulfill my primary responsibility. My challenge was to discover how to access that path, so that my whispers would rise to my author's mind like drops of water carrying nutrients from the soil through the capillaries to the pistil of a plant. If I could but secure that conduit, then he or she would apprehend my words of reassurance as if they came not from me but from within themselves, and thus be emboldened to pick up their pen to write the first line.

My list of books quickly surpassed a hundred volumes, crowding the back of the manila envelope. The familiar books surrounding me became even quieter; the darkness outside my window (I had neglected to draw the curtains) deepened. Strewn about my desk were the objects that had fallen out of my notebooks—business cards, illegible notes to myself, color chips from the design department.

When I bid farewell to my writers I always watched them until they disappeared from sight, whether their mode of departure was taxi, elevator, or train. This did not stem so much from social etiquette as it did from my compulsion to study their retreating backs. Those who live by the pen, an instrument so fragile it can be snapped by the slightest pressure, are themselves equally vulnerable; yet that vulnerability can only be perceived when one views their departure from the rear. This is as true for the first-time novelist as it is for the literary lion.

I loved to watch them as they walked away, though my shoulders might be soaking in a sudden shower or my body crying out with fatigue in the dim, predawn light. Their postures revealed the depth of their fragility, which I could then take in my hands and

read, as one might a holy book. I think I was not bidding them farewell so much as I was praying for them. Praying that the weight of their burden would not drive them to their knees and send the pen flying from their hands.

To be honest, some writers made me want to direct a curse in their direction, not a prayer. More than a few times I was forced to ponder how someone who wrote such a beautiful novel could be such a jerk. In our profession, however, a writer's character lies outside the scope of an editor's responsibility—in baseball terms, it is not our ball to play. I at least stuck to that policy. When a writer of mine wrote a book that delighted its readers, I was able to love it unconditionally, however nasty its author might be. Even then I could offer up a prayer to his or her back upon parting.

By now my list filled the back of the manila envelope. Title–author's name; title–author's name; title–author's name—just a succession of meaningless signs to an outsider, perhaps, but to me a sequence of lyric poems bestowed by a whole raft of writers.

When I reached the end, I checked for omissions and fixed any characters I had miswritten or left out. Finally, to give my list some added panache, I affixed small black circles before each entry. When I was all done, I went back to the space I had left at the very top of the list and added a single line, the name of the very first book I ever edited:

• *The Tale of the House of Physics* (author's name unknown)

Directly across the laneway from the house where I grew up sat an antiquated building called the Information Management Office of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Particle Physics. Despite the imposing sign affixed to the brick columns of its gate, its days as a functioning administrative office were long past. Indeed, moss and mold had so deformed the characters on the sign they could barely be made out. No one in our neighborhood had the foggiest notion of what purpose the place had served.

It was a Western building totally out of synch with the rest of the neighborhood, built in a style that might be called colonial, and made all the more strange by its green but riotously unkempt tree-shaded garden. If one looked closely at the features of the building—the gambrel roof curving gracefully to the eaves, the clapboard walls painted white to reflect the green of the trees, the scalloped arch framing an entranceway that bathed the front porch in quiet shadow—one could see it had once been a magnificent structure, but long years of neglect had left all that beauty in disarray. Vines ate away at the roof's curves, peeled paint created a weird patchwork on the walls, and the porch housed countless bats, who emerged at dusk to fly about the garden, squeaking their disapproval. The hanging wisteria had once been so thick that the wind never ruffled

its petals, and so heavy that the trellis had finally collapsed; the pungent fumes from the fermenting algae in the garden pond grew so worrisome one summer that the fire department had been called in to investigate.

People in the neighborhood feared and hated what they called the House of Physics. Yet, although they found it creepy, they always mentioned it when giving directions to their homes from the train station, for it was a most convenient landmark.

The House of Physics was home to one person, a single woman. No one believed she was there legally, but neither were they about to snitch on her to city hall (things were more laid-back in those days), and since the rightful owners had never complained, the situation was allowed to continue in its ambiguous state.

The woman was rail thin with long arms and legs, two braids that hung past her waist, and thick eyeglasses. Whatever the season, she wore a thin dress and sandals on her bare feet. She seemed strongly averse to people, for when she walked to the market near the station she always hugged the far side of the lane, teetering precariously on the curb above the gutter like a gymnast on a balance beam. With her arms waving to keep herself from falling and her two braids bouncing up and down, it looked as if she had four arms.

She was constantly muttering to herself under her breath, so people did their best to stay out of her way. She pointed to whatever she wanted to buy, and if someone tried to direct a kind word to her all they received in reply was a stream of meaningless babble. To avoid meeting anyone's gaze the eyes behind the glasses were constantly moving, looking for a safe place to rest. In those days, every community had its resident pariah, an outcast despised by all, and she was certainly ours.

No one knew her name, or why and from where she had come. There was no shortage of wild theories, though, when the local women gathered to gossip. Some said she had been a girl Friday at the Research Institute, others said, no, she was actually the daughter of the university administrator who had once run the place, while still others scoffed, saying that she was nothing more than a homeless vagrant.

Yet there was a side to the woman from the House of Physics grown-ups never saw. When talking with my friends and me, she spent most of the time bragging about herself. True, her boasts were so transparent even we could see right through them, but, unlike her babble, they were at least framed in proper sentences.

"I used to be a writer," she told us in a voice made hoarse by incessant muttering.

"What the heck is that?"

There could have been no more fun place for us than the House of Physics. We

played our war games in the garden until we grew tired, then hung out on the steps at the entranceway. This usually drew the woman out to join us to indulge in her habitual bragging.

"A writer is someone who writes books. Don't you know that much?"

We all responded to her challenge.

"Sure we do."

"Yeah."

"We learn all that stuff in school."

Just as the garden was the perfect place to play, the woman was the perfect playmate—or, if you can excuse the cruelty of the expression, the perfect toy. A peculiar, unpredictable toy that would cause no repercussions later.

"Now pay attention. Some writers write novels. Novels, get it? That's what a novelist is. Someone like me."

The woman thumped her flat chest with her hand. Yet even then her eyes would not meet ours. We could see the hollow of her breastbone through the sagging neck of her dress. The legs draped over the porch steps were covered with scabs.

"Writers are great, aren't they? What's so great about you?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"Sounds like a big fib to me."

We knocked bats down from the porch ceiling with sticks, clambered up the downspout, swung pond weeds over our heads. If one of us was hurling chestnuts against the roof, another was yanking on the woman's long braids, which were so caked with grease and dirt they never came undone, no matter how hard you pulled. We behaved as badly as we could in the knowledge that, at the House of Physics, all would be forgiven. We knew the woman would never get angry with us. She was too busy bragging.

"It's not that great people become writers. It's writing important books that makes us great. Look, this is how we scoop the air . . ." she said, cupping her hands and raising them to the level of her forehead. "It looks empty, but a story is hiding there, waiting to be heard. You common people can't see or hear anything, right? But a writer is different. We know the story's there. It's just waiting for someone it can really trust to show its true form. Stories are timid, bashful things, you see."

"That looks weird—you can't write like that. You have to sit at a desk with a fountain pen."

"If you're a real writer, show us your book!"

"Yeah, bring it here and show it to us!"

"Bring it here! Bring it here!" we chanted.

"But everything was burned up in the war. Really . . . everything," she answered, her cupped hands still held high. "You can't imagine my joy when I saw my book on a bookstore shelf for the first time. Just an inch-wide bundle of paper, but it sparkled like a newborn jewel, like the crystallization of cosmic rays. Readers from far away sent piles of grateful letters. I felt your story was meant for me, they wrote, thank you so very much. But their letters all went up in flames. Where oh where have they gone?"

Just then a drop of bat shit landed squarely on the woman's outstretched palms.

"Yuck, now you've got cooties!"

"That'll teach you to tell fibs!"

"Hooray! Hooray!"

The timing had been just too perfect. Singing madly, we danced around the porch, stamped across the grounds, and exited the House of Physics. As we passed through the gate I looked back and saw the woman in the same position, her shit-smeared hands raised like a chalice to the sky.

My mother pooh-poohed me when I said the woman could speak normally. And she found the notion that she had once been a writer preposterous.

"I don't want you talking to that person!" she snapped whenever I even mentioned the woman from the House of Physics.

I was on my way home from an errand at the market near the station one day when I saw the woman passing along the narrow lane that parallels the main thoroughfare. As was her habit, she was furtively walking along the curb of the gutter on the far side of the path, but this time she was dragging a thin stalk of bamboo behind her. Then I remembered—today was Tanabata, the seventh day of the seventh month, when the Weaver Star and the Cowherd Star have their annual lovers' rendezvous in the sky. They had been giving out stalks of bamboo and rectangles of colored paper to write wishes on in the market, and the woman seldom passed up anything that was free.

The swishing of the bamboo on the ground blended in my ears with the woman's incessant mumbling. Usually her balance on the curb was superb, but this time, perhaps because she was dragging an unfamiliar object, her bony legs, no thicker than the bamboo, looked somewhat unsteady. The hem of her dress swayed in concert with the bending branches.

Just when I was about to overtake her I noticed those branches were shedding

their colored paper rectangles one after another onto the ground as she moved. I picked one up and read it.

I pray my book will appear in the bookstore.

The characters looked like a traced silhouette of the woman's spindly body. Written in a trembling, tentative hand, they drooped in sad isolation from one another. The character for "book" (本) in particular had elongated sides that resembled the woman's arm-length braids as seen from behind. The roughly cut pieces of colored paper were limp and tattered from their contact with the ground.

I pray my novel will be published.

She and I were the only people in the street. Not wishing to overtake her, I slowed my pace. A hazy moon had risen in the sky, which was dyed red by the setting sun. Our two shadows connected at her feet, forming a line that extended to the far side of the path.

I pray my book will find a reader.

The woman was having too much difficulty dragging the long stalk of bamboo to notice the loss of the paper wishes. Instead of soaring to heaven along the flowing Milky Way, her prayers fluttered briefly in the breeze, then fell to languish on the ground.

I pray I write a good novel.

I picked up the pieces of paper one by one but had no idea how to dispose of them. I couldn't throw them away, nor could I call to her to stop and hand them over, so I just silently stuffed them in my pocket. What else could I do?

The games we boys played grew even wilder with the arrival of summer vacation. The House of Physics was in its most lively season; black stag beetles battled and mayflies mated as the cicadas' shrill cries echoed throughout the garden. Plants whose seeds had blown in from elsewhere were launching a frontal attack on even the smallest spaces with their leaves, flowers, and vines. They too seemed to have cottoned on to the fact that, at the House of Physics, everything would be permitted.

The incident began with our discovery of a dead weasel in the long pampas grass next to the river. We could find no wounds on the body, but the animal had obviously died in agony. Its fur stood on end, its tail was erect and rigid, and its legs were splayed at strange angles. Its small black eyes glistened with moisture, as if staring too long at a single spot had left them ready to fall out. Maggots squirmed around their edges, trying to burrow their way inside.

We stood there at a loss for words, just looking at the weasel. It was no bigger than

a cat, but the fact it was dead made it look much larger.

"Let's bury it at the House of Physics."

I can't remember which of us said that, but the proposal met with immediate and unanimous support. We couldn't bear prolonging our silent vigil; we had to find a way—any way—to turn things in a more lively direction. For that the House of Physics was clearly the most appropriate stage.

Reinvigorated, we began putting our plans into action. To shake off the pall the weasel's carcass had cast over us, and because we were thrilled by our splendid idea, we threw ourselves into the work: one of us looked for boards for the stretcher, another set to work removing the maggots with the end of a twig, while the third ran home to fetch a shovel.

We stopped sweating when we stepped into the cool green air of the grounds of the House of Physics, where the sun's glare could never reach. The sounds of the outside world receded into the distance, replaced by the insistent presence of the plant and animal life around us. Walking quietly so as not to alert the woman to our presence, we crept through the trees and along the garden wall. The two boys whose job it was to carry the stretcher were especially vigilant, petrified that the weasel might somehow fall to the ground. It had been no easy task to get the body on the boards in the first place—since no one had been brave enough to touch it, in the end we had pushed and prodded it into place with short sticks. The woman was nowhere to be seen, all the windows either shuttered or covered with tattered curtains.

We decided the most appropriate place for the burial was beneath the collapsed wisteria trellis. The few vines that had survived there were tightly entangled, creating just the atmosphere we were looking for.

At first the dirt was soft and moist. The boy who was our leader shoveled, while the other two of us pitched in with trowels. Beneath the dead leaves and mulch, however, we ran into clay soil the color of lead, which forced us to step up our efforts. We unearthed everything imaginable—earthworms, slugs, centipedes, a chrysalis of some kind, eggs, snail shells, tree roots, seashells, teeth, bones, nails, screws, buttons . . . Yet none of us spoke. All we could hear were the sounds of pitched dirt and our increasingly ragged breathing. With no wind and the sun still high in the sky, we worked in a motionless, dappled world. Only when a bird launched itself from a tree branch did that pattern tremble momentarily. An alley cat was lying on its belly on the moss nearby—from time to time, it opened its eyes to sleepily regard us.

Intent as we were on making the hole a little deeper, then a little deeper again, we

lost track of why we were digging. None of us even glanced at the dead weasel beside us. It waited patiently, its barely attached eyes still fixed on a single point.

"Okay, that should do it!" to our relief, the boy with the shovel finally announced. We were all sweaty, but remembering the purpose of our effort excited us all over again. No one had wanted to touch the dead weasel before, but now that it was time to bury it, everyone wanted to play a part, so we picked up the makeshift stretcher together.

"One, two, three," we chanted in our grade-school English, and dumped the body into the pit. It was over all too soon, given the trouble it had taken. The weasel's eyes had sloshed out on impact—what faced the sky now were two empty hollows.

Summer vacation ended and the autumn rains began. They fell quietly but steadily, bringing a temporary truce to our war games in the House of Physics.

I don't know what made me so uneasy when I glanced at the House of Physics that day on my way home from school. But something bothered me about the place. I stood there with my back to my own house, my backpack growing wetter and wetter, staring at the garden. For a change I was alone—none of my friends were with me. The sign over the gate, the porch steps, the pond, everything was soaking wet. All that could be heard was the sound of falling rain.

When I stepped through the gate I felt the first pang of fear. My boots sank further in the mud with each step, and the dripping leaves made it seem as if the rain had picked up. I found myself tightening my grip on my umbrella. The cracked steps where the woman always sat were black with bat shit or perhaps the woman's own grime.

Then it hit me—where were the bats? They should have been hanging from the arched entranceway waiting for the sun to set, yet not one was visible.

I could feel the black goo sticking to my boots as I walked up the steps. A window beside the door was wide open, the curtains poking through. When I lifted them with my hand and peered inside, my eyes met those of the woman.

She lay on a cot wrapped in a thin blanket, and though I was just a child, I could tell she was in very bad shape. Once inside the room I could see that her face was pale and bloodless, her forehead oily with sweat, and the feet peeking out from beneath the blanket were quivering. She stared fixedly into the air as if to blink would be to invite the end. Her thick glasses lay buried in the wrinkled sheets. The only proof she was still alive was the white drool trickling down her cheek and the blood oozing from her cracked lips.

"Is something wrong?" I asked, suddenly fearful that her heart might stop at the sound of my voice. She didn't answer. The only hopeful sign was the fact that, despite her condition, her two braids had preserved their shape—they lay neatly on the blanket with not a hair out of place.

"Are you sick?"

At last she blinked, although, as always, she refused to look in my direction. Gathering my courage, I reached out to touch her forehead with the tip of one finger. At first it just seemed sticky—then the abnormal heat hit me.

The room was dark and gloomy, with high ceilings. Despite the countless times I had played in its garden, this was my first time inside the building. Its mantelpiece and doorknobs, not to mention the lattice pattern of its windowpanes, gave it a Western feel, yet vestiges of its former identity as the Information Management Office of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Particle Physics were apparent in the binder-stuffed cabinet and the massive office desk with the typewriter perched on top. Like the exterior, however, all was neglected and run down. The woman's bed occupied the center of the room, as if it had pushed everything else aside.

At any rate, I had to find some way to cool her body. I put down my backpack and looked around for a towel. A dirty-looking cloth, either a dishrag or a handkerchief, was draped over the railing of the bed. That'll do, I thought. As I reached out to grab it, however, I noticed a plate of food on the desk just beyond the typewriter.

Whatever was on the plate looked greasy and gelatinous. It smelled bad too. I could make out what appeared to be the flat, broad top of a large mushroom. It had crimson speckles. Was that because it had been cooked long ago, or was it . . . ?

"Did you eat this?" I burst out. "Couldn't you tell it was poisonous?"

Tossing the cloth away, I ran from the room and down the steps, leaving my backpack behind. This wasn't something a cool cloth could cure—I had to find help, and quickly. Immediately. With this single thought in mind, I moved too fast, tripped over a tree root, and fell so hard I lost a boot. I pitched face-first into the mud. It tasted foul, as if I had taken a bite of the mushroom.

I had fallen under the collapsed wisteria trellis, precisely where we had buried the weasel that summer. There should have been a mound there, but at some point the earth had sunk so much that I feared the weasel's rotting carcass might reveal itself. Huddled together there in the depression was a cluster of mushrooms. Mushrooms with crimson speckles on their backs.

I think the thermos bottle full of my mother's vegetable soup that I took to the House of Physics each evening thereafter was the outward manifestation of the guilt I felt. As it turned out, the incident was resolved much more neatly than I had imagined: the woman was driven to the hospital in the car owned by the head of our neighborhood association, treated, and then returned home the same day for what was determined to be nothing more than a common case of food poisoning.

I told no one the secret of the mushrooms. It was not that I feared the adults' anger. No, I think I wanted to bear sole responsibility as a kind of solitary penance for what the weasel buried in the garden had brought about. Then again, I may have felt sharing the secret with the woman would comfort her in her isolation.

"I'm leaving your soup here," I said, placing the thermos and mug on the desk next to what appeared to be donations from members of the neighborhood association: an apple, cod-liver oil tablets, a hot-water bottle, and a spoon.

"Try a mouthful of the soup," I coaxed. "It's good for you."

Day by day, the woman's condition improved. The body under the blanket was still woefully thin, but her face had regained some of its vitality, and she was able to blink normally again.

"Now let's see if your temperature's down," I said, leaning over the bed and placing a hand on her forehead. The woman went on mumbling to herself. "Good, good. Talking to yourself proves how much better you are." Her forehead was cool and dry, almost parched—the oily sweat had disappeared. "See," I said. "Your fever's gone."

She was speaking so quietly she seemed to be breathing the words. It was as if she were convinced that only if she spoke in a whisper could the message pouring from her barely parted lips reach its faraway recipient. Then it hit me—these were not incoherent ramblings at all, they had a definite meaning. The problem was they were virtually inaudible. That was why no one had ever paid attention.

I opened one of the desk drawers, pulled out a stub of a pencil and a few documents left from when the place had been a working office, and placed myself near the head of the bed, where I could barely make out what she was saying. The documents were covered with indecipherable numbers and symbols, but they were blank on the back, so taking up the pencil, I began committing her words to paper.

The story she told was like none I had encountered before. Its hero was a fragment from an expired world, a particle flung out into the universe by an exploding star. Borne on gravitational waves, he (she referred to the particle this way) had wandered through realms of darkness, slipping between stars, planets, and shooting stars. Because he was

the tiniest particle in the universe, no one knew of his presence. His lot was to pass through the cracks in the world unobserved and entirely alone. He had but one modest wish—to bump into some other entity. He spent his long nights entranced by thoughts of what that encounter might feel like. The woman described the darkness vividly: it was a place she seemed to know well, which stretched out before her very eyes. She spoke in the particle's words. Using his tiny voice.

I recorded all I could make out, although, to be honest, there were many words I didn't understand. I focused intently on her lips as the words gushed out, trying not to miss a single one. I had never written so much before; in fact, I began to worry that the pencil would wear down to nothing before I could finish. Her delivery didn't change at all with me listening. It was exactly the same as when she had dragged the bamboo stalk along the narrow lane, shedding the paper wishes. I took great care not to disrupt her rhythm with a cough or sneeze. Instinctively, I understood that recording her story meant not getting in the way.

The particle was aware he would turn into light the moment he bumped into something else. Nothing in the universe was more beautiful than that light; yet there would be no one to exclaim in wonder as it faded into nothingness. The particle was forever falling from the sky, sometimes here, other times there. Each time seeking contact with someone. The woman's story spun and circled, rolled and swelled. The particle's voyage continued on without beginning or end. On occasion, phlegm would catch in her throat and her voice would quaver. At such times, I would help her through the difficulty by whispering, "Don't worry, it's alright" in my mind. The phrase I would repeat so often in the years to come.

The trees watched us expectantly as the sun went down. The woman's glasses lay by her bedside, a distorted image of the black garden reflected on their surface. My earlobes tingled with her faint breath.

As the woman recovered, life returned to normal. We saw her walking the curb with her two braids swinging, scaring those she met with her perpetual monologue. We resumed our war games and our mockery of the woman's boasts. Yet, however absorbed I was in racing about the garden, I always froze in my tracks when I caught sight of the weasel's grave. The mushrooms were gone. And the bats too failed to return.

When I got home that night, I made a clean copy of what I had jotted down on the back of the documents, added a cardboard cover, and bound the whole thing with string. I chose the title *The Tale of the House of Physics*, carefully calculated the

precise center of the page, and then, heart pounding lest I make a mistake, wrote the six characters with a fat-tipped Magic Marker. It was a thin book, and hardly what one might call elegant, but it was a book nonetheless. The first book I ever made.

I lacked the courage to hand the book to the woman myself, so I snuck into the building when she was gone to market and placed it on the shelf in the most conspicuous place I could find. There it sat in stately grace amidst the binders, secure in its privileged position.

The woman left the House of Physics the spring I graduated from primary school. No one could tell us if she had been evicted or if she had moved by choice. Nor did anyone seem to know where she had gone. People were slow to notice she was gone, but quick to believe the rumor, totally unfounded, that she would suddenly reappear. As time passed, however, they grew used to her absence, until in the end, hardly anyone remembered she had ever existed.

I stepped inside the doors of the House of Physics only once after her disappearance. By then our season of feverish war games had already passed. The iron cot and the typewriter rested under a thick coat of dust in the same space they had occupied before. Then my eyes moved to the cabinet. Sure enough, there was a narrow but empty space where "The Tale of the House of Physics" had once stood.

I pictured the back of the woman as, like a particle, she slipped unnoticed through the cracks of the world. I recalled her sitting there with her cupped hands raised to the heavens as if to catch the particles raining down, and her wish to see their light, the most beautiful in the universe.

The Tale of the House of Physics sits close by her side. It alone will keep her company. Watching her depart, I clasp my hands in prayer.

translated by Ted Goossen

an interview with HARUKI MURAKAMI
by the novelist HIDEO FURUKAWA

PURSUING "GROWTH"

December 16, 2008, in Tokyo

WRITING FROM THE BODY

HIDEO FURUKAWA
In 2003, I published "A Slow Boat to China RMX," which could be called a cover or a remix of your short story "A Slow Boat to China," and I'd like to thank you again for giving me permission to do so.

HARUKI MURAKAMI
It was my pleasure. You know, that story was published such a long time ago it doesn't feel like it's mine anymore. In any case, it was my very first short story, and I wasn't exactly sure how to handle it. So I'm very grateful that you decided to do something with it.

HIDEO
You're being modest. You know, I've been a writer for ten years, and when I was preparing for this interview, I went back over the different ways you've influenced my career. And I concluded that your biggest impact on me has been less literary and more connected to what I see as your backbone as a writer, your determination to write "from the body." That creed helped shape me—I've been trying to put it into practice in my own way.

HARUKI
For me, "writing from the body" is really very simple. I spent my twenties running my own jazz coffee shop and bar. What with one thing and another, I was on my

feet all day, carrying heavy objects, working myself to the bone from morning till late at night. You can't get fat living like that. When I was thirty, though, my life abruptly changed: I began writing and, when things took off, closed my business, so that suddenly I was spending all day every day at my desk—a really dramatic shift for me. I knew in my heart that if I didn't do something to keep my body in shape I was in for trouble. I mean, working for hours at a desk is exhausting, isn't it?

HIDEO
It certainly is.

HARUKI
It was at that juncture that I realized I had to build up my body if I wanted to be a writer. I might manage to get by the way I was while I was young, but after ten or twenty years I'd be sure to break down physically. I've often said that, in a way, my twenties was my time of "intake." During that decade, physical work gave me a foundation that I was able to draw on later, when I instinctively felt threatened by sitting at a desk day after day. If I'd been doing desk work from the beginning I might never have sensed the risks.

HIDEO
How did you feel once you started working out?

HARUKI
Simply put, I had the feeling that when novelists let themselves get out of shape, their work suffers. That's what hit me.[1]

HIDEO
Fair enough.

HARUKI
I don't know how true it is in general terms, but that's the way I feel. You know, the flabbier you get, the less physically agile you are. When that happens, your brain becomes less agile too. It slows down. I'm talking here about the kind of

1. This might induce some people to say (or perhaps blog) that one isn't qualified to write a novel if one isn't in good shape, but that's not what I mean. My point is merely that it's always better to be aware of your physical nature, whatever that may be.

mental agility required to write novels. Of course there are flabby people who write good novels, lots of them. But physical and mental activity are linked, so if you want to keep writing over a long period of time, you have to stay in shape. When you're young, you can write using only the upper half of your body, but past a certain age, the lower half—your legs and lower abdomen—becomes more critical. You can no longer write well using just your upper half. Strengthening your lower body, though, means you can't afford any extra weight. Of course, everyone gets a bit heavier when they get older—it's only natural. Even runners like me gradually reach the point where they can't shed the pounds the way they used to. In my case, I've put on nearly three kilograms over the years.

HIDEO

Less than three kilos? That's amazing!

HARUKI

When I first started running, though, I had no long-term program in mind. It was a pure gut reaction, a sense that if I kept going the way I was I'd be in big trouble. That any extra weight had to be avoided at all costs. So I began a process of physical reconstruction: I quit smoking and started following a careful routine, which included a workout every day.

I made my literary debut when I was thirty, with *Hear the Wind Sing*, and followed that up with *Pinball, 1973*. Both received their share of critical praise, and they sold pretty well too, but if truth be told, I didn't like them all that much. The fact that neither was awarded the Akutagawa Prize raised comment in certain quarters, but I wasn't bothered in the least. It may sound conceited, but I figured it would hardly be cause for celebration if they gave me the prize for works of that caliber.

You see, I didn't write that type of novel because I wanted to—I just couldn't manage anything better. At the beginning I really didn't know what novel writing was all about. It was like throwing together a meal with only a few ingredients at hand. I knew I still wasn't very good, but I figured if I could keep it up for ten years I might be able to write something a bit more impressive, that what I had to do was somehow maintain myself as a novelist until I turned forty.

I was thirty-eight when I wrote *Norwegian Wood*, and thirty-nine when I wrote *Dance Dance Dance*. Then the tenth year came around. Looking back, I think *Norwegian Wood* may have been a turning point of sorts.

All that time I was running. I would run a full marathon once or twice a year. And as I continued running I came to the realization that, in a variety of ways, I had been a long-distance runner all my life. I may not have been blessed with explosive power, but if necessary I can keep going and going for as long as it takes. Nor do I get tired or bored if I have to repeat the same thing day after day. It must have something to do with the way my muscles are designed. As for my daily regimen, well, that comes naturally, too. I went to bed at 8:30 last night and got up at 2:00 a.m. Then I started work.

HIDEO

What time do you eat dinner?

HARUKI

Usually before 6:00 p.m. Still, waking up at 2:00 a.m. presents a certain problem. I mean, should you have a cup of coffee, or a drink? If you wake up after 3:00 a.m., then morning isn't that far away, so coffee seems the most natural thing, and if it's around 1:00 a.m., well, then a glass of wine hits the spot. But 2:00 a.m. is tricky.

HIDEO

Have you always been able to hold your liquor? Or has your ability to drink decreased with age?

HARUKI

No, that hasn't happened. I didn't drink all that much when I was young, you see. If you don't overdo it when you're young, your liver stays healthy and you can drink that much more when you're older. Those friends of mine who drank like fish early on are all more or less off the bottle now, while I can drink as much as I like.

HIDEO

How about when you were running the jazz bar? Didn't you drink then?

HARUKI

That job left me so exhausted one drink would have knocked me out. How about you?

HIDEO

I'm at the point where if I drink too much, the effects carry over into the next day. So when I'm writing a longer work I really have to watch it.

HARUKI

You know I've never had a hangover, not even one. No headaches or stiff shoulders, either. Everybody tells me how crummy you feel the day after, but I have no real understanding of what they mean.

HIDEO

I've had all of those! When I look at you, I realize the most important thing for a writer is maintaining a healthy body.

HARUKI

Yes. A healthy body inhabited by an unhealthy spirit.

HIDEO

That's the ticket. You can't write a novel of any depth unless you're able to look into that unhealthy part of yourself.

HARUKI

I think novelists have to be willing to examine their unhealthy side, those parts that are twisted, or dark, or verging on lunacy. You've got to descend into that pit, and to do that you have to be physically strong. Otherwise there's no way you can reach the very bottom. This is what I have learned over the years. As a novelist, the idea that making yourself physically healthy means you can somehow wipe away that dark side of your soul strikes me as absurd.

ON CHOOSING TO LIVE OUTSIDE OF JAPAN

HIDEO

So you followed this program of strengthening your body until you turned forty, and then around that time—the time of *Norwegian Wood* and *Dance Dance Dance*, as you said—you left Japan to pursue your writing abroad. What was it

specifically that made you take that next step and go beyond physical training to actually shift your writing base to foreign soil?

HARUKI

There were a number of reasons for the move, but the primary one was the fact that I didn't have to be in Japan any longer. I realized I could work anywhere. Just choose a place I liked, move there, and work in a more relaxed atmosphere. At that time, the literary establishment in Japan still exerted considerable influence. They had . . . how shall I put this . . . the power to lay down the law, so to speak, and if you went against them, well, they could make things pretty difficult. I get the feeling, though, that the situation has changed. Has it?

HIDEO

Yes, there's very little of that now.

HARUKI

In those days, writers, critics, and editors all belonged to groups that functioned rather like clubs. If you didn't join one of these clubs, you inevitably felt a kind of isolation. It wasn't that I was opposed to this literary establishment, but I disliked the pressure to socialize, so I kept to myself. The problem was, in their world you were either friend or foe, whereas my basic philosophy was to seek neither, which meant I ended up surrounded by almost nothing but enemies. I tried not to let this bother me, but there were still times it was hard to take. I was simply plugging away at my work and minding my own business, but for some reason I stuck out like a sore thumb.[2]

As a result, although there were no major incidents, I began to feel as if it was a waste of time and energy to keep hanging around Japan, that the air here didn't suit me, so to speak. Since I was still writing by hand at that point, I only needed a pencil and a pad of paper to work anywhere. When *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* came out, my wife and I realized that we had enough money to scrape by for about six months if we were frugal, so we just packed up and left.

2. I'm not a big fan of published dialogues with other writers or critics, or the kinds of relationships they foster. That's why I usually turn them down, which annoys some people. My only substantial dialogues so far have been with Ryū Murakami, Hiroyuki Itsuki, and Kenji Nakagami. All were done a really long time ago. The one valuable thing I took from them, I think, was the chance to read those writers' works in a concerted way.

HIDEO

Is that ability to pick up and move something you were born with?

HARUKI

No, I'm someone who prefers to stay in one place doing the same thing over and over, like a man from a race of farmers who happens to take up long-distance running—or maybe a cat. It was my wife who argued that there was no point staying in Japan; that we'd be better off in a foreign country. In a way, she lured me into leaving! At the time, it did look like it would be fun to head off to distant lands to write, but when we got there we found it wasn't nearly as easy as we'd thought.

HIDEO

I guess it was harder then than it would be now.

HARUKI

Yes, it was rough. Living in America, where they have space for foreign visitors, is one thing, but trying to set up in Europe, especially southern European countries like Italy and Greece, is another. They just don't have the kind of system that allows you to do that easily. I'd better stop there—if I got into all the difficulties we had to put up with, there'd be no end to it. Looking back, I'm still impressed I was able to produce two long novels in places like that. We had some good times too, of course.

HIDEO

Don't you feel any resistance writing in Japanese when everyone around you is speaking a different language?

HARUKI

No, it doesn't really matter if I'm in Europe or Japan. Once I've started a novel I'm so focused I don't really notice what language people are speaking around me. Japan might as well be a foreign country when I'm locked in. In that way, I'm not a very sensitive person. In fact, you could say I'm pretty oblivious to my surroundings.

HIDEO

So you wrote *Norwegian Wood* and *Dance Dance Dance* in southern Europe.

HARUKI

I wrote a few short stories as well, including "Sleep" and "TV People."

HIDEO

I saw early signs of the revolutionary change that would take place in your writing then. I thought, wow, a big shift is underway!

HARUKI

I intended *Norwegian Wood* to be a wholly realistic work, from the first line to the last. I felt confident that once I managed that, I could compete on the same playing field with the so-called realist novelists.[3] That was a big thing for me: that I could accomplish whatever I set my mind to. *Dance Dance Dance* was the fourth and last work that featured the narrator and his friend the Rat, so when I finished it I had a clear sense that a certain cycle had been brought to a close. Once I'd used my time in Greece and Italy to complete those two novels and strengthen my foundation as a writer, I needed to reach a new level. That was how I felt when I entered my forties, and I guess "Sleep" and other short stories from that period were part of the result.

HIDEO

Can we assume, then, that you were consciously preparing to take your writing to the next level with works like *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* when you were writing "Sleep," "TV People," and so forth?

HARUKI

Yes, you could say that. You know, I look back on *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* now and think how much better it could have been; yet at the time it pushed me past my limits. Of course, working to surpass one's limitations can be a good thing for a writer. On the other hand, I probably had a bit too much fun writing *Dance Dance Dance*. So I'm not without regret when it comes to both novels, but for very different reasons. Conversely, a young novelist's work

3. I totally failed to anticipate how many copies of *Norwegian Wood* would sell. Until then, my novels had sold at most 150,000 copies, and my editor and I were talking about how nice it would be if we hit 200,000 with *Wood*, but instead it turned into a huge best seller, practically a phenomenon, which I found painful. It sounds weird to talk about the emotional distress that comes from selling too many books, but you see, I'm a methodical type who likes to plan things in advance, and when my plans get messed up it bothers me. Luckily, I was living outside of Japan during most of the boom.

may be stylistically weak, or full of holes, or sluggish, or poorly balanced, but if it's written with passion and power it can win over the reader through a kind of frontal assault. In that case, what might objectively be an imbalance can become part of a novel's charm. This is the advantage young writers—by which I mean writers under forty—have over the rest of us.

HIDEO

Uh oh, I'm past forty myself. But you make an interesting point.

HARUKI

You lose your readership after forty if you don't change the way you write. If you haven't developed the desire to write something bigger and with more depth, and the technique to pull that off, your readers will gradually drift away. You know, they're pretty tough minded that way. I was terrible at times in the beginning, but by the time I turned forty I felt I had a pretty good grasp of the technical side of writing. And I was determined to turn out a more ambitious kind of novel than what I'd already written. My health was perfect. All that was left was to find a concrete story to tell. To that end, I spent time writing a number of short and medium-length works. They were like probes sent out in search of the bigger topic. Stories in the collection *TV People** were like that, as was my novella-like novel, *South of the Border, West of the Sun*. In the end, everything I picked up from those works flowed into what became *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*. So while the critics may say this or that about each, as far as I'm concerned they were all just part of a single stream.

HIDEO

It's amazing how you can pile up works of all sizes—short stories, novellas, novels, meganovels—in order to take your writing to the next level. That's been a big influence on me as well.

* Throughout Haruki refers to the Japanese short story collections of which only one, *after the quake*, has been translated in its entirety.

LIFE IN AMERICA AND *THE WIND-UP BIRD CHRONICLE*

HIDEO

You were living in the United States when you wrote *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*. Do you think the novel reflects that experience in some way?

HARUKI

Well, we left Japan for America in January of 1991, immediately after Bush the father bombed Baghdad to launch the Gulf War.

HIDEO

That's pretty symbolic, isn't it.

HARUKI

I remember how hesitant we were to go live in a country at war. To make matters worse, Princeton University is quite a conservative school, so the students there were demonstrating in support of the war, while down the road at Rutgers everybody was demonstrating against it. We thought, What a place we've come to!

Still, it was a great environment in which to work. Princeton is really just a rural New Jersey town, so there are few distractions, and the faculty housing we lived in was a very basic and cramped old house. So I focused totally on my writing and used the university facilities for running and swimming, and for library research. Since the house had no air conditioner, on summer nights when it grew too hot to sleep we would get in the car and drive around. It was a used Honda Accord with over sixty thousand miles on it, but the air conditioning worked, you see. We lived two and a half years like that. Yet I have very fond memories of the place. It's a first-rate school and full of interesting people. Great used record stores, too.

HIDEO

I get the feeling that your time at Princeton was like living at the bottom of a well, a fitting place to write *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*.

HARUKI

Yes, it felt like that. Like I'd voluntarily locked myself away in a cell. Few people had any idea who I was, and virtually no one paid any attention to me. Now my name

is quite well known, and Princeton recently awarded me an honorary doctorate, but then I was just an obscure writer. When I had a book signing at the Princeton University bookstore, I signed just fifteen books in thirty minutes![4]

HIDEO

That's two minutes per person!

HARUKI

Yes, it was pretty boring. The writer who was signing next to me had no better luck, so we ended up talking to each other the whole time.

Part of the deal at Princeton was that I would teach a one-semester class during my stay. I chose to focus my course on authors like Junnosuke Yoshiyuki, Nobuo Kojima, Shōtarō Yasuoka, and Junzō Shōno, who are collectively known as the Dai-san no Shinjin, or third wave of postwar Japanese writers. The preparation was so time consuming I had to take a break from my own writing, but it turned out to be a good change of pace. Immersing oneself in course readings for a while and then going back to one's own writing works really well, I think. And talking to young people can be stimulating too. [Haruki worked his course notes into a volume of essays in Japanese, *The Short Story: A Guide for Young Readers*.]

HIDEO

Wind-Up Bird is written with consummate skill and power. What were you thinking when you were writing it over there in America?

HARUKI

I didn't think anything at all while I was writing. Afterwards, though, I could see how much of Princeton was in the novel—the landscape, the atmosphere. I wrote the third and last volume in Massachusetts, but it's still Princeton that pops into my head when I look back. [The Japanese edition of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* appeared in three separate volumes published between 1994 and 1995.] If I had written *Wind-Up Bird* in Japan it might have been a little different. I'm not sure in what way, though.

To tell you the truth, I felt totally empty when I finished the novel, as if everything inside me had been used up. Like I feel after running a sixty-mile

4. Last year, when I went to Princeton to receive an honorary doctorate, I sat next to Quincy Jones, who was receiving a similar award for music. When we chatted, he told me with great pride that he had produced a record for Seiko Matsuda, the Japanese pop singer. Good grief, I thought, people can be proud of the strangest things. Quincy was a really nice guy, though.

marathon. While I was writing, though, I felt certain that with *Wind-Up Bird* I'd reached the level I'd been shooting for all along. That . . . how should I put this . . . I'd finally made it onto the Big Stage.

Wind-Up Bird got very mixed reviews in Japan, however, especially at first. This was probably a reaction to the huge success of *Norwegian Wood*, which had sales in the millions. It appears some critics had decided that anything by me couldn't be worth reading and were prepared to pan whatever I came out with. As you might expect, that reaction has died down, and now there's a certain critical consensus surrounding *Wind-Up Bird*, but at the time all I could do was shrug and keep my mouth shut. I had my own sense of its quality, and I believed if I waited long enough, opinion would shift. Time solves a lot of things, I guess.

HIDEO

Today, *Wind-Up Bird*'s reputation is solid. It's a bold work, a remarkable achievement. Yet the fact that it diverged so radically from your previous novels—that it left the question of where your writing might move next so wide open—must have caused your critics a good deal of concern. I think they were worried about where you might be heading, and the fact that they didn't know frustrated the hell out of them.

HARUKI

Perhaps they were more irritated than anything else. Irritated that their system was on the way out, that the Japanese literary establishment was losing the war. And one of the chief war criminals was Haruki Murakami. Perhaps it was only natural that I'd be attacked by conservatives who espoused literary realism and autobiographical fiction on the one hand, and by the self-proclaimed radical avant-garde on the other, since the direction of my writing didn't fit either program. By declining to join either group, I ended up being attacked simultaneously on two fronts!

HIDEO

The structure of the old literary establishment required that there be conservatives on one side and radicals on the other. I guess you were the man in the middle.

When you call yourself a war criminal, you're not that far off the mark. I mean, Japanese literature had reached a dead end. Somebody had to bring it down, and then you, quite unconsciously, ended up in the role of the destroyer.

Believe me, there's a whole generation of people my age and younger who are very glad you came along. Thanks to you, we've been freed from the yoke of the old system to seek out new ways of writing and of being writers.

HARUKI

But you see, I never thought strategically like that. I just wrote what I liked in the way I liked, the way that was easiest for me. Yet I was the one who took the pounding from the critics and got knocked all over the block. So your explanation doesn't really do it for me!

HIDEO

Still, if you hadn't stuck to your guns and kept on writing, your readers would have been devastated.

HARUKI

Yes, my readers were different. They really supported me. And I thank them for it. I'll always be grateful. But practically everyone else took a shot at me. It was a terribly lonely position to be in, you know. Luckily, I'm the sort of guy who doesn't mind being left on his own all that much, but it still wasn't a very pleasant experience, to put it mildly.

THE RETURN TO JAPAN AND *UNDERGROUND*

HIDEO

After finishing *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, you returned to Japan just in time for the Kobe earthquake and the Aum Shinrikyō cult's sarin gas attacks in the Tokyo subways. Your next major work was *Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche*, which took you away from fiction into the realm of nonfiction. Looking back, it's almost as if some external force had taken the path you had chosen as a writer and the course of history and synchronized them.

What made me aware of the change after *Wind-Up Bird* was the disappearance of the well image from your writing. Was that because you felt you had exhausted that motif?

HARUKI

No, it just became embarrassing to keep repeating myself. You're right, though, there are a lot of wells in my writing. I don't know what more I can say about them at this point.

HIDEO

I guess there's also the fact that your typical young reader may never have seen an actual well. They've practically disappeared from everyday life.

HARUKI

You have a point there. Still, the well in the film *Ringu* was pretty scary!

HIDEO

Yeah, *that* young readers know!

It seems to me that when the well lost its reality, something more real, the "underground," arose to take its place in your writing. I think that is the motif that really grabs people living in today's Japan, regardless of age or sex.

HARUKI

I feel personally drawn to the world beneath the ground. It seems to pop up continually in my work, like "Super-Frog Saves Tokyo."

HIDEO

I really love that story.

HARUKI

I've enjoyed tales about traveling to the center of the earth ever since I was a kid. I love exploring limestone caves, too. Wherever I am in the world, if there's a cave nearby, I head straight for it!

HIDEO

Did you plan from the outset to shift to nonfiction after *Wind-Up Bird*?

HARUKI

No, it didn't cross my mind till I was back in Japan. Until then, I had no idea what

my next step would be. All I knew was that writing *Wind-Up Bird* had left my mind a blank, and I wasn't up to starting another novel quite yet. What I wanted to do instead, I decided, was meet a lot of different people and listen to what they had to say. The idea arose quite naturally after we'd recovered from our trip home. The sarin gas attacks played a role, too. I felt I needed to plunge into that whole sequence of events, to find out what had really taken place.

When Japanese live abroad, they sometimes become very patriotic or at least "antiglobal" on their return. The writer Kafū Nagai and the critic Jun Etō probably fit in this category. Well, I'm not that type at all. On an emotional level, I came back the same guy I was when I left. I have no particular interest in questions of Japanese identity—all that convoluted talk about the Japanese nation, Japanese culture, and so forth. Still, when it came to Japan, something new had taken place inside me. It's hard to put into words—perhaps the English phrase "my people" fits it best. Not "my country" but "my people." The sense that I had returned home to them, to my place of origin. It's not a concept to me but a spontaneous kind of thing.

I think this new state of mind shaped the way I reacted to the Aum Shinrikyō gas attacks. I wanted to hear the unfiltered voices of the victims, the people who were riding the subway that morning, the voices of normal people from all walks of life. The more people, the better.

It was hard for the folks at Kodansha, my publisher, to wrap their heads around the fact that I wanted to talk to the victims of the event and in such large numbers. Did people really want to read a book like that? After all, public interest wasn't focused on the victims at that point but on the sect that carried out the attacks. That's where the news value was supposed to be. I was persistent, though; I kept bowing and pleading until at last they relented. Moreover—and this would be unthinkable under normal circumstances—they lent me two of their best researchers for a full year. I guess that was the payoff for *Norwegian Wood*'s success, a kind of reward for services rendered. Whatever the case, they approved the project. Following that, the researchers began the task of locating the victims and arranging the interviews with those who were willing to participate, so that all I had to do was the interviews themselves. This was a tremendous help. Left alone I never could have managed to carry out such a huge project.

We worked like that for a solid year. When we finished I had listened to more

than sixty people at length.[5] Believe me, it took time. And effort. Looking back, though, I'm awfully glad I did it. That year I did virtually no work as a novelist, but it was a rare and precious time for me as a human being.

HIDEO

So I guess you could call it another year of intake.

HARUKI

True. Our work involved gathering the voices of those who had suffered the attack, and those voices resonated within me long afterwards. To create *Underground*, I took those sixty-two voices one by one and turned each into a distinct monologue. As they piled up, what I guess you could call the power of the event—the spirit that inhabited that particular moment—flowed into my body until I was filled with it. I think the year I spent working on that book truly changed me. It altered how I look at people and the world, and deepened my consciousness a little as well.

So the word "intake" does fit here. But it is not the intake of material for the writing of novels. Rather, I associate it with all those things I absorbed in the course of that project. It feels as if they've become part of me at the muscular level.

HIDEO

Were you at all conscious of the structure of Truman Capote's "nonfiction novel" *In Cold Blood* when you were working on *Underground*?

HARUKI

Of course I knew of *In Cold Blood*, but I seldom thought about it. Capote's book closely follows the sequence of his personal investigations and the various situations he encountered, so you feel his presence throughout. In *Underground*, however, I strove to make myself invisible, to erase the person called Haruki Murakami altogether. I tried to empty my mind during the interviews and allow the victims' words to sink in; then, later, I would let the sentences form themselves as if the person were sitting in front of me talking. It may sound easy, but . . .

5. My regret with *Underground* is that so many of the other victims didn't have the heart to give their testimonies and so remained silent. The experience taught me how very hard it is to write a book of nonfiction in Japan. Given that difficulty, I am especially grateful to those who did participate. If the book turns out to be not just a good read but a useful primary resource for future generations, then I'll be truly happy.

HIDEO

No, actually, it sounds really difficult.

HARUKI

Some people imagine it's a piece of cake to make a book out of other people's stories, but it's not quite like that. I don't mean to brag, but it takes a lot of skill to bring together the stories of average folks in a thick book on a single theme and still engage a general readership. That whole year I kept telling myself, "You're the only one who can pull this off," to get myself through. Honestly, though, I do think I'm suited for that kind of work.

You know, I've never had a problem writing dialogue; it's descriptive passages I sweat over. I took a great deal of care to make *Underground* a book people would enjoy reading—cutting here, filling out there, moving sentences around—so that in the end each story had become an elaborate montage. Yet when I showed this painstakingly edited version to the person whose story it was for approval, their first reaction was invariably, "Yes, that's just what I said!" I found that fascinating. Of course, we had to remove anything they found objectionable before we went into print.

HIDEO

So even though you'd carved their stories up with a fine knife, they couldn't see the difference.

HARUKI

That's right. You know, the process taught me a lot. I spent the whole time learning how to write in a colloquial style, right up to the very end.

When I finally took the finished manuscript to Kodansha, though, they didn't know what to make of it. I mean there was no Haruki Murakami in the *Underground* I gave them, just the voices of a lot of other people. Not what they expected at all. Still, I was convinced that the results were what I'd been shooting for, that the book could have taken no other form. That its readers would understand what I was doing. My own novels never make me cry, but I do cry when I read *Underground*, even now. That's because I empathize with the voices of the people there. Tears aren't necessarily good, but in this case I do think they reflect a certain achievement on my part.

HIDEO

Voices like that are so delicate and short-lived. If you hadn't captured them at that point, they would have been lost. After five or ten years their tone would have changed entirely.

You talk of erasing yourself in the process of working on *Underground*. Was that at all painful?

HARUKI

Not at all. It may sound strange, but I found it pleasant, even fulfilling, in a certain sense.

HIDEO

Truman Capote tried to erase himself as well in the making of *In Cold Blood*, but he had such a strong personality it may have been more than he could manage. In fact, it seems to me that his attempt at self-erasure left him with deep, invisible wounds, which made him unable to write thereafter.

HARUKI

Underground is a completely different story. I haven't read *In Cold Blood* since high school, so I can't remember it in much detail, but I do recall that it was witnessed through Capote's eyes and written in his style. Maybe he was the type of writer who couldn't survive the act of removing himself from the picture.

ON FIRST- VERSUS THIRD-PERSON NARRATION

HIDEO

I guess this brings us back to the idea of erasing oneself as a writer, but I remember when *Sputnik Sweetheart* came out, I read the opening section and thought, wow, Haruki is finally writing in the third person. In fact, of course, that was only true for the first few pages, which begin with the line, "In the spring of her twenty-second year, Sumire fell in love for the first time in her life . . ." After that, it's all first person, but that opening leaves the strong impression that at some point you're going to produce a novel written in the third person from start to finish.

HARUKI

I've talked about this somewhere before, but the fact is I knocked off the opening section of *Sputnik Sweetheart* very quickly and stuck it in my desk drawer, where it lay for many years. Then one day I pulled it out and decided to turn it into a novel.

Still, even though that section was just a few pages long, it was the first time I'd used the third person in a sustained way, and I guess some part of me wanted to go on working in that style. But writing those few pages satisfied me for the time being, so I tossed them in my drawer . . . perhaps I was still too embarrassed to go on like that for an entire novel.

HIDEO

Embarrassed?

HARUKI

I couldn't get past the feeling that writing in the third person was like playing God—you're on top, your characters way below, and you're looking down on them saying, Okay, now I'll move this guy here and that guy there. You're in complete control. In the first person, though, you see things through your own eyes, which lets you feel a lot closer to the ground. That's why I kept writing in the first person from my debut on—it just felt so natural. To change the perspective from one novel to the next, all I had to do was alter my viewpoint a little bit. The American novels I've been translating recently—F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Raymond Chandler's *The Long Goodbye*, Truman Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, and so on—were all written in the first person as well. That kind of "first-person fiction" taught me a lot about how to write my own first-person narratives. It became very natural for me, a free and easy way to write. Like a film director, I could point my protagonist in one direction to gain one perspective, then point him in another to change the perspective accordingly. I believe this approach fit the novels I was writing, yet at the same time, I gradually began to feel a certain dissatisfaction with it; something seemed to be lacking. Maybe I just came to understand that that angle was too restrictive for the novels I wanted to write.

I think the question of whether or not to name my characters followed the

same pattern. For a long time I chose not to name them, but that made a three-way conversation impossible, right?

HIDEO

I see your point.

HARUKI

I mean, it's okay if your narrator is talking to one other person, but if a third person shows up, you're stumped. That limits what you can write, so I figured I had to start naming them. I think the shift took place around the time of *Norwegian Wood*.

HIDEO

Even before that, you played around with the name Noboru Watanabe in your collection of short stories *The Second Bakery Attack*. That foreshadowed *Norwegian Wood* in a small way.

HARUKI

Yes, Noboru Watanabe turned out to be a stepping-stone to a lot of things. It feels rude to Mizumaru-san to put it that way, though. [The character Noboru Watanabe is named after the illustrator of several volumes of Haruki's essays, who uses the pen name Mizumaru Anzai.]

HIDEO

For sure, Noboru Watanabe performed a tremendous service. Like a springboard to launch yourself skyward.

HARUKI

One of the tasks I assigned myself when I began *Norwegian Wood* was to include as many three-way conversations as possible. Did you notice how long the scenes between Nagasawa, Hatsumi, and "I" go on? I was just having so much fun writing them!

HIDEO

So I guess that helps explain the scene where the three of them eat together.

HARUKI

If I hadn't given them all names, that scene couldn't have been written. I felt like a child with a new toy. Or a teenage guitar fanatic with a new riff. I generally set myself tasks when I begin a new work—I tell myself, This time let's try this or that—and with *Norwegian Wood* it was the three-way conversation.[6]

HIDEO

I guess what you're saying is that there is a connection between naming your characters and writing in the third person.

HARUKI

Exactly. You can only clear one hurdle at a time, and in the right order. These might not have been big hurdles for someone else, but for me they were huge.

HIDEO

Nevertheless, you said that around the time of *Sputnik Sweetheart* you still found it too embarrassing to write exclusively in the third person, from God's vantage point, as it were.

HARUKI

To a degree. During that period, using the first person was still easier for me. I couldn't break away from it. *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* was basically a first-person novel, of course, but its length meant I had to vary things to prevent it from becoming narrow and monotonous, so I added Lieutenant Mamiya's story, the long letters, and so on, mobilizing every technique and perspective I could think of to add to the first-person narration. In that sense, it was a very difficult novel to write. I had just about reached the limits of first-person fiction.

HIDEO

The third volume of *Wind-Up Bird*, "The Birdcatcher," is really striking in that way. I mean, you inserted articles from the weekly tabloids, May Kasahara's letters, the whole works.

6. For the protagonist's best friend in *Norwegian Wood*, I worked hard to create a name that would be difficult to write in Chinese ideographs since I felt kanji would make his character seem too fixed. Thus, when the novel was translated into Chinese and I was asked which characters should be used, I was stumped. It seems I really gave my poor Chinese translator a headache with that one!

HARUKI

It took me until *after the quake* to finally arrive at pure third-person fiction. Five whole years after *Wind-Up Bird*. Everything takes time for me.

THE LESSONS OF *AFTER THE QUAKE* AND *SYDNEY!*

HIDEO

after the quake is a collection of linked short stories. Do you think that's why you felt you could write them in the third person, because each piece was relatively short?

HARUKI

Not exactly. Rather, since every story had a different main character, I had to give them all names and write in the third person. In other words, I forced myself into a position where I had no choice but to take the third-person route. Before I began I decided that I'd write one story every one or two weeks, that each would feature different characters who would be named, that I would write in the third person, and that the earthquake would link them all together.

HIDEO

You don't fool around, do you! There's some part of you that's like an athlete—you set up one hurdle, clear it, then set up another and clear it too.

HARUKI

Yes, I do enjoy setting tasks for myself. For *after the quake*, I holed up at the residence that Shinchō Press keeps for their writers, the Shinchō Club, and just focused on the work. At one story a week it didn't take very long to finish.

HIDEO

Isn't there supposed to be a ghost living in that building?

HARUKI

You know, I've stayed there quite a few times, but I've never seen it. That's because I go to bed early and get up early.

HIDEO

So you've already sacked out when it shows up!

HARUKI

I have seen some pretty spooky-looking editors roaming the halls, though. Well, I guess you could say I just kept to the schedule I set for myself. The lady who used to work at the club was amazed by how hard I worked—no other writer could match me, she said. For me, though, it was par for the course.

HIDEO

Did you get any special pleasure writing *after the quake* in the third person?

HARUKI

Yes, I did. It was fascinating to come up with so many different kinds of characters—men and women, old and young—one after another. The words just poured out.

HIDEO

It's true, they really are of all ages.

HARUKI

The first step is . . . how should I put this . . . to become them. The character I remember best is the woman doctor from the story "Thailand," who's at the age where she's beginning to experience hot flashes. Now of course I've never had a hot flash myself; all I can do is imagine what one might feel like. Still, I can get a pretty good idea if I try hard enough.

HIDEO

I like the part where she muses about how hard it is at her age to lose weight. Your description felt very real to me.

HARUKI

I love describing people and events I've never written about before. Working on *Underground*, where I had to develop voices for sixty-two different people, probably had a lot to do with that. When I finished *after the quake* I felt strongly that I'd written what I wanted to write. As soon as I was done, I headed to Sydney,

Australia, to write about the Olympics there. That became the basis for *Sydney!*

HIDEO

That was another wonderful book, sensitive and powerful.

HARUKI

You're embarrassing me. That book was virtually turned out on the spot. I gave myself four weeks there in Sydney to gather the material and write the text, which meant I had to produce thirty completed manuscript pages a day. Talk about setting tasks for oneself! It's no easy thing to write that much each and every day, but I did it. Didn't miss a single day.[7]

HIDEO

That's an awfully hard schedule. It seems impossible.

HARUKI

Four weeks, thirty pages a day, sometimes more. I'd e-mail what I'd written to the publisher each night, so by the end of the four weeks we had about nine hundred pages. Partway through, someone stole my computer from my hotel room, which made things even more difficult. Still, the experience made me realize how far my technique had advanced, that I could write just about whatever I wanted to. That was a big discovery. I was able to grasp that, though there would be passages I might stumble over or find difficult or painful to write, if I persisted I could find a way. It took twenty years after I started writing—until 2000—to reach that point. So it took me ten years, until *Norwegian Wood*, to be able to name my characters, and then ten more, until *Sydney!*, to nail down the feeling that I could write about almost anything.

HIDEO

Again, I can see the athlete in you at work. It's as if the acts of running and writing had merged together. For *after the quake*, you wrote a story every week

7. I used to think the Olympics was a boring waste of time, but when I saw the event with my own eyes, it surpassed anything I had imagined. Now I realize what had bored me was the way the newspapers and TV chose to cover the events. All they were interested in was how many medals were won, how moved the spectators were, and so forth. The announcers' voices bugged me, too. When you're there watching the athletes move, though, it's so quiet you can hear a pin drop most of the time. I found the experience deeply satisfying. No matter how much I watched, I never grew bored.

or two at the Shinchō Club; then for *Sydney!*, you went to Australia and sent back thirty pages a day for four weeks. I feel these works mark moments in your two decades as an athlete, points when the running and writing sides of your career were beautifully unified.

HARUKI

The flip side is that when I'm not writing, I stop completely. That alternating pattern is important for me. What I don't like is letting things drag on.

You know reporters at the Olympics are given small booths to work in. Well, I sat in mine tapping away on my iBook. That's all I did the whole time I was in Sydney. I wrote as fast as I could think. Anyhow, I came away from that process finally convinced I really knew how to write: in concrete terms, I no longer had to stop and question whether I was capable of handling a particular scene—I could go on and write whatever came into my head, even if I had no familiarity with the subject matter. If I was describing the lesbian experience of an eighteen-year-old girl, for example, I had the skill to size up what was needed and the stylistic power to pull it off. This was a huge discovery. Till then, I'd always lacked confidence in my stylistic ability. When I got back to Japan I launched into *Kafka on the Shore*.

KAFKA ON THE SHORE, *AFTER DARK*, AND LINKED SHORT STORIES AS EXERCISE

HARUKI

Kafka was the first novel where I could write almost everything I wanted: in that sense, I had no regrets when I finished it.

The central character of that novel, Kafka Tamura, is fifteen years old. I'd never created a hero that age before, so it was a new situation for me. Still, since I wrote him in the first person and called him "boku" [the casual, youthful-sounding "I" used for Haruki's early unnamed narrators], and then sent him out on all kinds of adventures, his character was pretty much an extension of my previous heroes. Nakata and Hoshino, though, were another matter. I'd never written in the third person in quite that way before, which made the experience very refreshing. There were so many discoveries, times I realized, Hey, I can do it this way too! That made writing *Kafka* very enjoyable.

HIDEO

Half of *Kafka on the Shore* is in the first-person "boku" form and the other half is in the third person, which creates an interesting kind of imbalance. Yet the novel as a whole really holds together.

HARUKI

I found swinging back and forth between Kafka Tamura's first-person "boku" and Nakata and Hoshino's third-person narratives very interesting. It felt like the balance of the novel was in a state of constant flux, tottering between the two perspectives.

Looking back over the past thirty years, I think I've been gradually moving from first to third-person fiction through a series of incremental steps. I haven't been especially conscious of this shift—rather, my body has naturally taken me in that direction. *Kafka on the Shore* was a crucial step in that process.

HIDEO

I think *Kafka* also demonstrates an extremely strong sense of place. The island of Shikoku really comes alive—that's obvious—but so does the power of a downtown Tokyo neighborhood like Nakata's home base, Nakano. It grabs you.

HARUKI

I didn't go to Shikoku before writing that part of the novel. I was worried I might have gotten something seriously wrong, so I took the night bus there after I had finished, and you know, it was virtually identical to what I'd written. Like I'd described the seacoast a certain way and, sure enough, there it was, just as I had imagined it! Pretty weird. I guess that's what they mean by synchronicity. The same sort of thing happened in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*—I wrote the sections on Nomonhan purely from imagination; then later, when I actually went there, I discovered that the place was more or less as I had described it. I was shocked—it felt as if I had been there before.

At any rate, in the ten years after I turned fifty—in other words, after *Sydney!*—my new weapon was the knowledge that I could write what I wanted the way I wanted. As a result, *Kafka on the Shore* gave me a real sense of accomplishment.

HIDEO

So that's what led you to make your next novel, *After Dark*, so experimental.

HARUKI

Right. First *Kafka*, then *After Dark*. *After Dark* was written in the third person, too. And a bit of first-person plural . . .

HIDEO

Yes, it was interesting how you blended a third-person perspective with that of the plural "we."

HARUKI

I've never told anyone this before, but I wrote *After Dark* a bit differently than my other novels. Before, I'd always written the dialogue and descriptive passages in order from start to finish. This time, though, I wrote all the dialogue first. Like a movie script, you might say.

HIDEO

Now that you mention it, it does have the feel of a film script.

HARUKI

I whipped off the dialogue, then went back and wrote the descriptions, fit them in where they belonged. I'd always wanted to try writing that way.[8]

HIDEO

That took guts! In style and substance, *After Dark* strikes me as the literary equivalent of David Lynch; it was like being dragged into the television.

HARUKI

Yes, I wrote *After Dark* as if making a movie. The kind of movie that's shot by a handheld camera, so the image is grainy and jiggles around. It was fun to write that way, but I doubt I'll ever do it again. It certainly didn't feel the same as writing a novel straight through from the beginning—the texture of the experience was different. And I don't think it would work for a longer novel—*After Dark* was okay because it was relatively short. Still I *could* use that technique again in certain situations. And it sure helped me get into the third-person mode. After all, it may have been rather short but it was still the first novel I wrote in the third person

8. I had Shibuya vaguely in mind when I wrote *After Dark*, so after I finished writing I decided to go down there in the wee hours to check the accuracy of several scenes in the book. I go to bed early, so I'd never seen that world, which turned out to be a lot scarier than I'd expected, the sort of place that's best to avoid if you can. Parts of the book draw from my experience working nights in the Kabukichō area of Shinjuku back in my student days.

from start to finish. So *After Dark* was experimental in a lot of ways.

HIDEO

So I guess we can say that it's the only one of your works that you consciously wrote as an experiment.

You completed your second collection of linked short stories, *Strange Tales from Tokyo*, a year later. Were you trying to make it different from your first collection, *after the quake*?

HARUKI

Strange Tales from Tokyo is held together by a common but loosely woven thread: all the stories are what could be called urban ghost tales and were composed with a certain freedom. Still, as with *after the quake*, I wrote them in a relatively short time while sequestered in the Shinchō Club. What are their differences? I'm not really sure.

HIDEO

Well, did you set any new challenges for yourself as in *after the quake*?

HARUKI

No, not in any specific sense.[9] The style was more or less the same. Third person, different central characters, various situations . . . Alternating between longer and shorter novels, I find material for short stories piles up. Well, maybe not material in the concrete sense—rather, it's sort of an emotional buildup. I feel like I want to sit down and devote myself to trying out various approaches, just let all that natural energy gush out. That's the main reason I write short stories.

I used to publish my stories in journals, first one here, then a while later another there, but I stopped. I just didn't like it. If I write them in a single flow, then I can feel how each story is related to the others—doing it any other way strikes me as pointless. If possible, I like to write five or six stories consecutively.

HIDEO

From one angle, perhaps not just *Strange Tales from Tokyo* but all your linked short stories could be seen as exercises leading to the writing of future, entirely third-person novels.

9. It entirely slipped my mind at the time of this interview, but I did try out a new technique when writing *Strange Tales*—I scribbled down a long list of key words at the beginning of the project and then chose three around which to build each story as I went along. I tend to forget things like that.

HARUKI

Yes, I think I wanted to go back and review, to check the techniques of third-person fiction once again from a variety of perspectives. Short stories do function like physical exercises for me. Of course they're fun, but even more important, they help me reacquaint myself with a different set of muscles that I can develop to fit my needs, kind of like a testing ground for my new weapons.

HIDEO

But the story "The Kidney-Shaped Stone That Moves Every Day" from *Strange Tales from Tokyo* might properly be called a prequel to "Honey Pie," one of the stories from *after the quake*, given that it features the same central character, Junpei. What are we to make of something like that?

HARUKI

What was that first story? Sorry, I don't remember it. The problem is I never go back and read anything once it's published. So when people ask me about my work, it puts me in a real bind. "Honey Pie" is a little clearer in my mind. There's a little girl in it, right? That story resembles my early fiction—I guess I feel like going back to that world every so often. Afraid I can't remember much more than that, though.

HIDEO

You've just reminded me, when Junpei vows to write "a different kind of novel" at the end of "Honey Pie," it mirrors the conclusion of *Dance Dance Dance* in the Dolphin Hotel, when "boku" decides to write a novel. Yet the texture of "Honey Pie" and "The Kidney-Shaped Stone" isn't like that of your early novels; it's softer and filled with the flavor of real lives being lived by real people. My sense is writing in the third person allowed you to make that shift.

HARUKI

Yes, I probably would have written "Honey Pie" in the first person if I had written it back then. Maybe I don't write like that anymore because now that I'm older, a part of me says, I don't think like that now or I don't look at things that way now. If I wrote a young character in the first person I would just be lying to myself, and I don't want to do that.

Recently, I've been rereading the works of one of the founders of modern Japanese literature, Sōseki Natsume (1867–1916).[10] You know he wrote his first major novel, *Sanshirō*, in 1908 and his last, *Light and Darkness*, in 1916. Yet just look at the amazing variety of novels he wrote during those intervening eight years. If I dare compare myself to him, there's no way I could write the equivalent of *Sanshirō* at this stage. Still, I guess that's only natural.

HIDEO

The changes Sōseki's novels went through in that short span paralleled the rapid maturation that was taking place in Japan as a whole. So I guess he just reflected the context of his times.

HARUKI

I don't know the historical context that well, but it strikes me that Sōseki's writing evolved so quickly because he lived so intensely. We could say he packed a whole lifetime into a few years, or that time was different for him than for normal people. Either way, it's easy to see why his ulcers were so bad. I've been writing for thirty years, so my evolution is smoother and more gradual.

AFTER 9/11: LIVING IN A CHAOTIC WORLD

HIDEO

Still, when I look at the trajectory of your output over just the last twenty years, I can see you grappling with events taking place inside and outside of Japan. Change may have been more rapid in Sōseki's era, but history has been evolving in a very compressed way recently, and your fiction has been evolving right along with it.

HARUKI

I don't know if my writing is linked to history in the way you suggest, but it is true that my books have gained popularity abroad since the end of the cold war, when

10. Jay Rubin (who has translated many of my works) recently did a new translation of *Sanshirō* for Penguin. Since I'd agreed to write an introduction, I threw myself into rereading Sōseki's novels. It had been a long time since I had read his works in a concerted way, and I found I really enjoyed them, especially his skill at portraying minor characters. Yet I still don't like *Kokoro*, one of his most famous novels, though I have read it several times.

the old global system collapsed and a kind of chaos began to emerge. For some reason my literature seems to fit well with that chaos. On the other hand, if there were an established system firmly in place, I might not be so well received.

HIDEO

Not long after the cold war structure came tumbling down, the Kobe earthquake and the Aum cult subway gassings occurred in Japan, and then 9/11 in the United States. Those events were truly chaotic—they're the symbols of the current era.

HARUKI

The last few times I've visited the United States I've come away with the feeling that a certain kind of reality is rapidly disappearing from this world of ours. Think about it: a few terrorists hijacked two big jets and wiped out the World Trade Center. Both skyscrapers totally gone, just like that. However you think about it, it doesn't seem possible. It taxes our imagination, yet it really happened. In that sense—leaving aside the issue of good and evil—it was almost like a supernatural event. An event that took place in downtown New York before the eyes of so many people, killing thousands in a single stroke, turning the global system, indeed the whole course of history, on its head. It's hard to swallow something like 9/11, to accept that it really happened. We just can't digest the concrete reality of it. That's the impression I get. It was too sudden and unexpected.

HIDEO

The pictures were just too stunning.

HARUKI

No question about it. This may sound bad, but frankly their beauty and clarity were almost surreal. When I talk to Americans today I feel they're experiencing a certain sense of loss, a fear that the ground beneath their feet is no longer solid, that the world they live in is not the real world at all. That reality itself may have been lost.

Had 9/11 never taken place, we would all be living in a different world. A saner, likely better world. That world would be a lot more natural for most people than the one we are in. But 9/11 actually happened, and the world turned out the way it has. This is where we have to live—we have no choice. To put it another way, the

actual world today has less reality than the worlds of fiction and supposition. We are living, so to speak, in the wrong world. This is bound to have a huge impact on our spiritual selves.

A lot of Americans are avidly reading my novels these days, especially young people. As I mentioned earlier, when I had a book signing in 1991 only fifteen people showed up in an hour, but if I had the same event today there'd be thousands. This makes me happy of course, but when I stop and ask myself what's changed, the only answer I can come up with is that, strange to say, people have grown used to this loss of reality and want to make it theirs by confronting it head-on. That atmosphere seems to have spread everywhere. It has nothing to do with "magic realism," "postmodernism," or any other "ism." Rather, I think it's entirely spontaneous, something people absorb through their pores.

Europe's much the same. When the cold war ended, the Berlin wall fell and the Soviet Union crumbled. And you know where my books sold best, outside of Asia, for a while? Germany and Russia. That strikes me as somehow symbolic. Over the longer term, we have the end of the cold war and the rise of fundamentalism, the collapse of universal systems of thought and the growth of regionalism, the struggle between globalism and antiglobalism, and the advent of megacapitalism versus the flourishing of the environmental movement. Wherever you look, competing forces are clashing, which breeds a certain kind of chaos, which in turn makes the sort of novels I write easier for people to appreciate. If all that chaos is fertile soil for my writing, however, it is anything but for the literary establishment, which is getting blown to bits.

HIDEO

I think the sense of loss, of reality having been somehow diminished, arrived in Japan first.

HARUKI

I agree completely. From that perspective, Japan is the world's most developed society.

HIDEO

Yes, we lead the way in spiritual disintegration! And it was the Aum gassings and the Kobe earthquake that pushed us to the forefront.

HARUKI

Nineteen ninety-five was indeed a symbolic year. Those events coincided with the collapse of the bubble economy, and afterwards we quickly lost everything that might have served as a model. We still haven't found new values to replace the old ones.

HIDEO

Yet in the midst of this global chaos and new and altered perceptions of reality, you have continued writing novels set in Japan and seen through the eyes of Japanese characters.

HARUKI

Well, those are the kinds of stories that are most natural for me to write. Another way of putting it might be that Japan is a good cultural vantage point from which to view that chaos.

Recently, I've come to think that a huge east Asian market—which will include Korea, China, Taiwan, Japan, and Southeast Asian countries like Thailand—is in the process of being created. This developing market isn't just economic; it's also cultural, and includes literature, music, manga, and so on. We could call it the east Asian "cultural zone," and although it's not yet as well established as its European counterpart, it's going to keep growing. The way I see it, for the next while there will be three zones that have the power to transmit and exhibit culture around the world: east Asian, American, and European.

It's interesting to compare how my work is received in these three cultural zones. In the east Asian zone there is little tendency to attach "isms" to what I write. Readers respond to a novel purely as story, not as an example of postmodernism or magic realism. They think, "Wow, this is neat" or "This is cool," and get into it that way. They don't make a big fuss over whether it might be connected to realism or nonrealism. That's what we might call the cultural soil of Asia. In the European and American zones, though, readers tend to read analytically; they look at things like narrative structure and then make connections with theoretical concepts like magic realism.[11] Well, that's how they talk, but I think they actually read the novels intuitively, feel them through their skin, as it were. When all is said

11. An "ism" is necessary to function in an American university—you can't survive if you're not affiliated with one or another. Scholars of Japanese literature are no exception. They subscribe to feminism, for example, or postcolonialism, or post-postrealism. If their students don't have a visible axis on which to stake their position, they are simply ignored. Personally speaking, I think it's rather inconvenient, but then I'm Japanese, so it's none of my business. I hope Japanese universities don't become like that, though.

and done, everyone picks up a novel for the sake of enjoyment. But when they finish reading they start thinking about what elements are new, or interesting, or addictive. They want to ask questions. East Asian readers are usually content just to sit back and read without getting involved in the whole cycle of analysis. They accept novels as they are.

As a Japanese author, I straddle the east Asian and the European/American zones. In fact, my position makes me a kind of meeting point between the two sides.

HIDEO

That's fascinating. To diverge somewhat, your novels are being translated around the world, but often out of sequence, so reactions to your "new" work may in actuality be reactions to your older books. Does it affect you when you receive reactions to older and newer works at the same time like that?

HARUKI

I'll admit it can get pretty confusing. When *A Wild Sheep Chase* comes out after *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, let's say, I may think, This is nuts! But that's the way it is, and I have no choice but to accept it. Still, I'm grateful all my novels are appreciated abroad, unlike in Japan where I'm known as the author of the best seller *Norwegian Wood*. Foreigners read all of my novels more or less equally, which is a great relief. Although *Norwegian Wood* sold an awful lot in China and Korea as well.

DOSTOYEVSKY, OR THE QUEST FOR THE COMPREHENSIVE NOVEL

HIDEO

As I mentioned earlier, one of the crucial things I've picked up from you is how to use works of various lengths, from short stories to very long novels, to push my craft forward. That it's a mistake to write novels alone, let's say, or stories. So for the last ten years I've tried to treat all my works equally, regardless of volume, from half-page vignettes to thousand-page-long novels. With some success, I think.

HARUKI

I think it's important for an author to experiment by composing works of all sizes if he or she is able. That way you build up the full range of muscles.

HIDEO

I think that's key. A writer who specializes in novels or in short stories *matures* at a certain point. But you haven't set your sights on maturing; rather, you've aimed to keep *growing*. Maturing and growing seem quite similar, but in this context they're actually very different. In fact, I can't think of another Japanese writer who's chosen growth over maturity.

HARUKI

I often think of Dostoyevsky and how he wrote *The Possessed* and *The Brothers Karamazov* when he was over fifty. *Karamazov* he wrote at fifty-nine, if I'm not mistaken. Then he died. There haven't been many writers who've been able to write their biggest work, both in quantity and quality, when they were pushing sixty, have there?

HIDEO

No, it seems quite impossible.

HARUKI

Most writers have reached their maturity by the time they turn fifty, after which their work begins to wither. With a few exceptions, they lose that overwhelming power. I don't want to be like that, though. I feel a strong desire to follow Dostoyevsky and continue to grow, writing bigger and more ambitious novels through my fifties and, now, my sixties.

For some reason, the American writers I love to read and translate, like Fitzgerald, Capote, and Raymond Chandler, either stopped writing or lost their shine when they got older. Salinger shut himself away and quit publishing altogether. None were old yet, but they couldn't continue, despite their ability. It's a pity and a shame. I won't go so far as to say that they are examples of what I don't want to become, but my challenge is to see how long I can go on writing.

One of my favorite writers is Raymond Carver, who died at fifty. I'm exactly a decade younger than he was, so I was forty when I heard the news. To be honest,

my immediate reaction was, Good for him, fifty is not that bad, and he managed to keep writing till the end; but when I reached that age myself I felt very differently. In fact, I was ashamed for having let myself think that way, even for a moment. Now I know how much he must have longed to live to write new and different kinds of works. How painful it must have been for him to watch death approach when there was still so much left to do. When I look at his life and the lives of others like him, I'm even more determined not to waste time.

That's why I give everything I have when I write a novel. Use up every ounce of energy. Why be halfhearted about writing when I've worked so hard to reach this point?

HIDEO

So then Dostoyevsky isn't your role model exactly, but . . .

HARUKI

Dostoyevsky, a role model? Not his personal life! Who would want to live like that? But he *is* a model for me when it comes to immersing myself in my writing. There are many novelists I admire, but I can't think of another who wrote so powerfully and passionately right up to the end. There's Dickens, of course, but his works are of a different type. No, I may be influenced by other books, and drawn to other writers, but in the end there's only Dostoyevsky, looming above me like a solitary mountain peak. That's closest to my true feelings about him. *The Idiot* and *Crime and Punishment* leave something to be desired, but *The Possessed* and *The Brothers Karamazov* are in an entirely different category. Both were serialized novels, so their balance is shaky in a few spots, and you couldn't call them perfect, but in their totality they are superb.

HIDEO

It's their scale, I think, that makes all the minor flaws seem trivial.

HARUKI

Yes, when all is said and done I want to write a novel along those lines. Something that huge and comprehensive.

Provisionally, I use the phrase *comprehensive novel* to describe works of that sort. Others have applied that term in various ways, and my understanding

may be off the mark, but in my mind at least it means a novel that's really long and very heavy. It features all kinds of characters, some normal and others highly peculiar, and combines various perspectives in a totally organic way. Obviously, a work of this kind can't be written in the first person. So when I talked earlier about my long-term shift from first-person to third-person fiction, this idea of the comprehensive novel was in the background. In the end, I guess that's where I felt I wanted to be.

As I conceive it, a comprehensive novel weaves together a number of stories that combine to create an anarchic mix of humor and seriousness; yet, while it deals with situations that are inherently chaotic, a clear and consistent worldview forms the backbone of the work. It operates as a kind of melting pot in which all these reciprocal factors can be combined. I may be no Dostoyevsky, but now that I've turned sixty I want to start gradually moving towards constructing this kind of novel.

It's not easy, though. I'm working on a long novel right now—I started on Christmas two years ago—which means I get up anywhere between 2:00 and 4:00 a.m. to write for four or five hours every morning. The only exceptions to this are when I'm on the road, but if you added those together it would only amount to a couple of weeks. Believe me, it's hard work to write for four or five hours every day like this.

HIDEO

It sounds almost as if you're observing some kind of ascetic practice.

HARUKI

At my age, you can feel the clock ticking. At your age, you feel like you can write lots more novels, but at sixty, I pretty much know how many are left. All I have to do is count backwards. When I wrote *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, I felt the sky was the limit—the question of how many more novels I had left in me never entered my mind. I could take it easy. But that's not the way life is. Now I have to exert all my strength to concentrate on writing just one. Realistically, I don't have time for anything else. There's nothing religious about it.

HIDEO

Does that mean there's no time when you're not focusing all your energies on your work?

HARUKI

Not at all. Like I said, a lot of the time I'm doing nothing. That's because I don't write on commission like so many Japanese authors.[12] People often ask if I ever have writer's block, and the answer is no. If I don't feel like writing I don't write, which means the problem of being unable to write never arises. It's that simple. When I do decide to write, though, I'm always able to. Sitting down at my desk means I'm ready.

HIDEO

That's wonderful.

HARUKI

There must be nothing more painful than facing a deadline and drawing a complete blank. Even I can imagine that. So if you do away with the deadlines you get rid of the problem. If you ask me, well then, what do you do when you don't feel like writing, my answer is, I translate. Kind of like a beer company that bottles oolong tea on the side. Seriously though, I consider myself fortunate to be able to translate. This way I don't have to write essays to make ends meet.

This isn't a blanket statement—everyone has their own circumstances, after all—but I believe that novelists should avoid writing too many essays. It only reduces the number of drawers at your disposal. Novelists are constantly thinking and feeling things that they then toss into what could be called their chest of drawers, and when they sit down to write a novel they start opening those drawers one by one to make use of the material they've stashed away. But when you start opening those drawers to write a series of essays for a magazine, let's say, the material gets used in dribs and drabs. I used to write the occasional essay myself, but I stopped. I want to hold on to my material, whatever it is. You never know what drawer you may have to open in an emergency! Once I've finished a novel, though, I do use the leftover bits and pieces in shorter works.

What I like about translations is that, unlike essays, I don't have to put anything of my own into them. It's enough just to concentrate on the linguistic transfer. Translation is perfect for me—it teaches me about writing and is a great kind of mental calisthenics. I love it. And I can listen to music while I'm doing it.

12. My unwillingness to make a living by accepting commissions meant that for the first two years I had to write while simultaneously running my bar. It can be hard to wear two hats, but it's better to punish your body like that than force yourself to write when you don't want to. When I was sure I could make a living with my pen, I became a full-time writer. Then I wrote *A Wild Sheep Chase*.

HIDEO

You mean you don't when you're writing your own stuff?

HARUKI

Basically no. Even if it's playing, I'm not listening. But I have music blasting away when I'm translating. I used to stink, but I've been translating for almost thirty years now and I'm getting pretty good. Patience does pay off in the end, I guess.

HIDEO

That's the realization of growth, isn't it. "Growth" really is the key word when it comes to your work.

HARUKI

Yes, it's easy to measure your growth as a translator because your mistakes are so clear: you're either right or wrong. A mistranslation is a mistranslation, no matter how you look at it. It's unforgiving that way—excuses don't cut it. But that also makes it fun.

HARUKI'S NOVEL IN PROGRESS, AND THE PACE AND BALANCE OF WRITING

HIDEO

Returning to the idea of the comprehensive novel, does the novel you've been working on for the past two years fit that definition?

HARUKI

No, not entirely. But in a certain sense it seems to be heading in that direction. As I said, people conceive of the comprehensive novel in many ways, so some may say, no, my new novel doesn't belong in that category. I don't know, and I don't really care one way or the other. If it fulfills the role I want it to play in my writing program, then I'm satisfied.

One example of a comprehensive novel for me is Tim O'Brien's *The Nuclear Age*. The way he challenges literary conventions in that novel gives it incredible scope. And the theme is massive. The proof of a comprehensive novel isn't in

the details but in the overall momentum of the work. Anyway, if the theme isn't big, it's not much fun.

HIDEO

So we can expect your new novel to be something really special.

HARUKI

When you put it that way I start to sweat! But the truth is I can't write a novel unless I feel like I'm physically stretching myself as far as is I can. If I succeed in that, I can accept it if the work fails. When I tell English readers Tim O'Brien is one of my favorite novelists, they usually go, Huh? But the fact is I really love his work. *The Nuclear Age* is considered one of his least successful novels, and I guess it is a failure in one sense of the word, but I see it as filled with the power that comes from trying to physically expand oneself as one writes, and it's that determination I prize most. Young American writers today are clever, and their works are well put together, but Tim dwarfs them all. When I met Tim, though, and told him I loved *The Nuclear Age*, he looked stunned, like he couldn't quite believe his ears. He clearly hasn't gotten much praise for that book!

This may sound a bit simpleminded, but I also happen to like bulky novels. People complain this makes them hard to read on the train, though. Do you ever get that reaction?

HIDEO

I wrote a really fat one a while ago (*The Saintly Family*) which was apparently a big hit for readers who ride crowded trains, since when they got off they could thrust it out like a battering ram and a path to the door would open.

HARUKI

Didn't readers, especially women, complain it was too heavy?

HIDEO

Yes, that's definitely a problem. But making the paper lighter helped a lot.

HARUKI

Yes, we did that with *Kafka on the Shore*. But then people groused that the breeze from the fans on the commuter trains blew those light pages all over the place.

You can't win—they'll always find something to complain about.

HIDEO

In my case, I ended up writing a long novel to fit the times. Because that's where I think we're heading, somehow.

HARUKI

It's my impression that really long novels are on the way out in the States. Thomas Pynchon being the big exception, of course.

HIDEO

Every one of his novels is huge—that seems to be his fundamental principle. Now he's past seventy, of course.

HARUKI

What amazes me about Pynchon is that he wrote a perfect, massive comprehensive novel, *V.*, at the very beginning of his career. Usually, writers of his type have to grow into that gradually. I find it hard to believe.

HIDEO

No kidding. And then he didn't come out with anything for nearly two decades after *Gravity's Rainbow* was published. That wasn't a bad idea either. What's your pace—how many pages do you normally write a day?

HARUKI

Well, for *Kafka on the Shore* it was about ten manuscript pages a day. I stuck to that schedule closely, so after six months I had completed eighteen hundred pages, then another three months of rewriting whittled that down to sixteen hundred pages. So the whole process took about nine months from start to finish. I'm very systematic about these things: if I decide ten pages a day for three or six months, then ten pages it is. People used to make fun of me when I talked about my schedules. Said I might as well work a nine-to-five job. Some even claimed a writer shouldn't start until the deadline arrived. Now, though, some people praise how I do it.

HIDEO

That's because no one else can do it your way! Recently, though, people are beginning to realize that pushing one's art beyond one's limits is the height of avant-garde.

HARUKI

Back in the old days, a lot of writers were out-of-control types who scoffed at the whole idea of a systematic, well-ordered life, but that seems to have changed. It's kind of a drag when so many are wild and crazy, but when they're all gone you miss them.

HIDEO

Your work habits perfectly fit with your principle that an unhealthy writer can't handle "unhealthy" material. Could it be the greatest lesson you've learned?

HARUKI

Like Jung says, the more that part of us that lives above the surface of consciousness is elevated, the deeper our subterranean world sinks. It's the principle of psychological compensation—if a person sets his eyes entirely on goodness, unavoidably the evil within him grows to an equal extent. It means the healthier a person consciously tries to become, the unhealthier he grows at the deeper, unconscious level. Should this process pass a certain point, a psychological schism can result. I may be a prime example of this. When I'm writing a novel, it's as if my left and right hands are thinking independently of each other, even though they're engaged in the same process. In other words, I seem to be able to program the game and play it at the same time.

HIDEO

Ah, I get it. You fight the monster or whatever it is at the same time you create the program.

HARUKI

Yes, that's just what I mean. It's like playing chess with yourself: when you play one side, the other doesn't know what you're thinking; when you play the other

side, you forget the previous strategy. Normally it's not that easy to forget, right? But I have learned how to do it deliberately when I'm working on a novel. I think I'm pretty good at programming with my right hand while simultaneously playing with my left. It doesn't happen if I'm not writing, but I can snap into that mode the moment I sit down at my desk. I never fail to be interested in what may come out during this process—like a reader turning the pages of a good book, I'm always curious to see what happens next. Once I'm in this zone, I feel like I can keep playing day after day. It strikes me there may be something schizophrenic about this. I don't know what the specialists would say, but most people certainly wouldn't be able to work in this fashion. In fact, it might be dangerous if more were to try. I can handle it because I've built up my physical strength.

When I walk away from my desk, though, I'm just a regular guy.[13] Thinking normal thoughts, leading a normal life. So even now when someone comes up to me on the street and says, "You're Haruki Murakami, aren't you? I read all your books," it feels weird. I've been writing thirty years and I still think, Why me? Because I'm normal when I'm on the street. It's a different story when I'm writing: some pretty abnormal things come out then. Otherwise, though, I'm a regular guy through and through. When I give autographs it feels like I'm printing Monopoly money.

Although I never give lectures in Japan, I do occasionally in foreign countries, and it never fails to amaze me how many people show up. What can they possibly gain by hearing me speak? So I compensate by putting even more into my performance than is necessary, trying to make them laugh and so on. I really am just a normal human being, in many senses of the word.

I avoid public performances in Japan. No radio or TV shows, no lectures, no book signings. I just don't see the point—all those things seem so meaningless. I do want lots of people to read my books, with all my heart, but everything else is irrelevant. Really.

I'm willing to go to such lengths in foreign countries because I feel a sort of obligation. I don't enjoy making public appearances there either. But if I win some kind of award, let's say, then I'll give a few words of thanks or even a speech, or a reading, or autograph readers' copies of my books. I feel it's somehow required

13. "Sometimes admitting one is just average can take a lot of guts." Someone said that to me the other day, and it made me sit up and think. I've always followed the principle that there's nothing wrong with being average, so I can't really understand where the guts part comes in. The way I look at it, I'm just an average guy who happens to have the ability to write novels. What's wrong with that?

of me. Why? I guess because all those years living abroad brought home just how weak Japan's cultural presence is around the world. When I was living in the States back in the early 1990s, Japan was phenomenally wealthy. "Japan as Number One" [the title of Ezra F. Vogel's book, which became a best seller in Japan] was on everyone's lips. Yet if you asked how much this economic powerhouse was offering culturally, the answer was practically zero. They knew Sony, they knew Toyota—and that was it. I felt humiliated. Being outside Japan makes you realize just how important cultural influence is. So if I, as a Japanese writer, am given the opportunity to make a difference, I feel I should take full advantage. This has nothing to do with patriotism; it's just that I had such a painful experience living abroad in the past. In a way, I'm doing it for those Japanese living out there now.

HIDEO

Maybe speaking English allows you to exist in the third person, as it were.

HARUKI

I wonder. It's true that I'm not a very good public speaker in Japanese.[14] And although I'm better at reading and writing English than speaking it, the language does help me feel more relaxed, perhaps because it's borrowed. Like it's not my responsibility. My sense of humor comes out more freely too. People laugh at my jokes, which makes it easier for both parties. For some reason it doesn't work like that in Japanese, though. . . . Where were we? I was talking about being a regular guy away from my work, right?

HIDEO

Yes, I think you've been able to achieve a marvelous balance—between who you are when you're writing and who you are when you're not writing, or perhaps between your healthy and unhealthy sides. It seems you've hit it just right.

14. Here's what I think about language study. The number of Japanese who've been abroad has grown, so many more young people can speak a foreign language well. I think that's great. Yet what do they have to say in that language? Listening to a musician who knows the notes but lacks a musical sense leaves me cold; in the same way, you have to develop your personality before picking up a new language. I may not be great at speaking English, but there's still a lot I want to say. That's why I think it's pointless to start teaching Japanese kids English in the first years of primary school. It's far more important to help them develop a personal point of view.

PRESERVING THE SENSE OF EPIPHANY

HARUKI

Yes, balance is key. That, and I guess what you could call creative greed. I've said this many times, but I never planned to be a novelist. I loved reading, really immersed myself in books, but I never thought I had what it took to be a writer myself. I experienced the craziness—the huge student demonstrations, closing of the campuses, and what have you—that took place around 1968, married a fellow student, managed to eke out a living running a jazz bar—basically, doing grunt work—and then one day, out of the blue, sat down and wrote a novel, *Hear the Wind Sing*, that, much to my surprise, won a new author's prize. It sold fairly well, too, which meant that, just like that, I became what people call a novelist. It was all very strange, like being swept away by a great wave. Still, I figured if a writer was what I was going to be, I shouldn't pussyfoot around—I should give it my best shot. To see where the wave might take me.

The other day, I happened to glance at the remarks I composed for the journal *Gunzō* when they gave me that first prize, and they included the line, "I hope I can produce a serious work of literature before I turn forty." I'd forgotten having written that, but I do remember how much I longed to create something more solid than *Hear the Wind Sing*, something really good, now that I had the chance to write. Apparently, I was already working on one of my ten-year projects. That's what creative greed means, I guess.

HIDEO

I'm impressed by how much respect you have. For your profession, for the novel form itself, for the writers and works that you admire. And you've maintained that level of respect for thirty years. Maybe that's the key to your success. It strikes me that other writers tend to lose that sense of respect—they become smug about their own work.

HARUKI

I have a hard time understanding that kind of thinking.

HIDEO

But there are quite a few like that.

HARUKI

Maybe so. What sticks with me when I finish a novel, though, is a sense of dissatisfaction. I may feel happy with what I've done at first, but like liquor, it wears off quickly. When it comes to writing novels my ambition knows no bounds.

HIDEO

It's the way you've held on to that ambition that I admire.

HARUKI

You've got to have that. It's nothing to be embarrassed about. Having reached this point it's only natural to want to push ahead further. There are lots of would-be novelists out there, but only a few succeed.[15] So if you've made it to the pro ranks and have a setup that allows you to write, you should squeeze out every ounce of energy. To do otherwise would be a sacrilege.

HIDEO

Where does this ability to give birth to stories come from? When I ask myself that question it strikes me that it must be a kind of "gift." I'm being disrespectful to someone or something if I don't put all I have into my writing.

HARUKI

Yes, that's how it is. The ability to create is a very special thing. Once you've grabbed hold of it you have to keep hanging on. I've often mentioned the incident at Meiji Jingu Park, when the desire to write first hit me. It was early April, and I was twenty-nine and sitting in the bleachers watching a baseball game when it happened. It was as if I'd caught something fallen from the sky—I can still feel it in my hands. I'd never thought seriously about writing before; yet there it was, out of the blue, in the midst of a game between the Yakult Swallows and the Hiroshima Carp, this overwhelming feeling that "I want to write!" Yasuda and Sotokoba were pitching, as I recall. I don't know what to call it—a revelation, perhaps, or an epiphany?—but whatever it was, the sensation has stayed with me to this day.

15. I've always felt it's not really all that difficult to write one or two novels. Even to write a good one, all it takes is some talent, and the rest is pretty simple. Only a very few can go on to become professional novelists, though. That's because not many people are willing to carry on year after year doing such dreadfully slow and inefficient work. If you are smart you naturally gravitate to more efficient pursuits. Thus I hold all professional novelists in high esteem. I may like some of their books better than others, but I respect and admire their ability to make a go of it over the long haul. That's why I try not to bad-mouth what they write.

Perhaps I am one of a rare few who've experienced something like that. To that extent, I feel a certain reverence towards the act of writing. A reverence towards the absolute. Yet I also wonder if these revelations or epiphanies don't occur at least once in everyone's life. Maybe people just overlook them.

HIDEO

I think you have to be ready. Otherwise, you'll either miss it or be unable to deal with it when it comes. It may not arrive with a crash, after all; it can be more like a flash of light.

HARUKI

In my case, the timing was perfect. I was there at the game by myself, drinking a beer and kind of spacing out, so when it landed on me I was open to it. At any rate, it was the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me. In English, you'd call it a "blessing." I feel I must treasure it, not let it get lost or damaged.

Of course there are lots of fun things in life. Flirting with women, for example, and gambling. For me, though, the most fun is writing a novel. It's not that I don't enjoy women, but I have to admit, if I'm forced to compare the two, I'm better at writing. And since I have that special skill, I think I should push it to the max. Besides my writing I have my translating —there's really nothing else I want to do all that much. Either I write or I translate. I can't write novels all the time, so when I can't write I translate; when I want to write, I write. My policy of not writing on commission has remained basically unchanged from the beginning. If someone's telling me to finish something by such-and-such a day, the pleasure disappears. I lose my spontaneity, too.

HIDEO

It becomes like work then.

HARUKI

Exactly. Still, some claim they can't work without deadlines, right?

HIDEO

Yes, they sure do.

HARUKI

That's hard to believe. I mean, look at all the hard work that goes into becoming a novelist—how could you make it if you didn't really enjoy what you were doing? To say then that you need deadlines strikes me as absurd. Still, I shouldn't pontificate. I could be very wrong. F. Scott Fitzgerald, to take a rare case, was after the money, and was constantly hounded by deadlines as a result. Yet though he churned out a limitless stream of short stories for commercial, mass-market magazines, most of which have been entirely forgotten, there were a number of jewels among them. Besides, he never wrote his novels on demand. Those he wrote the way he wanted, without deadlines, taking whatever time he needed. In other words, his short stories were the "job" that secured the time he needed for his real work. Unfortunately, his wife ruined this plan by blowing the money as fast as it came in.

Both Fitzgerald and Raymond Carver wrote a fairly direct and personal kind of literature, with much of their material loosely based on what they'd experienced in their own lives. I don't write that way at all. In fact, I'm much closer to writers like Gabriel García Márquez and Thomas Pynchon, who write what we could call pure fiction. Yet Fitzgerald and Carver are my favorites, which I suppose proves that I'm drawn to writers whose temperaments are the opposite of mine.

HIDEO

I know what you mean. My work takes a completely different direction than yours; yet I love your stuff and have been influenced by your comments about writing from the very beginning. So although my output may assume a different form, what I've taken in owes a lot to you and your work, which I guess is what keeping a "good distance" is all about.

HARUKI

I've labored all these years under the assumption that everyone hated me, so all this praise makes me pretty uncomfortable!

HIDEO

Times have changed since I made my debut as a writer. There's a whole new atmosphere out there. Back then, though, people gave you a funny look if you said your favorite writer was Haruki Murakami.

HARUKI

Yes, I was really taboo. A literary four-letter word.[16]

HIDEO

People used to be miffed when you spoke out in public, like, "Who does this guy think he is?" Now, though, the winds have shifted. Things are moving in a great new direction.

HARUKI

Well, that's good news. Nothing could make me happier. Before, when someone praised me, I used to worry it would get them in hot water, though not to the extent that I lost sleep over it. Still, I do have the impression that we've somehow moved full circle. I don't like to grumble, but I did put up with a lot of unpleasant things along the way.

I make a point of not reading reviews of my work. It's a fortunate habit I picked up somewhere along the way. Great for my mental health. How many young readers read newspaper and journal book reviews these days anyway? What the critics say doesn't concern me at all. As long as the publisher announces in the papers that a new book of mine is out, I'm happy. For now at least, a fixed number of readers will buy it if they know it's out there. And I am very grateful for that. I've often said—and I know this comparison sounds inappropriate—that the connection between a writer and his readers is like that between a drug dealer and his customers. We peddle our stuff and then, just when they need a new fix, show up again with a fresh supply. The timing has to be right, though. If it is, then you've got an ideal relationship.

Consequently, it's my personal opinion that a writer should try to keep out of the public eye. I mean, why expose yourself? You compete through your books—that's the Way of the Writer. If Chandler were still alive, I bet I would be waiting breathlessly for his latest novel. Even now, if a new Kazuo Ishiguro novel comes out, I'm the first one at the bookstore. Sadly, though, the number of writers I feel that way about is shrinking all the time. When it comes to thrillers, there are still a few writers I can't seem to shake, like old lovers. I no longer buy their books in

16. Back in the early or mid-1990s, a book review editor from a certain newspaper—someone I had been fairly friendly with—contacted me to tell me how concerned he was about the way the other editors and journalists were slamming me. "I can't stand listening to them talk about you," he said. What on earth could they have been saying?

hardcover, but if I see a paperback by Robert B. Parker or Elmore Leonard at the airport, let's say, I gobble it up. Can't help myself.

HIDEO

Whatever the case, we're all hungry for our next fix. We're beginning to get the shakes.

HARUKI

If it were one of my translations I'd want to tell the world, "It's great, you've got to read it," and in fact I do say that sometimes, but I can't talk about one of my own novels like that. I can't help but think there'll be lots of people out there who won't like it.

HIDEO

Really?

HARUKI

Yes, I'm quite serious. There's no way I could tell someone, "Please read my new novel—you'll really enjoy it." Novels are much too personal for me. So personal, in fact, that as a novelist I can never assume someone else will readily get into what I have written. Writing a novel is a lengthy process: you go about it the only way you can, and push yourself to the limits of your individuality. But what if my limits and those of my reader aren't well matched? You can never be sure of something like that. It's entirely possible they'll go, What the heck is this? And that'll be that. Of course I'm a pro, so I'm pretty confident that my work will survive in the long run. If I didn't feel that way, I couldn't write. But if I'm face-to-face with a specific individual, like I am with you right now, I can never say, "You're sure to like this, Hideo." The bigger the work, the more true that is. That's why I don't really enjoy sending author's copies to people—it's like I'm forcing them to read it. When a new novel comes out I want to sneak away and hide. Not out of fear of criticism, mind you, but because . . . how can I put this . . . it's scary to see a book go out into the world, as if my heart and my body were becoming total strangers to each other. If someone praises my book, for example, I can't trust him right off the bat.

HIDEO

Does that mean you've come to understand why Kafka wanted his books burned after his death?

HARUKI

No, I don't want my books burned. I want people to keep them around. To continue reading them. The problem with Kafka was that he had too many unfinished manuscripts. He would set one piece aside before it was done to work on another, then leave that one incomplete as well. I think even he must have found that pattern hard to take. I'm not like that at all.

HIDEO

Well, this has been an immensely enlightening conversation. Thank you so much!

HARUKI

I feel like I've done six months' worth of talking in one sitting!

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translated by Ted Goossen

Interviews with the Heroes, or Is Baseball Just for Fun?

INUO TAGUCHI

1 (AN INTERVIEW WITH THE PITCHER)
Confusion turns to certainty when I take the mound
I stand at the center of the universe
Every batter my captive
Caged in a chalked square
Nervously, he awaits my expression of love
I intently scuff the dirt with my shoe

2 (AN INTERVIEW WITH THE BATTER)
When I'm in the zone the ball seems to stop
The seams joining love and hate stand out
Why oh why did I become a batter and not
A blacksmith, novelist, or architect?
Strange, when I whack my wife, I'm always drunk
But when I whack the ball I'm cold sober

3 (AN INTERVIEW WITH THE CATCHER)
I am not so arrogant as to stand
Nor so pious as to kneel
So I will go on squatting
For I love this world I look out upon
I am the guardsman, the fort, the tortoise who lays
Its eggs of white balls on the birthing soil of home plate

4 (AN INTERVIEW WITH THE RUNNER)
Instead of starting a fresh line, I step on first
Instead of tapping on my keyboard, I fly between the bases
You readers who stand and cheer
You critics who grudgingly note the call, "Safe!"
This poem is being broadcast live
So why don't I steal the next stanza!

5 (AN INTERVIEW WITH THE INFIELDER)

We hunger for batted balls
For self-deprecating grounders, fastidious line drives
Overly clever safety bunts, coy flies
A batted ball has a face, a calling, a moral character
Its fate is decided in an instant
Recorded, and then forgotten

6 (AN INTERVIEW WITH THE OUTFIELDER)

We who catch fly balls understand
Why we have been granted the earth
And given the gift of gravity
All straight lines are deceptions
Sections of one great arc
Those arcs sections of one great circle
The ruts left by that invisible circle fill my eyes

7

Even the most beautiful diamond
Is but a stone in the dark
Stonehenge, the Nazca Lines, the Pyramids
None glows like the garden of the riddle of the universe
Where we awake to find ourselves playing baseball
From whence did it fall
The first white ball born on this star?
Ignorant of even that, still,
We chase it blindly

translated by Jay Rubin

CLOSET LLB

KŌJI UNO

Five years have gone by since Sansaku Otsukotsu, LLB, received his bachelor of laws degree, but he still has no fixed occupation. Almost nine years have gone by since he first arrived in Tokyo from the provinces, but he still spreads his bedding in the same room of the same rooming house he chose at the beginning (while ownership of the rooming house itself has changed hands thirteen times).

As an undergraduate, Sansaku was, in fact, present on at least two-thirds of the days his college was open for classes—perhaps because school rules prohibited anything less—and his grades were on the high side. In law school, however, he averaged ten days a year, passing through the campus gate no more than forty times in four years, as a result of which he graduated second from the bottom in his class.

Back in the third or fourth year of elementary school, Sansaku became obsessed with boys' magazines and fairy tales, and he aspired, if somewhat vaguely, to become a children's author like Sazanami Iwaya.

His father died when Sansaku was three, leaving Sansaku and his mother enough money to live on for the rest of their lives. His mother took the extra precaution of entrusting the property to an influential relative, but this had the reverse effect of plunging them into misfortune when, unexpectedly, the relative went bankrupt, losing not only his own property but theirs as well. This happened the year Sansaku entered middle school.

At that point another relative, a man named Ōike, stepped forward to pay his school expenses. Ōike was a cousin of Sansaku's father whom the father had aided monetarily and in other ways and who, unexpectedly, had succeeded in business and become a millionaire. When Sansaku finished his first year of middle school, Ōike brought him to live in the Ōike household and insisted that he take an examination to transfer into a

prestigious business college. Try as he might, Sansaku could not make himself study for the exam, and two days before the appointed date, he ran away from the Ōikes' to his own house (or, rather, to the house of his mother's parents, who had taken them in after the bankruptcy).

Ōike then gave up on his plans for Sansaku and resigned himself to paying the boy's tuition and letting him continue in middle school. Sansaku had had excellent grades all the way through elementary and middle school, which is not to say that he was working especially hard in middle school. Far from it. Indeed, he was already completely immersed in magazines and fiction. But the ambition Sazanami Iwaya had sparked in his earliest years had been evolving bit by bit: first, he found himself wanting to be a staff writer at a magazine, and then, from the third year of middle school, he embraced the unshakable goal of becoming a novelist. To this very day, that has not changed. Which only goes to prove that we are dealing here with someone who was once a childhood prodigy.

Yet another problem arose when Sansaku graduated from middle school. Ōike, convinced that this was the time for him to take action, again pressed Sansaku to enter a business college, but Sansaku insisted that his future lay in the humanities. The two clashed repeatedly until it was decided (through the offices of a third party) that Sansaku should take the middle path and enter law school. Not even the gifted Sansaku Otsukotsu was able to grasp exactly how law was the "middle path" between business school and the humanities, but he did see that any further resistance to the wishes of the relative who was paying for his education would be both futile and against his better interests, and in the end he resigned himself to entering the college's prelaw program. Thus it came about that through the long years of school, Sansaku steeped himself exclusively in literature while supposedly settled in law. He managed to squeeze through the law exams at least, and five years ago became, if in name only, a bachelor of laws: Sansaku Otsukotsu, LLB. Just about the time he graduated, Ōike died. This did not spell the end of the Ōike line, however, since Mr. Ōike had a perfectly fine heir to carry on his name. But the payments to Sansaku came to a halt the moment he graduated, almost as if Ōike's debt to Sansaku's father had now been settled once and for all. As noted earlier, Sansaku was a bachelor of laws, but he knew almost nothing about the law. Not one of his relatives, who felt only antipathy toward him, offered to help him find employment. Nor did he, in his strange arrogance, bother to approach any of his senior law colleagues in search of an opening. None of them had good feelings for Sansaku, either.

In this way did our poor bachelor of laws suddenly find himself pressed to make ends

meet. While in law school, most of his friends had been in the humanities department, and it was through those friends that Sansaku was able to live from one poverty-stricken day to the next by doing the occasional cut-rate translation or writing fairy tales, though still he ran up a sizable debt at his rooming house. In addition, once he graduated, he found that he was expected to send fifteen yen every month to his elderly mother in the country.

Over the past year or two, Sansaku had fallen into ever-deepening poverty. There was never enough translation work, and he ran out of ideas for fairy tales. Still, visiting literary friends to beg for work was just as hard for him as calling upon his senior colleagues in law. (In other words, though arrogant, he was also a man of great diffidence.) Before he knew it, then, his payments to his mother fell farther and farther behind. Once that happened, it ceased to bother him, and he gradually stopped sending anything at all. In the end, he could toss her urgent letters aside with hardly a twinge of conscience.

Then, just a month ago, a letter arrived from the country. As we have seen, Sansaku might allow two or three days to go by before reading his mother's letters, and some he never read at all; but this one, fortunately, he opened and read immediately—"fortunately" because it brought him excellent news. Since he had so often been late sending money to her, his mother said, their relatives had begun to hear of her difficulties, and several of them who, like Ōike, had been aided by Sansaku's late father and had since done especially well for themselves, had gotten together and collected ten thousand yen, enabling her to open a small but dependable shop.

This news brought Sansaku such a tremendous sense of relief from the cares of day-to-day living that he felt quite drained.

"What was that again?" he muttered to himself, recalling the last part of his mother's letter. " 'Our relatives say they pooled their resources and helped me open a shop because you have failed to support me the way you ought to, Sansaku, so under no circumstances should you even *dream* of pestering your mother'—"not that we are in a position to say such a thing," said the hypocritical bastards! —'for a loan.' A loan? Who the hell's asking for a loan? But wait a minute," he went on, trying to make sense of the situation, "If they gave it to her, it's hers. And besides, it's not as if I'm some prodigal son planning to 'pester' his mother for money to support his dissolute lifestyle. This will be my chance to sit down and do some serious work. Which means . . . and so . . .

"All right, then, let me just set all thought of money aside and take the time to apply myself to a grown-up novel." (Having written so many fairy tales over the years, this was how Sansaku referred to ordinary novels.)

"Because I've had to send out fifteen yen or so every month until now, I've been compelled to keep taking stupid jobs I absolutely detested, but now that my mother's livelihood is assured . . ."

No sooner had his thoughts brought him this far than Sansaku felt that sudden, draining sense of relief, like a traveler who remains unconscious of his fatigue as long as he keeps hurrying down the road but who collapses in a heap from exhaustion the moment he realizes he has reached his destination (though in fact, as stated earlier, Sansaku had by no means been making regular monthly remittances to his mother). Once he felt it was no longer necessary for him to act, the will to act simply vanished. Although he did at least feel an occasional urge to write a grown-up novel—after all, it was an ambition he had often harbored to the point of ignoring everything else, including school for a time—it occurred to him that, even if he managed to finish one, far from earning him easy money like his fairy tales, just getting it accepted would require enormous effort on his part. And so he flung his pen away.

Every single day since then he has passed either visiting with friends or sleeping. Sansaku's style of sleeping deserves special mention. His small tatami-mat room has the standard tall, deep closet divided by a sturdy shelf into upper and lower compartments for storing his futon and covers behind a pair of sliding paper doors, but Sansaku long ago decided that it was too much trouble to open the closet door and pull the bedding out every day to spread it on the tatami. Instead he cleared out the upper compartment and spread his futon on the shelf permanently. He sleeps in the closet with the doors open and never has to make his bed.

"This is it! This is the answer!" he cried in delight at his own discovery. "I may have been born in the sticks, but I'm different from the typical farmer or merchant's son. I'm delicately built, so I can't sleep just anywhere with a pile of magazines or a folded cushion for a pillow. This is it!"

Lazy as he was, Sansaku still managed to wake up early every morning, wash his face, and eat breakfast. After an hour or two, however, he would always crawl back into his bed on the closet shelf. Usually he would be awakened by the maid when she brought his lunch on a four-legged tray, which she would set on the tatami. He would slip down from the shelf, sit cross-legged on the floor to finish his lunch, and then immediately burrow his way back into the bedding on the closet shelf. Then, in the evening, he would be awakened yet again by the maid when she arrived with his dinner on the usual tray. While he slept, of course, Sansaku was in a world of unconsciousness, so it seemed as if his three meals—breakfast, lunch, and dinner—were delivered to him in rapid succession

the way a waiter in a Western restaurant brings one dish after another to the table. He spent most evenings strolling around the city or visiting friends to talk about nothing in particular. Bedtime was two o'clock in the morning for him most days. Still, it was Sansaku more than anyone who was amazed at how much he could sleep.

"On the other hand, I never sleep without dreaming," he would often think to himself. "Which may mean that the amount of time I am actually asleep is short. If ordinary people dream a little while sleeping, in my case it's more that I sleep a little while dreaming."

Now, the rooming house in which Sansaku Otsukotsu, LLB, lived was halfway up a hill, and it stood on a plot of land that was two feet lower than the street level, as a result of which, even though his room was on the second floor facing the street (that is, the hill), the faces of people passing by were at virtually the same height as his own face when he was sitting on his tatami floor. This meant that when he left his window open and kept the door of his closet slid back, he could lie amid the bedding on his closet shelf, watching the street and closely observing the passersby—none of whom, of course, would imagine that there was a person in the closet watching them and who would consequently pass by unconcerned about what they assumed to be an empty room.

That way, from among the folds of his bedding, Sansaku would spend certain intervals—the five or ten minutes between the time his eyes tired of reading magazines and the time he drifted into his morning or afternoon nap—watching the people climbing or descending the hill as if he were seeing them in a play. In the end he developed the ability to pick out neighborhood people even if he had never spoken a word to them, saying to himself, "Aha! That's so-and-so from such-and-such a house." Quite often, while lying in bed and watching the passersby this way, he would eventually slip into a dream while muttering something like "Oh, I'm glad to see *him* out walking all the time again: he must have gotten over his sickness," or "My goodness, look at that girl! She's really decked out today!"

In his student days, Sansaku had been terribly dissatisfied with the law as an academic discipline. Now he had the LLB attached to his name, but he still lived like a literature student, albeit one to whom current literature and literary people had come to seem just as dissatisfying and contemptible. Before, he (and perhaps only he) had believed that a literary man was someone who possessed keen powers of appreciation for all things in this world. Now, however, how did those literary people he had grown familiar with appear to him?

"To take an example close at hand," thought Sansaku Otsukotsu, LLB, while observing the street from his closet bed as usual, "the face of that woman passing by: among the writers I know" (and in fact, many of the literature-student friends he had while he was in law school were already well-known men of letters), "is there even one who would be capable of composing a decent critique of how beautiful—or *not* beautiful—her face is, or her figure, or the way she wears her kimono, or her whole outfit?"

As a child, Sansaku tended to be smug and arrogant, always ready to show off his slightest ability. He was, in a word, vaguely contemptuous of just about everything and everyone. The tendency only increased with his age to the point where now even he has come to find it somewhat abnormal. In the past two or three years it has reached the point that all works of art—not only fiction but critical essays, dramatic texts, theatrical performances, paintings—are remarkable to him only for their innumerable shortcomings. He has come to feel that he is the only one who can perceive their flaws and virtues (if, indeed, they possess any virtues), that he alone truly understands them. He has gone so far as to think he should therefore provide models for other writers, write works that would serve to guide them to increasingly greater accomplishments; but in the end nothing has ever materialized.

Say he goes out to eat, or to a performance of *gidayū* or *rakugo* or *kōdan* or *naniwabushi*, or perhaps *ongyoku* or *buyō*, or down a notch to comic *teodori* or a *shinpa* tragedy: there is absolutely nothing about them that he does not know how to appreciate. He is capable of discovering points of beauty in things that everyone else dismisses, and equally able to find bad points in things that everyone else admires, which makes him very pleased with himself.

"Had I become a sumo wrestler, I'm sure I would have numbered among the champions." This was one of the more far-fetched thoughts that came to Sansaku one day as he was lying in his closet. "Take that Tatsugorō Ōarashi, for example. Everybody is calling him unbeatable, but I knew him in middle school. At first, he and I were in the same class, but he was what they called a 'backward' student and failed his exams twice a year for two years until he ended up two grades behind me. Now you look at the sumo coverage in the paper and they're calling him an unusually smart wrestler. Well, I used to face him in judo all the time. I never had the physical strength, but my body was as unresisting as noodles, so the other guy could come at me with all his might, but I was like a willow in the wind—sure, it's an old figure of speech, but that's how I was—and nobody could ever knock me down. After a while, when the other guy started pressing, I'd see an opening and use his strength against him. I always won.

Old Ōarashi was fairly strong back then (though nothing special), but he never once beat me. If I had been training all this time like Ōarashi, I'd be great by now, or at least a damn good—if unusual—wrestler."

The thought made Sansaku Otsukotsu feel he couldn't lose against Ōarashi even now. As he lay there in his closet imagining himself going up against each of the current sumo wrestlers, a big grin crossed his face.

"I wonder why I never put more of myself into studying the law," thought Sansaku one day. "I mean, think of that stiff-brained, tongue-tied, unimpressive-looking classmate of mine, Kakii: I see in today's paper they're calling him one of the up-and-coming hot young lawyers for some stupid case he's managed to win. The public is so damn easy to fool." (Sansaku finds fault only with other people and forgets how hard the public is—and has been—for *him* to fool.) "With my intelligence and my eloquence . . ." More than once, such thoughts inspired him to resolve to hit the law books and apply to be a judge or public prosecutor, but the inspiration never lasted more than an hour.

Ultimately, Sansaku lacked the most important elements for making a go of it in this world: perseverance, courage, and common sense. To him, everything was "stupid," everything was "boring," everything he saw and heard filled him with displeasure and sometimes even anger. He was especially repulsed by his landlady's modern, swept-back hairstyle, to which she added an extra swirl by placing a black-lacquered wire form against her scalp and covering it as best she could with her thinning hair, each strand stuck in place with pomade. She also appeared to spend her days in eager anticipation of being called "Madam" not only by the maids but by her lodgers as well; she was trying to hide the fact that she was the mistress of an old country gentleman who visited her once or twice a week.

Only Sansaku made a point of calling her "Mistress Proprietor," to which she never once deigned to reply. In spite of her refusal to respond, he would always ask her, "How much fun are you getting out of life?"

"How much fun are you getting out of life?" was a pet phrase of Sansaku's.

"And you?" he once asked a friend. "Are you enjoying life?"

The friend's only answer was a pair of noncommittal grunts.

Another friend answered the question with a straight-out "Not at all," to which Sansaku responded with his second pet phrase, "Don't you want to die?"

"I'd like to be killed without knowing it," the friend answered.

"Oh, oh, I can't take it any longer. I think I'll just find myself an airplane. I was one of the best gymnasts in middle school, so I'm sure I'd make a great pilot." Sansaku's own

special delusions of grandeur were taking flight. "Too bad I don't have the one thing you really need for that . . . guts." And soon he was drifting into his usual dreamworld in his closet bed.

Sansaku Otsukotsu had been an excellent broad jumper in middle school. He would take a twenty-foot run, plant his left foot on the line, and sail into the air with his legs still rotating, as if swimming. As he neared the end of his jump, he would flip his body forward, beginning a second arc and lengthening his distance, and then twist himself to make still another arc the moment before he touched down, forming three arcs in all. This way, he managed to jump much farther than the other jumpers, who could only execute a single arc. Now, in his mind, he found that he could use this technique to send his body aloft until he was sailing through the air without the aid of machinery. "This is so much fun! And so easy for me! Oh, look! I'm flying over pine trees and all those people down there! Strange how no one seems amazed by this. But they'll realize it soon enough. I'll show them! They'll see how great my work is! Oh, I'm coming to the far bank of the river. But so what? River, ocean, they're all the same to me. Just go, go, it doesn't matter. See? It's nothing, I'm across the river now!" This was all in his dream, of course. He didn't know when he awoke, but the one thing he knew for sure was that the dream didn't end, as they so often did, in failure.

Sansaku Otsukotsu was not the least bit surprised when he opened his eyes. He really had been an excellent broad jumper in middle school, and he could clearly remember being able to propel his body farther in midjump.

"Why haven't I tried that all this time? Sprinting to the line is the same as a plane accelerating for a takeoff, and planting the foot is probably the takeoff itself. Sure, that's it, I know I can do it! But . . ." Of course he started having second thoughts in the midst of his enthusiasm. "But . . ." he thought to himself again.

He climbed out of his closet and gave it a try in his narrow six-mat room, but he could not even rise a foot above the tatami. In fact, he fell back so heavily and clumsily that he suspected he must have gained weight. "No, I can't be this bad," he told himself, his initial failure spurring him on to a more determined attempt. He stepped out into the hallway. Fortunately, there was no one present. It so happened that there had been a major housecleaning a month earlier, and a layer of oiled paper soaked with some kind of new chemical and varnish that had been put down to improve appearances and protect against bedbugs was still spread all over the hallway floor. It was very slippery, and Sansaku often enjoyed skating on it in his slippers when he was bored.

Now, using the aeronautical skills suggested by his dream, Sansaku gave himself

over to running down the hallway and leaping through the air, but he could not make a tenth of the distance he used to cover in middle school. When he tried to plant his foot for the takeoff on his fourth run down the corridor, he slipped and fell, slamming his shin against the stairway railing and landing on his bottom. He was sitting there on the floor, scowling with pain, when the landlady with her hard-pomaded backswept hairdo came climbing up the stairs.

"My goodness!" the woman cried with wide-open eyes. "Mr. Otsukotsu!"

"Madam!" Sansaku responded with the title he preferred not to use for her. He chose it because he had recalled something that made it necessary to call her "Madam," something that even made him forget about the pain in his shin.

"Madam, I expect to receive a small payment tomorrow, so I will be able to . . ."

After he said this, he sighed from the pain in his leg and from the imagined consequences of his lie. Feeling a need for further words to cover his embarrassment, he came out with his habitual, "Life is not much fun, is it, Madam?"

"Not much," she replied resolutely. "For either of us." Without so much as a smile, she headed down the stairs.

"Not for either of us, is it? I see, I see," Sansaku Otsukotsu, LLB, still flat on his backside, mumbled to himself as he watched her go.

translated by Ted Goossen

When Monkeys Sing

MASAYO KOIKE

When I left Monkey Island
Two monkeys, one big, one little, married perhaps
Were standing on the quay
Seeing me off
Long arms dangling before them, hands clasped
Their eyes holding me for so long
Blinking in the salt spray, pupils of ash.
When I recall Monkey Island
I see monkeys melting along the shore.
Monkeys run deep, they are to our existence
As miso paste in soup
Suffusing the world with their presence.
I once gave birth to a monkey
In Shibuya's Red Cross Hospital, on a stainless-steel gurney
I tried to hide it in my shorts,
But my crack is so red and rough.
Those objects we see floating on the waves
From the bus terminal at Shibuya Station's west exit
Heading for the source,
Aren't they the heads of monkeys great and small?
With staring eyes, they
Sing a crazy lullaby in unison
Ra ra ra, kera, kerari-kero.
Monkeys are profound, the miso of existence.
Our commuter passes don't work,
Our credit cards are useless
When monkeys sing
For when monkeys sing
Magnetism loses its grip.

translated by Ted Goossen

Monkey Tanka

SHION MIZUHARA

Our forebears are
Risen from the apes
Here we lie
As the olive leaf passes
From my lips to yours

translated by Ted Goossen

Monkey Haiku

MINORU OZAWA

Bear flesh
Monkey meat
In the same pouch

translated by Ted Goossen

THE FORBIDDEN DIARY

SACHIKO KISHIMOTO

FEBRUARY–MARCH
THE CANCEL-OUT APARTMENTS

I have a little brother sprouting from a spot behind my right hip. He's about four inches long without any arms and legs, and when he gets hungry (which is like all the time) his face turns red and he starts bawling in this ear-splitting voice; and then he whips his body back and forth so that it goes whap, whap against my butt. I hate the kid, and there've been so many times I've thought about taking a razor and slicing him off, but I just can't bring myself to do it.

Cicadas shrilling outside my window.

FEBRUARY 4

Heard a rumor about something called the "Cancel-Out Apartments" today. Seems it's a two-story building with five small apartments on each floor. If, say, a cop is living on the second floor, and then another cop moves in on the first, the two cancel each other out. I mean, they both vanish, poof, just like that. If there are two babies in the building, poof, they're gone too. If a Mr. Yamada moves in, and another Mr. Yamada's already there, you guessed it, both gone. In one case, two tenants who seemed totally different—a thirty-five-year-old guy working part time and a sixteen-year-old high school girl—disappeared together. Nobody could figure it out. Then it was discovered that both had the same fetish for, get this, the smell of dirty socks. People living in the Cancel-Out Apartments are totally stressed because they can't tell when someone who's somehow like them might move in. According to the rumor, the building is right here in Tokyo.

Note: The italicized passages are inspired by Stacey Levine's collection *My Horse and Other Stories*.

FEBRUARY 5

Talked with O. on the phone for the first time in a long while. Our topic was the names of the bullet trains. If the Flash is faster than the Echo, and the Hope is faster than the Flash, then, we decided, if they made a train even faster than the Hope it would have to be called the Death, but no one would board the Death 101 for Kyūshū.

Translated a bit.

FEBRUARY 6

Met a dozen or so people at K. Station on the Odakyū Line and we all headed off to a bar/boxing gym called Knuckles. Everyone ordered their "sandbag set," which gives you a drink and forty minutes punching the heavy bag for fifteen hundred yen, so we drank and pounded away to our hearts' content.

After that we went out to a Korean barbecue place, and after that drinking in Shimokitazawa. The party broke up at 4:00 a.m.

FEBRUARY 7

Death.

FEBRUARY 8

I can't stand for people to see me with my little brother, so when I go to the beach I dig a hole in the sand and lie on my back with him in it. I talk, eat, and drink in that position. He spends the whole time bawling except when I reach down and give him a bit of whatever I'm eating, when he shuts up to chew. Then he's so surprised and excited at being treated nicely he whips himself, whap, whap, against my butt even harder. He's so ugly then I wish he would hurry up and die, but he gets his sustenance from my body, so even if I stopped feeding him he wouldn't starve. I gave up and lay on the beach all day while my loathing for him grew.

FEBRUARY 9

Found an inchworm pretending to be a twig on the potted oleaster in my room, so I named him Little Desperado and made up my mind to love him.

Minuscule progress on the translation.

FEBRUARY 11

In the evening, *yakitori* in Shibuya with T. from K. firm. Intended it to be a business

meeting, but somewhere along the line we got into this lengthy discussion about cats and dogs and that plan died. T. hadn't heard about the "Cancel-Out Apartments."

Walking home in the dark, I heard a voice call "Boo!" but when I turned around no one was there.

FEBRUARY 12

My kid brother is buried in the sand almost all the time, and when he isn't he just cries with his face all crumpled up. Still, there is the rare occasion when he falls quiet, and then I start worrying maybe he'll say something, which terrifies me because I know that if I hear what he has to say, I'll go insane.

FEBRUARY 14

I was taking a shower when it suddenly hit me that when the Galactic Battleship Yamato enters warp speed, the commander shouts, "Go to warp!" the instant the curves on the screen converge, but although the other guy shouts back "Warp!" right away, he takes his time pulling the lever, which means it will be way too late. Not much use worrying about it now, though.

FEBRUARY 15

No sign of Little Desperado. Whenever I give something a name and start loving it, it always disappears on me.

Night—drank *shōchū*. Opened a packet of dried durian that someone had given me. Shut it two seconds later.

FEBRUARY 17

Received an e-mail from F. There were a number of full-screen photos of her little boy attached, and a message that simply read, "He turned five!" F. and I worked for the same company ages ago, but we were in different departments on different floors, so we only talked once or twice; then all of a sudden, a few years ago, she starts sending me these pictures of her son. Photos of him dressed up for the Shichi-Go-San children's festival; on his first day at nursery school; on a school trip; at Disneyland—and in each and every one he's just standing there facing the camera. I delete them as soon as I get them, so they won't eat up the memory on my computer.

Translated a bit.

FEBRUARY 18

A teen group like AKB48 shouldn't surprise anybody. After all, there's another slightly older and sexier idol group, The Girls of Earthly Desire, which has 108 members, not just 48. When I try to convince people that their singing and dancing really does eradicate the 108 earthly desires of Buddhism, though, they just laugh.

FEBRUARY 19

H. phoned demanding the translation. Haven't been able to make any progress since the point where the narrator starts burying her brother in the sand and her hatred for him grows. Now translating makes my head ache, and the cicadas outside my window send up a terrible racket every time I sit down to work.

FEBRUARY 21

It hit me that the strange voice I heard walking home the other night might be the same one an old classmate of mine, a girl by the name of O., heard outside the window of the school lavatory when we were students. According to her story, she couldn't tell if it belonged to a girl or a boy, or even a human or an animal, and although it sounded idiotic, it still sent a shiver up her spine. The voice stopped when she threw open the window, and she couldn't see anyone out there, either.

What happened to O. after that? Guess she switched schools.

FEBRUARY 22

Another e-mail from F., identical to the one from a few days ago. Seems she just pressed Resend. Delete.

FEBRUARY 24

Found some gross-looking sweets in the supermarket that tasted even worse than they looked, so I tried to compose a haiku for the occasion, but even a monkey could have written something better than what I came up with: Dried persimmon chocolates / Wish I hadn't eaten you / Santa Maria! Fell into despair at my lack of talent.

FEBRUARY 25

Went to Bamboro, a Chinese restaurant in Akasaka, with some people from S. firm. Vinegared jellyfish vermicelli chili sauce broth dumplings dim sum squid celery stir-

fry preserved duck egg Shanghai crab beer beer beer lao chu lao chu lao chu lao chu. After that we headed for Caravaggio, a bar that, like the lakes at Lop Nur, fades in and out of existence depending on the temperature date time yin yang five elements moon phase, but although the bar was there that night, the owner was semitransparent, so we had to make the highballs cocktails whiskey simple snacks ourselves and then deposit withdraw whatever we felt like from the cash register.

Started raining around midnight so we broke up early.

FEBRUARY 27

I've got this secret thing for old apartment buildings with outside staircases, and I discovered a perfect one today while strolling around the neighborhood: it had a rusty washing machine sitting beside each door, umbrellas hanging from window grates, a tricycle lying on its side (the kid's name inscribed in Magic Marker)—the kinds of objects I love, in other words—and I was just standing there happily sucking it all in when it suddenly dawned on me that this might be the Cancel-Out Apartments, but when I moved a few steps closer to get a better look, I realized one of the first-floor doors was ajar, and that maybe I was being watched, so I split.

FEBRUARY 28

Oda Kazumasa's songs were stuck in my head all morning.

I'm so happy
To have met you
I could kill you and kill you
And never get tired
Kinda like a fake Oda song.

No progress on the translation. Cicadas.

MARCH 1

Ever since the voice called out to me that night, memories of the girls' school I attended in junior and senior high have been surfacing one after another.

When K.'s parents were living abroad and she had to stay temporarily with her grandmother, all she got for breakfast were sweet bean jelly rolls. One day the short-

tempered N. got so upset at the noise we were making she stood and shouted "Shut up!" except that it came out as "Shup!" which promptly became her nickname. Y. sent out New Year's cards that read, "My nipples hurt when something rubs against them!"

MARCH 2

My calendar for today read "Meeting—2nd Floor—3 pm," but although the handwriting was mine, I had no memory of having written it, no idea where this second floor was, and no clue who I was supposed to be meeting, which meant I had no way to check and could only wait trembling at home, expecting the phone to ring any minute and someone to start bellowing at me, but in the end, the phone never rang.

MARCH 5

A beautiful day, so I hung my bedding out to air. Mount Fuji was white in the distance.

Memories of school (continued):

Our Western-style school building was over seventy years old and filled with architectural oddities. For example, there was a short staircase that began in the strangest spot and led nowhere, while tucked away in another location was this little forgotten room that still appears in my dreams. The coolest place, though, my secret spot, was the bathroom built directly above the stage in the auditorium; it was small, but had one wall that was all glass, which let in loads of sunlight and left the room looking bright and clean. It was always empty, too, no matter when you went.

Which reminds me, on the far wall of the innermost stall there was a switch box of some sort with a small metal door, and on the door someone had written: "Break on through to the other side!" I tried pulling on the door but it wouldn't open.

MARCH 7

The phrase "My kryptonite."

The phrase "With children, first a girl, then a boy, then an eggplant."

MARCH 8

I'm raising a horse at home. Someone gave it to me to look after. It's awfully small, no bigger than a dog, with short, short legs. Its hide is the color of liver and very baggy, and covered with grains of rice so that even though it's my pet I can't pet it. It used to spend all day tearing in and out of the house whinnying in this thin, agitated voice, and

it ate like there was no tomorrow. Anyway, one day I took a vise and tried clamping the loose skin around the horse's ribs. The horse didn't resist as much as I expected, but after that it pretty much stopped eating, and when I looked down on it from my window I could see that it was getting skinnier and skinnier and its legs were shaking like a leaf; yet even so, it didn't try to run away, but just kept staring at my face.

MARCH 10

Went to get a haircut. I've known T., my stylist, for a long time, and today when I walked into his salon, he guessed right off the bat that I wanted him to "take it all off," which made me feel good. I hadn't had it cut in three years so it had grown past my shoulder blades, but one swipe of the scissors took care of that. What a relief!

On my way home, people on the street seemed to be freaking out for some strange reason. When I looked up I could see a passenger airplane circling unusually low over the city. Everyone was pointing at the sky and shouting something I couldn't catch. The plane was rolling and shaking and bouncing up and down. Then, as the crowd oohed and aahed, it started making looping somersaults, progressively losing altitude until it crashed just beyond the Laforet building. "The shock wave is coming!" someone screamed, and everyone started running en masse toward Harajuku Station, which meant I was forced to run with them, and it was at that point that I woke up. I was home.

But how much of it was a dream? I reached back to touch the hair that had hung down my back, but it was no longer there.

MARCH 11

Walking alongside the school grounds on my way back from mailing a letter, I passed a place in the wall that was growing hair. A big clump of messy, bleached-out hair that didn't look human at all.

Gave it a wide berth.

MARCH 14

Another e-mail from F. "Why did you delete the photos I took the trouble to send you?" she complained. "You should look at them carefully and save them!" Once more, a whole bunch of photos were attached. The amount of memory they take up is no joke, though, so I deleted them without looking.

Cicadas more annoying than ever today.

MARCH 15

Don't know what he finds so damned amusing, but my little brother is in great spirits, flinging himself against my butt like crazy. Whap, whap.

MARCH 16

Woke up in the middle of the night, grabbed the flashlight, made my way to the closet at the end of the hallway, opened the closet door, and trained my light on the door of the switch box inside. Nothing was written on it.

Heading back to bed I heard someone calling to me from somewhere. When I turned around to look, the battery on my flashlight gave out, leaving me frozen like a statue there in the dark.

APRIL–MAY

THE HAIR SALON

APRIL 1

Went a bit overboard cooking stew, so now it's stew morning, noon, and night. I live to consume stew. Stew is what gives my life meaning. Oh, glorious stew!

Translated a small amount. Cicadas in full voice. Headache.

APRIL 2

Went to the kitchen, turned the faucet on full force, stuck my hands underneath, and cried out, "Wara! Wara!"

Playing Helen Keller is what I do these days when I get blocked.

APRIL 6

Rain in the afternoon.

Met T. from the P. firm, with whom I share the same birthday, at a coffee shop in front of the station. Listened to one sad story after another— how his girlfriend left him on Valentine's Day, how he sprained his ankle the first day he went skiing and spent the rest of the trip in the hotel, how he lost his wallet, his glasses, and his memory in a downtown bar. Then he stepped outside, opened his umbrella, and kabam!, the thing fell apart. All because Pisces is under the curse of Saturn.

Had a long phone conversation with Y. in the evening. She confessed to a mild but budding crush on Obama.

APRIL 7

The long-dead poet Chūya Nakahara creeps into a corner of my mind at off-guard moments these days to read his poems. That alone wouldn't bother me, but for some reason he stutters terribly:

"F-f-f-foul m-m-melancholy
A s-s-sprinkling of s-s-snow"

Enough already, I say, whereupon he casts me a sad and mournful look and departs.

Infinitesimal progress on the translation. Cicadas.

APRIL 8

I want to make you happy, happy, ever so happy, the world outside our door is sand and more sand as far as the eye can see, it cries as it whips against our walls, I want so to make you happy I dance and spin around you, and each night while the sand cries I somersault over your body, grab you by both wrists and whirl you around and around, but when I set you down you lie there curled on your side, your round back a small, hard shell.

APRIL 9

In the afternoon, a blossom-viewing party hosted by N., a writer. The magnificent cherry tree in the park across the street from his house is in full bloom now, so we all brought our favorite food and drink and frolicked beneath the flowers. Since I was a bit late, the party was in full swing when I arrived. When the sun was going down somebody wondered if there really might be a dead body buried beneath the tree, as in the Motojirō Kajii short story, so we got a shovel and began digging. We produced a hole about three feet deep, but no corpse. Well then, what would happen with a living body? someone asked. So we picked up my friend T. from the P. firm, who was passed out drunk nearby, and planted him in the hole to find out. As far as we could tell, though, there was no particular change in the blossoms. After that we took the party inside,

where we fell into a heated debate over whether two TV personalities—one a middle-aged male musician, the other a mannish female fashion model—resembled each other or not. Broke up regretfully with barely enough time to catch the last train.

APRIL 10

Early morning dream: I slit the back of a frog about a foot and a half across with a knife to find a huge tadpole inside. Aha, so that's how it works! I thought.

Had a mild hangover all day.

APRIL 15

I was walking down Setagaya Boulevard when a waiter from the Indian restaurant where I eat occasionally tore past me in hot pursuit of someone, his face livid with anger. Must have been a customer who took off without paying, I thought, but when I looked down the road in the direction he was running, no one was there.

APRIL 16

Happy, happy, I want to make you so happy in every way, I tumble about on top of you laughing, yet you lie there motionless, your eyes tight shut, so I pry your eyelids open and look inside and, what is this? Are you still not happy? Have my efforts been lacking? Forgive me, please! For a second time, I take hold of your wrists, drag you outside, and swing you around and around over the sand, but when I look back our home is spewing sand from its doors, from its windows, from everywhere.

APRIL 18

Woke to a cloudless day. Mount Fuji white in the distance. I hang the futon out to air.

My sister, who is visiting Morocco on a business trip, phones with all sorts of questions: "Does 'blackmail' mean the same thing as 'intimidation'?" "How do you say to 'bluff' someone in English?" "How about 'fudging the figures'?" What sort of business is she doing in Morocco anyway?

A microscopic sliver of translation. Cicadas. Headache.

APRIL 21

H. phones to press me for the translation. I offer an abject, groveling apology. Then I explain to him that the stories in the collection—of the little brother growing from the

heroine's hip, or her pet horse with the granular, sagging skin, or of the lover being swung around in circles to make him happy—are literally driving me crazy, and to make matters worse, every time I resume work the cicadas outside my window start screeching though it's still only spring; but he shrugs off my litany of complaints, reassuring me in soothing tones that from what he's heard it's an orthodox love story, that if I just stick with it I will find my rhythm, that I've got to pull myself together. Then he hangs up.

APRIL 24

The little brother growing from my hip opens his perpetually red and crumpled face to let out another earsplitting cry. Yet no one hears him but me. Sure, I could reach down and caress him with my hand anytime I wanted. I could even bend over and kiss him. But I never have.

APRIL 26

I go get my hair cut. The assistant who shampoos me tells me that the lever that sends contestants down to hell on the *Arcane Impersonations No One Can Understand* game show is controlled by none other than the comedian Tetsuhei Arita himself—a most significant fact.

Having my shoulder-length hair lopped off—a most refreshing feeling.

APRIL 27

Passed the school grounds on my way back from posting a letter. That clump of bleached-out hair is still sprouting from the wall in front of the school. In fact, it seems to have somehow grown.

Gave it an even wider berth.

APRIL 29

Ever since it dawned on me that it might be the Cancel-Out Apartments, I've kept a surreptitious eye on that nearby two-story apartment building with the outside staircase. Since my first attempt to check it out failed when the residents grew suspicious, I tried a different time of day and went in the late afternoon.

The building is squeezed between two tiny dirt parking lots facing a narrow lane, so that you can pretty much survey the whole property by turning your head while you are "just passing by." With five apartments on the second floor and five more on the first, it perfectly conforms to the supposed layout of the Cancel-Out Apartments. It looks

inhabited, with plastic umbrellas hooked on the window grates facing the exposed corridor and washing machines standing beside each door, but the extreme quiet of the place gives it the atmosphere of an abandoned building.

Making sure no one was nearby, I approached the cluster of mailboxes at the side of the building. As with the apartments, they were arranged in two rows, five on top and five underneath. Assuming this was the Cancel-Out Apartments, no two boxes should have had the same last name. The names were on yellowing, sometimes tattered paper attached to rusty metal boxes whose gray paint was flaking, which made them hard to read. The name Nagai was written in characters on the middle box of the top row, while the box on the far left of the bottom row could be read either Nakai or Nagai—part of the name had been penned in Magic Marker directly on the painted metal, which had flaked badly, making it impossible to ascertain. Predictably, I didn't dare to look inside the box and find out, so I decided to just call it a day.

A millibar of translation. Cicadas.

MAY 1

Spent the day with an editor and salesperson from X. publishers visiting bookstores to promote my recently launched translation. In most places, I would be escorted to a storeroomlike office in the back of the store, where I would sit at the corner of a worktable and sign copies and write short messages on cards to be displayed with the books. They'd usually apologize for squeezing me in, but I love cramped spaces, so I felt right at home. I was fine for the first ten bookstores, but after twenty my hand was understandably tired, and after fifty my mind was completely fogged over. Sometimes it felt like I'd signed the wrong book; at other times that I'd signed the wrong name. So I called it a draw.

To celebrate the end of our hard day, we set off for the Bar Caravaggio in Akasaka, but look as we might we couldn't locate it. It should have been between an old coffee shop and a nose, ear, and throat clinic, but today the coffee shop and the clinic were pressed tight together with not even an inch separating them. Oh well, we shrugged, the Caravaggio is like that sometimes, so we headed off somewhere else without prolonging the search.

MAY 3

Chūya Nakahara showed up again. Perhaps he'd felt outmanned before, for this time he brought another long-dead poet, Sakutarō Hagiwara, along with him. They both

started reciting their poems, Chūya's habitual stutter now augmented by Sakutarō's nervous habit of overstressing the ends of his words. I found the whole thing both depressing and irritating.

Oh no-no-nostalgic pa-pa-parachute
Good evening, good evening to
Yuyuyuyuyuayuayua

When I snapped, "Pipe down!" they both left together, Sakutarō's arm slung over the shoulder of the downcast Chūya. As they made their exit, though, Hagiwara looked back over his shoulder and gave me the evil eye.

No progress on the translation.

MAY 7

Another e-mail from my former colleague F., the first in quite a while. From its size I could tell that this one had even more photos attached than the ones before. I didn't want to look, but she can apparently tell—don't ask me how—when I delete them unseen, so I opened them while chanting the spell, "Face it, face it." True to form, the first photo contained a single line, "My son at seven, at the Shichi-Go-San children's festival," while the scores of others, all of which showed her son standing blankly in front of one place after another, went unidentified. I still can't understand why she does this. I mean, it wasn't that long ago she sent out photos announcing her son had turned five. So how can he be seven already? He doesn't seem to have gotten any bigger, though he does look a bit unwell. Whatever. I delete them all.

MAY 9

I wake up in the middle of the night feeling that my room has somehow changed. It appears I fell asleep sprawled on my back on the bare tatami without having laid out the futon. Yet I'm sure that I'd gone to bed. There's what seems to be the beam from a flashlight playing on the wall, and when I hold my breath I think I can hear voices calling. At some point I fall back asleep, and when I wake up in the morning everything is back to normal.

MAY 11

In the evening I call T. from the P. firm at work. Someone else answers and tells me

he hasn't been in for a while. When I ask if he's been sick, whoever it is just hems and haws. Come to think of it, am I sure someone dug him up the day of the cherry-viewing party? I'd assumed they had, but maybe I was wrong. Did he join us when we moved the party into the house? My memory is a blur.

MAY 16

I go get my hair cut. It doesn't seem that long since the last time, but what can I do—it grows like crazy when I'm busy or stressed. The same assistant comes and stands beside me while I'm waiting my turn, regaling me with a steady stream of tidbits about what's hot in the world of TV entertainers. I worry a bit, since everyone else is busily sweeping up hair or carrying towels around, but then maybe that's his job.

I pass by the school grounds again on my way home. Not only has the clump of hair grown even more, now it's combed out into a wave.

Hey there, are we seeing the same stylist?

MAY 18

I stand before my mirror holding a white handkerchief in front of my face. Then I pull it down, slowly open my eyes, stare at myself in the mirror, and whisper, "Can this really . . . be me . . .?"

These days, whenever I get blocked I pretend to be a character from girls' comics of the 1970s.

MAY 29

Clear weather. Mount Fuji faint in the distance.

In the evening, I get swept up in a party celebrating the launch of a new magazine. It's held in a downtown art gallery rented out for the occasion, and is a real zoo, about three hundred people in all. I recognize quite a few faces. One of them looks like T. from P. firm, so I go running over and, yes, that's who it is. I was so worried, I say, I thought maybe we'd all left you buried there under the tree. That's crazy, he says, they dug me out right away. Don't you remember? When he laughs I see a cherry petal stuck to his front teeth.

MAY 30

The phrase "The walls have ears, Claude Ciari."

The phrase "The peak of youthful ardor, shins all hairy."

MAY 31

Again, I wake up in the middle of the night. I sense right away that this is the same place as before. Straining my eyes to see, I lie there on my back in the dark, holding my breath. The room seems about ten feet square, and smells of old tatami mats and dusty curtains. As my eyes adjust to the darkness I can make out the vague outline of something looming nearby. Someone is crouching there. I stay still, and the shadow hesitantly reaches out to touch my hand. I feel the small, soft, trembling palm of a child.

I gently squeeze back.

CONTRIBUTORS

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HIDEO FURUKAWA (b. 1966) won the Mishima Prize for *Love* and the Mystery Writers of Japan Association Prize and the Japan SF Grand Prize for *Tribes of the Arabian Night*. *TYO Gothic*, a collection of linked short stories originally published in *Monkey Business*, came out earlier this year.

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SACHIKO KISHIMOTO (b. 1960) is one of the best-known translators and essayists in Japan. She has translated Nicholson Baker, Lydia Davis, and Jeanette Winterson, among others, and her second collection of essays, *Reasons to Hold a Grudge,* won the Kodansha Essay Award in 2007.

MASAYO KOIKE (b. 1959) has written numerous books of poetry, short story collections, and essays. In 1997 she won the fifteenth Gendaishi Hanatsubaki Prize for *The Bus That Never Comes*, and in 2000 she won the thirtieth Takami Jun Prize for *The Most Sensuous Room*.

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ATSUSHI NAKAJIMA (1909–1942) was a master stylist who often turned to the Chinese classics for his material, but he was also an avid reader of Western writers like Aldous Huxley and Robert Louis Stevenson; the latter would become the hero of Nakajima's fictional biography set in Samoa. "Li Ling," a story by Nakajima, appeared in Issue 8 of *A Public Space*.

THE BROTHER AND SISTER NISHIOKA have attracted a cult following with their literary manga. Their books include *Hell* and *Dream of a Dead Man*.

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M. CODY POULTON (b. 1955) is professor of Japanese at the University of Victoria in British Columbia. His many translations include kabuki plays, the plays and stories of Kyōka Izumi, and "Portrait of an Old Geisha" by Kanoko Okamoto, among others. *A*

Beggar's Art: Scripting Modernity in Japanese Drama, 1900–1930 was published by the University of Hawaii Press in 2010. He is presently preparing, with Thomas Rimer and Mitsuya Mori, *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Japanese Drama*.

JAY RUBIN (b. 1941) is professor emeritus of Japanese literature at Harvard University. He is one of the principal translators of the work of Haruki Murakami. Among his most recent publications are *Modern Japanese Writers* (Scribner) and *Haruki Murakami and the Music of Words* (Vintage). His translation of *Rashōmon and Seventeen Other Stories* by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa appeared as a Penguin Classic in 2006, and his revised translation of Sōseki Natsume's *Sanshirō* appeared as a Penguin Classic in 2009.

MOTOYUKI SHIBATA (b. 1954) is an essayist and translator of American literature who teaches at the University of Tokyo. Authors he has translated include Paul Auster, Steven Millhauser, Stuart Dybek, Richard Powers, and Steve Erickson. He received the Kodansha Essay Award for *The Half-Hearted Scholar* in 1992, the Suntory Prize for Social Sciences and Humanities for *American Narcissus* in 2005, and the Japan Translation Cultural Prize in 2010 for his translation of Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*.

INUO TAGUCHI (b. 1967) has written five books of poetry. In 2000 he won the Takami Jun Award for his second book, *General Mō*. Inuo is his pen name, literally "Dog Man."

J. A. UNDERWOOD (b. 1940) has been a freelance translator from German and French for forty years, and has translated Franz Kafka, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Sigmund Freud, Gaston Bachelard, Elias Canetti, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Walter Benjamin, among others. His translation of "A Country Doctor" appears in *Franz Kafka: Stories 1904-1924* (Abacus).

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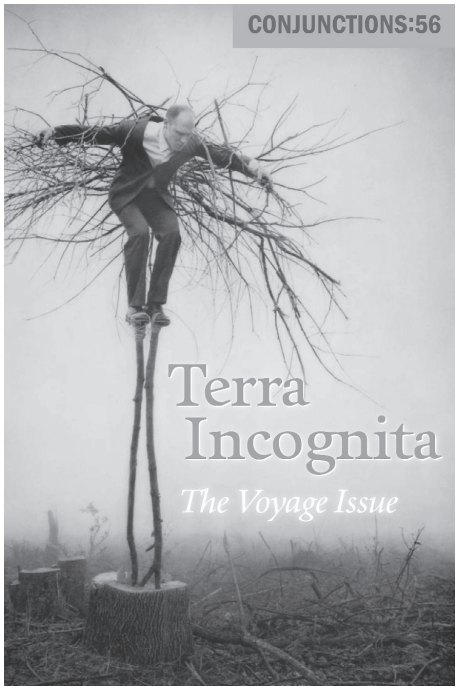

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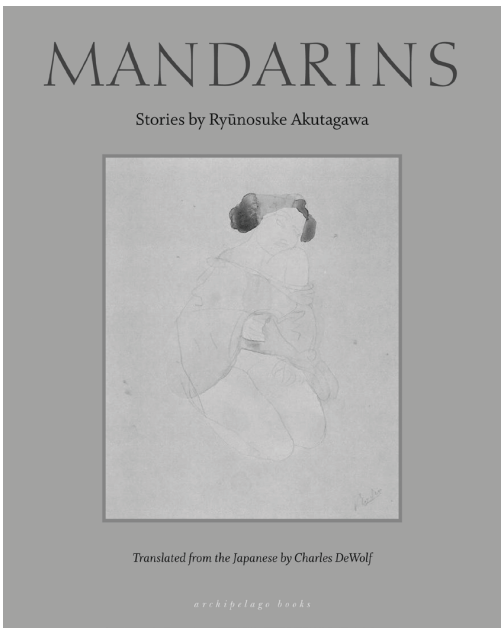

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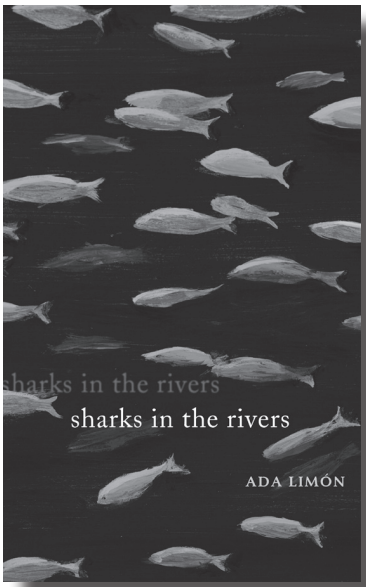

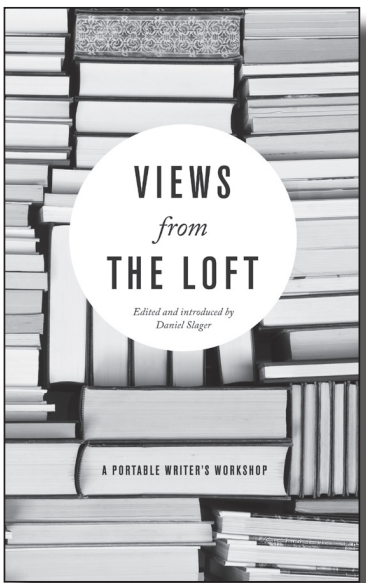

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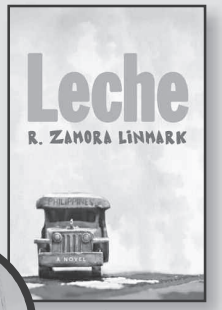

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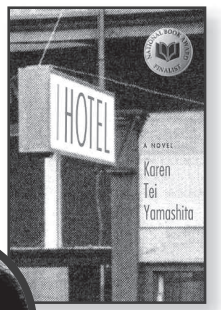

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