2

monkey business

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the monkey speaks

So here's another batch: what we hope is some of the best new writing from Japan. Some writers are already established, both at home and abroad, and some are truly new, having had their first work published in the original Japanese version of this magazine. We are arrogant enough to say that, hey, this isn't a bad place to start if you are curious to learn what's going on in the Japanese literary scene.

Our first issue received, we are happy to report, some terrific reviews, and a number of people, both our friends and people we scarcely know, told us they had fun reading it. The issue was launched in New York in April and May 2011, featuring literary dialogues between Hiromi Kawakami and Rebecca Brown, Minoru Ozawa and Joshua Beckman, and Hideo Furukawa and Steve Erickson. In September the three Japanese writers took another trip, this time to Toronto, meeting Canadian writers Eric McCormack and Rob Winger. Through it all, everyone had *enormous* fun, and we mean to have fun just as gigantic this coming spring (take a look at monkeybusinessmag.tumblr.com). See you all in New York City!

Our heartfelt thanks are due to everyone involved in creating the original Japanese *Monkey Business*, everybody at *A Public Space*—especially Anne McPeak and Brigid Hughes, the two irreplaceables of that great journal—and all the people from all the organizations that have supported us: the Asia Society, Japan Society, Japan Foundation, and the Nippon Foundation. We'd especially like to raise our hats to David Karashima from the Nippon Foundation for his immense help in everything and more.

Twenty-five percent of the sales of this magazine will go to the Nippon Foundation/CANPAN Northeastern Japan Earthquake and Tsunami Relief Fund, as it did last year.

monkey business

volume 02 | 2012

translated by Paul Warham
except Yōko Ogawa's "Nightcap," translated by Stephen Snyder

A month after March 11, the Monkey asked seventeen writers and artists:

WHAT DO YOU WISH WE HAD IN JAPAN TODAY?

Name your wish! And add your comments. It could be a physical object, a system, a trend, or a spiritual tendency: anything you like. Your response needn't even be a straightforward answer. Fantasies or fictions sparked by the question are fine too. Feel free to include illustrations with your response—or to submit drawings alone if you prefer.

SHUNTARŌ TANIKAWA

Poet/Lyricist of the "Astro Boy" theme song

ASTRO BOY MARK II

What Japan needs today, if you ask me, is Astro Boy Mark II. It would be just like him—don't you think?—to update himself for the twenty-first century and come back in a new and improved format. I can picture the new Astro Boy Mark II sitting in the lotus position high up in the clouds. From there, he can access all the information he needs from Earth, deciding in an instant between good and evil, and leaping into action to save the day... But wait a minute, oh no—it looks like his system's crashed! Or is he simply meditating?

TATSURU UCHIDA
Critic/Martial arts practitioner

A NEW GREAT BUDDHA AND A NUCLEAR POWER STATION SHINTO SHRINE

There are two things I really want right now: a Great Buddha in Kita Umeda and a nuclear power station shrine in Tokyo.

No doubt the modernists will reject both these ideas out of hand—but personally I think that an undertaking to construct religious buildings on a national scale would be an extremely effective way of bringing the country together.

In the Noh play *Ataka*, which I am rehearsing at the moment, the doomed samurai hero Minamoto Yoshitsune is on the run from his brother, the shogun. He and his entourage are disguised as mountain priests, fleeing for their lives. Their cover is that they are soliciting donations for a project to repair the great Tōdaiji temple in Nara. (Think of it as a kind of medieval fundraising project.) The climax of the play comes when the party is stopped at a border crossing and quizzed by suspicious guards. Yoshitsune's loyal retainer, Benkei, saves the day by giving a heartrending reading from a grandiloquent edict calling on the people of the nation to contribute to the efforts to restore this holy place. In fact, what he has in his hands is just a blank piece of paper. Togashi, the barrier guard, is so moved by the performance that he ends up donating to the cause himself, even though he knows the travelers' true identity. Talk about deep.

Confronted with this mighty tale of national unity, Togashi decides that a factional squabble like the fight between Yoshitsune and his brother pales into insignificance. (Probably.)

The Great Buddha is my idea for a way to make use of the old North Yard by the Japan Railway Osaka Station, now a vacant lot under redevelopment in the heart of the city.

Naturally, construction costs would be covered by generous donations from pious men and women of faith throughout the land. Once complete, the Great Buddha would comfort weary commuters as they board their crowded trains on the JR or Hankyū lines after a long day at work, his serene features illuminated by spotlights and overflowing with compassion for humanity. Instinctively, people would offer an awkward one-handed prayer in the Buddha's direction in thanks for having made it safely through another day.

The Great Buddha would bring spiritual peace to the great commercial city, an oasis of calm in the midst of Osaka's materialistic clatter and convulsions.

Whatever happens in the months and years to come, Japan's nuclear power stations will surely all be decommissioned. But I think it would be a shame to just dump them unceremoniously as something polluted. Instead, I think we should take at least one of them and convert it into a Shinto shrine—a nuclear power station shrine that would serve as a kind of national monument to appease the spirits of these places and remove the curse. "Thank you for all your hard work. Now please stay quiet until the end of your half-life arrives, and don't cause any more disasters. *Rest in peace*."

Obviously, the location would have to be Tokyo.

So, to sum up: My humble proposal is that Japan should build two major religious structures in Tokyo and Osaka, our two major cities, for the purposes of spiritual regeneration and the pacification of angry gods. The whole archipelago needs to quit the modern age and go cold turkey for a while.

TAKEHIKO KASUGA
Psychiatrist

"DEVICE A"

I don't have the knowledge or experience to talk in specialized terms about "Japan today" and what it needs, so I will write from my own personal perspective as one individual who happens to be living in Japan at this moment.

I sometimes wish a device existed that would allow you to pinpoint unpleasant experiences and wipe them from your memory. The device I have in mind looks like an iPod, but instead of inserting the little buds into your ears you attach them to your temples and flick a switch and the selected experience is zapped from your memory bank. All your other memories are left intact. I will refer to this apparatus as Device A.

Daily life is full of trivial annoyances and frustrations that, precisely because they are so petty and insignificant, have the power to provoke a special kind of irritation. Oafs with no manners who snub you when you say hello... idiots who cross their legs and stick their muddy boots out on the train... thoughtless buffoons walking three abreast and blocking the sidewalk. The best thing would be just to ignore them, but since I'm such a petty-minded person, I let these things get to me. I carry the resentment around inside until it starts to sour my everyday life.

The accumulated frustration of these little annoyances puts me in such a foul mood

that sometimes I feel like telling the country and its problems to go to hell for all I care.

Of course I realize that I would be wasting my time giving a fuddy-duddy lecture on morality, good manners, or common courtesy. That's what makes me think that if I could only use Device A to erase my memories of these disagreeable events, I might be able to look forward to stress-free and invigorating days again.

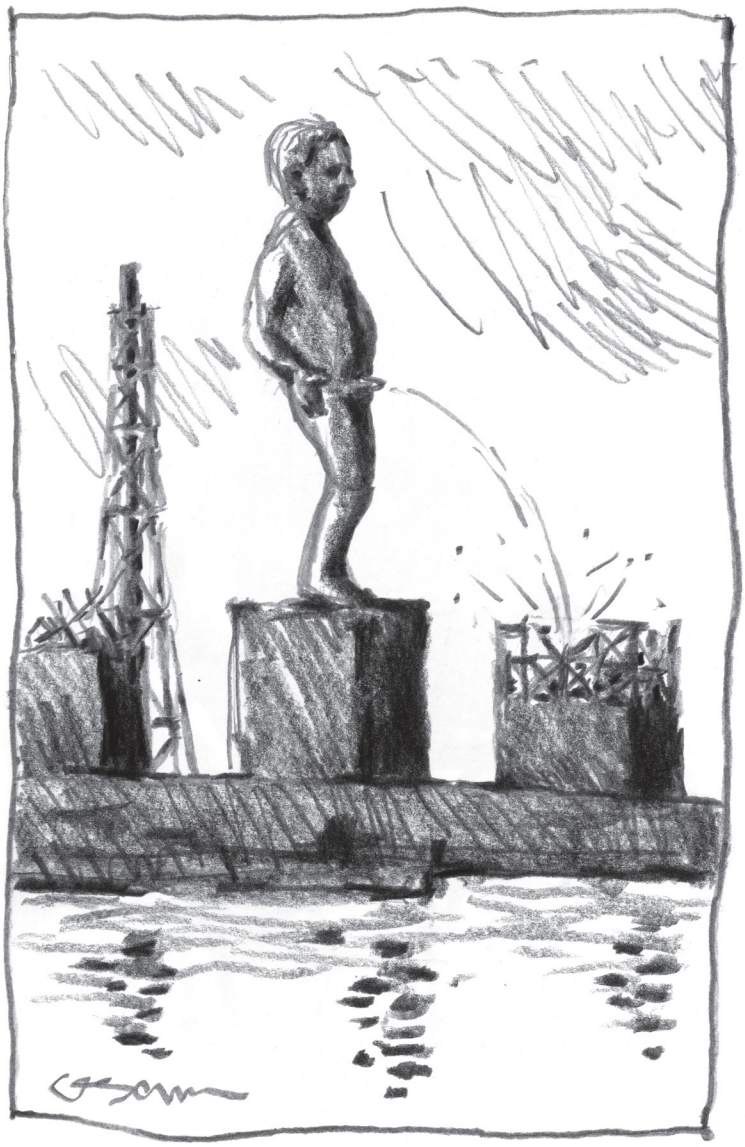
But how would you identify which memories you wanted to erase? This is where things might get tricky. The original idea was to get rid of memories that were irritating but insignificant, but I can see how events might spiral out of control. What if you had a fight with the wife and erased all your memories of her in a fit of pique? Imagine turning to your wife and asking her with a straight face: "And who might you be?" It doesn't bear thinking about. I also have a nagging suspicion that unhappy memories might be a vital part of what allows human beings to develop maturity and depth. A person who got too attached to Device A might well wind up being happy but shallow. But maybe the idea that people only acquire depth by dealing with unpleasant experiences is just a superstition. The urge to confuse unhappiness with spiritual nourishment may be nothing more than narcissistic sophistry.

Whatever the case may be, Device A would likely prove addictive, with the potential to cause irreparable damage. It might turn out to be little better than alcohol or drugs. But if Device A did exist and it *were* possible to eradicate unpleasant memories, including on the subconscious level, I might be tempted to use it anyway, in spite of all the risks.

TED GOOSSEN
Translator

DAYS WITHOUT ELECTRICITY (A FANTASY)

The days of no electricity are popular now, although when they began many hated the idea. Public parks, a number of which used to be golf courses, are full on those days. Musicians, street performers, and food stalls line the paths, and in the evenings, children race back and forth under the glow of gaslights. It is said that Japan's increased birthrate can be traced to the tendency to look for other entertainments when TV and computer screens are blank.



THE PEACEFUL USE OF NUCLEAR ENERGY

OSAMU KITAMURA / *Painter*

TESSHŪ SHAKU
Scholar of Religion

THE VEIL OF IGNORANCE

It's not exactly something I long for desperately, but I would be quite interested in trying on the Veil of Ignorance if it existed.

The political philosopher John Rawls believed that our principles of justice do not exist a priori, but are formed as the result of a consensus between the members of a society. The Veil of Ignorance was an attempt to visualize the process by which this agreement comes into being.

Imagine for a moment that a Veil of Ignorance exists. When you put it on, you are stripped of all knowledge about your own position and status. (You become ignorant.) What is your position in society? Are you a student? A company employee? If you have a job, what kind of work do you do? Are you male or female? You know nothing about your own abilities or property. Rawls called this the Original Position.

Rawls argued that people placed in this Original Position would make choices that would minimize the disadvantages all people suffer. For Rawls, this was one of the principles of justice.

Normally, for example, an employer and employee each follow their own strategies, aiming to minimize the disadvantages to their own respective positions. But once placed behind the Veil of Ignorance, people would make fair decisions, free from the bias of self-interest.

The Veil of Ignorance came in for a fair bit of criticism as a political philosophy, and even Rawls himself eventually retracted the idea.

But as a hypothesis, it's quite interesting. Even if it didn't lead to an agreement on the principles of justice, I'd still like to try it on. I expect it would make me realize how distorted my normal perspective on society is. And there are lots of other people I would want to wear it too. The March 11 disaster is a case in point. If our political leaders were forced to put on the veil, maybe they could see what needs to be done for the sake of the country, instead of being led astray by party interest or personal profit. After all, they face a whole range of crucial issues requiring urgent decisions: from assessing conditions in the disaster areas to resolving the nation's energy problems and deciding the future of our cities. It would be nice to think that these decisions were being made without the distorting influence of personal interest.

Incidentally, I had a clear sense that people were becoming less self-centered in

the aftermath of March 11—at least temporarily. The selfless attitude of people in the disaster areas, their readiness to share limited resources, and the energy-saving efforts of the rest of the country were all examples of people putting fairness and an equitable sharing of the burden first. People dismissed Rawls's Veil of Ignorance as just a fantasy. But for a while after the disaster it felt a little closer to reality.

YŌKO HAYASUKE
Novelist

SOMETHING THAT SERVES NO PURPOSE

I feel like filling my lungs with the polluted air and coming right back at you with a challenge of my own: "You really think one wish is enough?" Or maybe we should all raise our empty hands in the air and shout, "Give us Doraemon!" (Is it true what I heard about Doraemon, by the way? Does he really have a mini nuclear reactor inside him?) What do I wish we had in Japan right now? More things than I could possibly tell you. Not that anyone is going to make my wishes come true. But I'm not going to let that fact get me down. I will do my best to come up with an answer that complies with the rules. After all, this is a game, right? (I mean, you're *not* going to give me what I ask for, are you?) And so, as my own small contribution to the proceedings, I want to choose something totally impractical—a bit like the traditional gifts they used to give people when they got married. Steering clear of answers that are too beautiful or too wholesome, I humbly offer instead a response based on facts and solid research. Graffiti on walls, for instance.

A STORY ABOUT NORMAL PEOPLE. THE KIND YOU MIGHT MEET ANYWHERE.

Ten years after she moved to Tokyo, she daren't go outdoors without a surgical mask. Out of her meager salary, she scrimps to buy water. She lives in fear of the rain and checks the radiation levels and wind direction online every day. But she has no intention of moving back to the country. One night, it occurs to her to count the friends she has lost touch with since the nuclear power station collapsed and released masses of radioactive material into the atmosphere. One... two... three. But then, she didn't have that many friends to begin with. So she starts to add up the other people—celebrities she has never met and vague nodding acquaintances. That TV commentator she used

to like, her boss and coworkers at the company where she works as a temp, the old lady at the Yamazaki bread place where she buys her milk. And so on and so on.

Midweek, she sits next to an older guy in a bar who asks her all kinds of leading questions (only later does it occur to her that maybe he was trying to chat her up). On the weekend, she attends an anniversary memorial service back in the country, watching with rising irritation as her aunts, uncles, grandparents, parents, and cousins start babbling about the nuclear power station (and cooing over the baby her same-age cousin has just given birth to).

Every day, she takes the same thing to work for lunch—two big *onigiri* rice balls that fit exactly into her plastic Hello Kitty lunch box. For reasons of frugality, she has been making the same thing for years now, with the result that today she can make exactly the right size of *onigiri* with her eyes shut.

On a clear bright Sunday, she goes out to a demonstration. The rhythm of the drums, the clanging of pots and pans. Hundreds of children with tiny surgical masks on, hundreds of strollers. Mothers. Bright-colored placards. She sips from the can of beer she bought at a convenience store and for the first time in a long while thinks to herself: Hey, this is kind of fun. Long lines of plane trees cast shadows. There is a beautiful, clear blue sky.

She takes a deep lungful of the polluted air and is wondering where this sudden happiness has come from when a veteran activist with a *hachimaki* bandanna around his forehead thrusts a banner under her nose and says, "Revolution!" Taken aback, she puts up her hands in a gesture of rejection—as though she were in a busy intersection in Shibuya, trying to escape the attentions of a particularly insistent distributor of leaflets attached to free tissues.

"What are you grinning at?" the activist gasps in anger. "Fun and games won't change anything," he spits. He seems to be upset about something. Maybe he's just in a bad mood. One of the young organizers, an eco-warrior love-and-peace type in sandals, lumbers to the rescue. He shakes his head and gives her a wink. "These guys are in a world of their own," he mutters under his breath.

Before she even has a chance to agree, the young man wheels around and all but assails a bunch of police officers trying to impose unreasonable restrictions on the crowd of demonstrators. He walks up to the cops and with a look of perfect sincerity asks: "Is there no one important in your lives?"

It goes without saying that the young man's behavior is based on the somewhat arrogant conviction of his own existence in the here and now, protected and firmly

established on a solid foundation. The police officers make no reply. Don't even blink. But for some reason his question moves her tremendously and sets something resonating inside her. She even attempts a joke. "No—there is no special *person* in my life. But I have a cat, if that counts."

The young man looks at her contemptuously. Whatever. "You don't understand the times we're living through at all, do you?" he says.

The scene shifts to a tiny park in a residential area, lit by a mercury lamp. It is ten o'clock on Wednesday night and she is writing graffiti on the outside wall of the public toilets. She takes a fountain pen from the bag she carries to work (a pen her father gave her when she got into the prefectural high school) and uses it to write on the wall in small, neat, beautiful handwriting.

Or she writes with a can of red spray-paint. In a big, bulky, ominous script even she has never seen before. As she writes, she feels the cool spray against her skin, splattering red blotches all over her dried-out skin as though she has suddenly come down with chicken pox, or like some sacramental sign. Either way, she goes on writing:

Enough already!

Suddenly there is a bright light, and the policeman on patrol fixes the glare of his flashlight on her from behind.

Something like that.

TOMOKA SHIBASAKI
Novelist

NEIGHBORHOOD CAFETERIAS

This is something that's been on my mind for the past ten years or so: a neighborhood version of the school or company cafeteria.

There's a choice of simple, set meals with soup and pickles, or you just order rice and a dish or two on the side. It's there for you whenever you want to eat. You can take your own packed lunch, and people are free to share things they have made at home or received from friends. Unlike in your local bar, you don't have to order anything to drink. You don't even have to eat. You can just sit and watch TV if you prefer. You can come several times a day, or once in a blue moon. Or don't come at all—it's totally up to you. And the cafeteria is not just open to locals, but to anyone who happens to be passing through.

By spending time together, people would get to know one another—even if they didn't necessarily chat or become close friends (although obviously it would be great if they did). Whether they talk or not, just seeing each other regularly would turn strangers into acquaintances, even if only on the level of a familiar face.

Wouldn't it be great to have somewhere like that?

YŌKO OGAWA
Novelist

NIGHTCAP

When the world brings you anxiety and pain, nothing is as devastating as a sleepless night. You know perfectly well that worrying will do no good, but you worry still, shed tears all night long. And when dawn approaches, there's no solution, just a feeling of utter hopelessness—and the tears, so many you wonder how your body could have cried them all. I prefer to avoid such nights if possible, to sleep instead. A person may be poor and ignorant, may be afflicted with illness and suffering, but if he can sleep at night, he'll survive.

The nightcap is made of wool, hand knitted of thick yarn. The stitch is loose, the color dark. On top, there's a pom-pom the size of a Ping-Pong ball, and somehow only there can the mottled pattern of the yarn be seen. The pom-pom is so appealing, so touchable that it bears traces of the many hands that have rubbed it. If you don this cap at bedtime, you will sleep through the night free of worry and tears.

Everybody needs one—there are even versions for pets. Dogs, cats, sparrows, turtles, rabbits, goats, giant flying squirrels, armadillos, walruses—a nightcap for each, and with it the peace of sleep. What's more, the nightcap is ideal in an emergency; when disaster strikes and you have to flee, it can be folded up and stuffed in your pocket—like Snufkin setting out from Moominvalley with nothing but his harmonica. After all, no matter where you go, no matter where you find yourself, you need to sleep, to rest. Even when all is lost, when there is no refuge in the waking world, the nightcap and sleep remain. You can still find repose in the land of sleep, gently rubbing the pom-pom, free of all worry.

DAISUKE ASAO
Novelist

LITERATURE

I wish we had more literature! If only literature were a closer, more familiar presence in our lives.

If only all of us living in Japan could take in our hands all the literature that exists in the world and read it to our hearts' content, without feeling intimidated or diffident. How great would that be?

I live in a small town on the coast, and for various reasons it is not easy for me to buy books. There is no bookstore here, and none in the neighboring towns on either side. I make do with what I have on hand—silently reading my way through books I have requested from the local library, books that lie unmoving on the shelves, books that people have given me, and books that breathe quietly inside the cardboard boxes piled high in my room. I am still reading them now.

The books I have been reading since March 11 include some pretty dark stuff. Natsume Sōseki's *Light and Darkness*; Hiroshi Noma's *Dark Pictures* and *A Red Moon in Her Face*, and another anthology of Noma's work; Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*; and Haruki Murakami's *Underground*. All of these are books I have read two or three times already. I know the stories. Why my finger happened to stop at the swollen bumps on the spines of these particular books, I can't really say (with the exception of Noma, whom I had to read for work).

When I read literature—as I work my way through the chain of letters printed on paper—a self-centered urge wells up within me to try to link the catastrophic earthquake and tsunami that engulfed eastern Japan and the fallout from the nuclear power station in Fukushima with the words I am reading. I become incapable of calm, but equally powerless to stop my hands from turning the pages....

In *Light and Darkness*, the main character dismisses the operation he undergoes for his fistula as "just a simple procedure." But as he lies faceup on the bed, he sees a vision of his wife, O-Nobu, on the ceiling, dressed in her finest clothes. Sōseki writes: "He was just about to give a loud cry and try to call her..." In the famous opening to *Dark Pictures*, the major air raids on Osaka during the war overlap with a scene in which a volume of photographs of Brueghel paintings burns to cinders. Noma attempted to bring back to life the stories of his college friends who had died in prison or on the battlefield, from a place that "had been left as mere shapeless ash among the curled

and twisted lead gas pipes, the warped and naked girders scorched to a purple, and the glass that had melted, then hardened into pale-green lumps." In his novel *Vacuum Zone*, which depicts the Imperial Japanese Army, an incredible array of different kinds of paper appears: army notebooks, criminal intelligence, pay slips, daily orders, barracks logbooks, communication forms, private letters, scraps of paper for use in the latrine, banknotes, books, newspapers, reinforcement rosters, personal papers, photographs of the girl Hanae... and yet at the same time the Japanese soldiers were in a position that made it impossible for them to write "letters" on "paper."

Grapes of Wrath, the familiar story of farmers harried from the land they have cultivated since their grandfathers' day, was just as I remembered it, but I was struck for the first time by the expression the smallholders use to describe the true nature of what is driving them from their land: "It's the monster. Men made it, but they can't control it."

Past and present, some powerful force, invisible, uncontrollable, and lethal, has always confronted the protagonists of works of literature. Rereading the humor they are able to muster in the face of that looming presence, I sensed a deadly urgency, as if the writers had been pushed to the very extremes of literature, forced to the brink of the final precipice, and were fighting desperately to rally and claw their way back. And when through closed eyes an image came into my mind of the beautiful Sendai Plain being swallowed up by the black sludge of the tsunami as it surged over the tidal walls, and I found myself tempted to add, "like watching dominos toppling," it was the voice of literature that called out to me and said, "You can't do that."

Somewhere around the middle of Murakami's *Underground*, the author goes to interview Shizuko Akashi (thirty-one years old at the time), one of the victims of the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway. Even though the attack has left Ms. Akashi barely able to talk, the author writes: "I felt it only fair that I acknowledge her survival by meeting her personally." He also writes: "In all honesty, though, I wasn't at all certain that I would be able to write about her without hurting someone's feelings."

The world of literature is full of many, many works that can pacify and arouse the heart—not just for me, but for all of us.

In *Vacuum Zone*, Private Manabu Anzai's letters were inserted between the pages of a small notebook. Written in the letters and scattered throughout the notebook itself are fragments of language that were enough to shock anyone who saw them.

Is it hard? Hey—is it hard? If it's hard, then say so. I lost touch with my heart a long time ago.

If only we had more—lots more—literature.

SHIN'ICHI FUKUOKA
Biologist

A VERMEER PAINTING

I wish we had just one of the thirty-seven generally accepted extant paintings by Jan Vermeer here in Japan.

The only countries that possess Vermeer paintings are the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Austria, Ireland, and the artist's native country, the Netherlands. Unfortunately, international supertreasures on this level don't exist in Japan.

I have made a pilgrimage to see thirty-four of the thirty-seven paintings myself. Of the remaining three, two are in private collections in the United States, and no matter how much I beg, they won't let me see them. The other one has been missing ever since it was stolen some years ago. I don't suppose it's likely, but wouldn't it be great if it suddenly turned up one day in Japan...

RYŌICHI WAGŌ
Poet

TIME

An evacuee was granted permission to return for a brief, two-hour visit to her home, located inside the twenty-kilometer exclusion zone around the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. What did she bring back with her from this precious visit home after so long? It turned out she had touched nothing and came back empty-handed. What was the matter, someone asked. "I just stood in the living room and wept," she said. "Think of it like this," a bystander said: "You went home in order to cry." If we had only had just a little more time—just thirty seconds or a minute—we might have had time for one more heavy sigh.

KEN'ICHIRŌ MOGI
Brain Scientist

VACANT LOTS

One thing I wish we had more of in today's Japan is vacant lots. When I was a kid, vacant

lots seemed to be everywhere—we used to build our secret bases in them and stage pitched battles and water-pistol shoot-outs in forts we made out of cardboard boxes.

Today, the idea of supervision has gone too far: even if you do find a vacant lot, it is fenced off so that you can't get inside. I understand the idea—of course it would be terrible if something bad happened—but as a result of all this caution, today's children are being deprived of a wonderful opportunity to create their own games and build a community for themselves out of nothing.

The stray cats seem to meow their way around the vacant lots the same as ever—fences don't mean anything to them. But kids today aren't as agile as cats. I can't help thinking that we as a society should give more consideration to the needs and interests of these children.

I wish grown-ups would take the lead and open up the vacant lots for the local kids to use—even if only for a limited period before the next building goes up. I want to give today's stifled kids an opportunity to experience the joy of using their own ingenuity and creativity. And you never know: it might prove to be the starting point for change in our society.

YURIE NAGASHIMA

Photographer

"Is there anything we should know about your walls before we start? Sand walls, board walls, anything out of the ordinary?"

"They're plaster."

"Oh... *(Silence.)* As a general rule, we prefer not to accept cleaning jobs in cases like this."

"Huh?"

"We use water for the cleaning, you see, and sometimes it gets onto the walls..."

"But I was living in the same place when I had it done two years ago. It wasn't a problem then."

"The rules got stricter in April this year. Obviously we take every precaution, and everything is carefully sealed off. But even so, sometimes a drop or two of water splashes onto the walls. And if that happens, there's a possibility that the dirty water might run down the wall and leave a stain right under the air conditioner. Once a stain gets into the wall, it's a nightmare to remove, so in the interests of customer convenience we

only accept these jobs on the proviso that the customer bears full responsibility for the risk... Some units are quite difficult to seal properly."

"It was fine last time."

"Just because it was all right last time is no guarantee that it will be all right this time too. I'm afraid we can't take the job on unless you accept those terms."

"Let me see if I have this right... *(Getting annoyed.)* Are you telling me that you are not prepared to pay compensation if something goes wrong, even if it's clearly your fault? Like if things aren't properly sealed or something?"

"I'm afraid so. Even in the case of negligence. *(Coolly.)*"

"Are you not insured or something?"

"We are insured, but unfortunately we are unable to offer compensation."

"Look, I'm no pro when it comes to cleaning, so maybe I am missing something. But it seems a bit much to expect the customer to take responsibility for damage *you* caused to *their* property."

"I quite understand. And that's why we prefer not to take on jobs like this, to avoid inconvenience to the customer. With plastic coatings, of course, you can wipe the stains right off and the wall is as good as new. But in these cases I'm afraid we can only take the job on if you are willing to accept the possibility that the process may stain the walls. In fact, we require customers to sign a waiver before we start work."

"It's not really to avoid 'inconveniencing the customer' at all though, is it? The real reason is to cover your own backs."

"Well, it's both, actually."

"In that case, I'd like you to send the same person who did the job last time."

"Ah. I'm afraid that employee is no longer with us. He had to leave the company for health reasons."

"So you're proposing to send me someone I've never met? I know nothing about this person—how long he's had the job, the quality of his work... and yet you're telling me I have no choice but to trust you and your good faith. So then when on top of everything else, you tell me before you even start work that you can't be held responsible if anything goes wrong, it makes me extremely nervous. I have nothing to go on and no way to protect my own interests. But you just tell me if I am not prepared to put my blind faith in your company, I can take my business elsewhere. It makes me feel like I'm being taken advantage of. Not to change the subject or anything, but it's the same with what's going on at the nuclear power station in Fukushima. The way things are these days, people are quite reluctant to put their faith in companies' good faith, you know.

Can't you try to sound a bit more sincere?"

"I see what you mean.... All I can do is promise that we'll give it one hundred percent and do our very best."

"That's what I wanted to hear. All right, why don't you send someone over to do the air conditioner by the window first. There's not much wall there anyway. And if that turns out all right, I'll think about asking you to do the other one later."

"That will be fine. We'll be there on Sunday afternoon."

"I'll be waiting."

"Thank you for calling today."

"Till Sunday, then."

SACHIKO KISHIMOTO
Translator

Q-TARO THE GHOST, OR DORAEMON

There's a manga that has been in the back of my mind ever since the earthquake and keeps popping up at random moments. I'm pretty sure it's an installment of *Q-Taro the Ghost* that I first read when I was in grade school. A secret corridor leads down from the bedroom closet into a parallel subterranean world where there is an exact replica of the town Q-Taro lives in aboveground. Everything looks exactly the same—all the same houses in all the same places and exactly the same layout and furnishings inside each house. I suppose I've been thinking about it so much since March because on a subconscious level I wish the country could somehow be magically restored to the way it was before the earthquake and tsunami. But that alone would not be enough. The town beneath the earth was missing its most vital element: people. There was something lonely and frightening about it that still comes back to me now. A town where all the structures are in place but there are no people is terribly sad. It is not so different from rubble, really.

Maybe Doraemon would be better than Q-Taro the Ghost. He wouldn't have to do anything. He wouldn't even need to bring out any special gadgets from his magic fourth-dimensional pocket. Just the mere fact that he was visiting us from the future would be enough. Then at least we would know that we really do *have* a future.

But if he did happen to have an extralarge Time Cloth with him, part of me would like him to drape it over the nuclear power station and make time run backward for a while.

DREAM BIG REI BETSUYAKU / *Illustrator*

What do aliens look like? One popular view in recent years is that they are gray beings who look more or less like us.

"HEL-LO.
I have removed the insides from this cow for you."

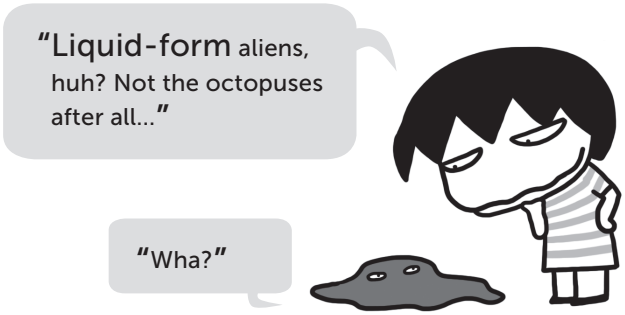
Or that they are already here among us, disguised as ordinary people.

"Oh wow,
look at the price of these tissues!"
[Aliens can't resist cheap tissues.]

These theories have plausibility on their side.

But personally I find the traditional versions more exciting. Like the classic "octopus" alien, for example.

My view is this—in the case of something that's never been seen, and that may not even exist, why not dream big?



Of course, your dreams won't always come true.

TAKASHI ODAJIMA
Columnist

CONFESSION

Confession. That's right—like in *The Godfather*. Let's have one of those confessional boxes in every city, town, and village in the land. That should do for a start. Crime must be tried by law, but sins need to be forgiven. I'm sure the suicide rate would go down too once we introduced a compulsory system of confession and the remission of sin, backed up by authority.

Of course, a certain amount of corruption might be inevitable once the remission of sin enjoyed official status. But certain types of sin can only be fermented through the process of corruption. We should probably close our eyes to a degree of dishonesty.

Speaking of corruption, the priests who would perform the rites of absolution would be granted the very highest levels of authority. They would play a role in the supreme organ of state power as Confessional Members of the National Diet. Under this system, diet members would represent not the hopes or support of the electorate, but their sins. Then we would be freed from the idiocy of the present system, where a bunch of cowards wholly incapable of representing sins are given responsibility for our politics. Wouldn't that be a wonderful thing?

translated by Michael Emmerich

I CHASE THE MONKEY AND THE MONKEY FLEES FROM ME, THE MONKEY CHASES ME AND I FLEE FROM THE MONKEY

MASATSUGU ONO

The reason I didn't notice the faint cheeping of the monkey inside me was that it sounded just like a wooden chair creaking, and I happened to be sitting in a chair, rocking my body slightly forward, then backward, and the *creeeeek creeeeeeeeek* of the wood somewhat resembled the cry of a beetle, a long-horned beetle, say, which makes one wonder how they produce that sound, the beetles, though on reflection, as I gazed at it there on the table where it had suddenly plopped down, or rather dropped down, as if by mistake, the only place that low drone, that vibrant *hummm* still tingling in my ear, not in my ear, exactly, but in the turbid, motionless air, could really be coming from is those wings, delicate as clippings of burned film, peeking out from under the glossy green dome of its back like someone's untucked shirt, ugly and unnoticed (only not anymore, because the second I thought that the bug whipped its back open for an instant and drew them up inside), and sure enough when I picked the beetle up and flipped it and stared fixedly at its mouth, at what appeared to be its mouth, it simply wriggled its legs in a frenzy, in a panic, like it was trying to say something, only soundlessly, and I didn't hear anything like a voice, of course, only those six wheeling legs that appeared, somehow, frustrated with me and my staring, my clinging, sticky gaze, they were struggling to break free from my persistent gaze, wriggling so fast and furious it would hardly have been surprising if they *were* to make a sound, twanging the tight, taut sight line that strung my eye to its body, and so I stared even harder, but still there was no sound, nothing at all, until I began to think perhaps those wildly and yet clumsily jerking legs might *not* be trying to break away from the entanglement of my gaze after all, no, perhaps, instead, they were gathering it up, making my attention the material from which to weave whatever a beetle might weave, and the more I pondered

it the clearer it became, the beetle was weaving something in its silence, and the figure that would eventually appear there would be the beetle's voice, made visible, though at the same time I couldn't help thinking, watching those six legs flail this way and that in the turbid air, capturing the beetle's bewilderment at this puzzling state of affairs—there it was, pinched between my fingers, unable to move its wings yet levitating in midair—that they were simply moving, that no rule guided their movement, and even if its legs *were* weaving some sign, the language they revealed was bound to be a babble, incomprehensible clipped snippets of meaning, nothing more, and if the threads it was weaving together had been culled from my attention to it, from my gazing, the voice its legs drew into visibility would be my own voice, not humming in the air, perhaps, as a true, audible voice, but rampaging nonetheless insistently through my mind, and in that case perhaps the sound I heard, that cheeping creaking, which might have been the whirring of all the joints in the beetle's legs as they paddled drunkenly in the air, prompting me to stare still harder, or which might have come from the joints of the chair I was sitting in, causing me to let my eyes drift away from the beetle, down toward the chair's legs—well, perhaps the truth was that the sound was coming from within me, that it was projected by means of my gaze into the external world, and so my ears were simply picking up a sound I myself created, *but no, that can't be, it can't be that*, I told myself, concentrating on the sound, trying to pinpoint its precise origin, except that now all I could hear, over the sound of the cheeping, was my voice, but no, that can't be, it can't be that, and there was nothing I could do, because while eyeballs, as is evident from the fact that they are equipped with eyelids, would, if nothing were there to restrain them, bound recklessly out of the head, tumble from their sockets like foolish chicks from a nest, the grotesque masses of folds, the welded slits we refer to as our ears are incapable of setting out on their own, tracking down the origin of a sound, they simply stay there, stuck to either side of our faces, absorbing any sounds that come their way in the most frustratingly passive fashion, in a manner so aggravating, in fact, that I took the beetle pinched between my fingers—was there fear in its eyes? Fear multiplied hundreds, even thousands of times in each facet of its two compound eyes?—and popped it in my mouth, feeling for the briefest moment its scrabbling legs on my lips, on the roof of my mouth, on my tongue, and then I was chewing, listening to the muffled scratching of the beetle's body coming to pieces and then being ground ever finer on the surface of my tongue as a bitterness coated the inside of my mouth, that was all there was to it, and it struck me that this was nothing like the joy I had experienced as a child just yelling, making sounds, the joy I felt stitching words together, in no matter

how senseless and broken a chain, and of course why should it be, as something thick and warm squirmed down there, where my legs met my bottom, and I trembled, tilted more forcefully on my chair, lifted into motion by the warmth, though since there was this monkey inside me, perhaps the anger skewering me, so fierce I could hardly tell it from despair, wasn't skewering me at all, but the monkey, but maybe the monkey was already me by then, and so, concerned that it might get out, outside of me, this monkey in me, or this me in me, whichever, I squeezed my lips together, my labia, my anus, while from deep within me, far away, there came that same fragile cheeping, like a person moaning in distress, or in anger, licked by the flames of a ferocious, burning rage, *cheeeeeeeep cheeeeeeeeeep*, and I was plugging the only escape route the monkey in me or the me in me had, covering my ears.

Could I have been drowning in a bathtub holding so little water that it would only reach my knees if I stood up, warm water oozing into my body through my anus and my genitals, it hardly seemed possible and yet the monkey that inhabits me clearly thought it was, because, though I'd never heard that monkeys are afraid of water, it seemed to have panicked when it awoke and realized that it was submerged up to its waist, flailing and kicking its legs, splashing and plashing, spray flying, even though it was only a bathtub and I was lying in a comfortable daze in the warm water, that's all it was, the monkey acted like it had landed in a bottomless swamp, a shriek so awful you wondered where it could possibly be coming from, except that of course it was coming from me, to a certain extent it was my own voice, it had wandered into me and was looking for a way out but not finding one, or finding what looked like a way out only to discover that it was tightly shut and so, for the time being at least, it couldn't get out, it couldn't go anywhere, and at the same time it was the voice of the monkey that was here with me, within me, it was that, and the monkey that was also me was screaming at the top of the monkey's lungs, and my lungs, loud enough to burst an eardrum—but whose? The monkey's? My own?—and that scream, loud enough, it seemed, to tear my throat in two, was yet unable to tear my throat, drowned out by the sound of water flying this way and that as hands and feet, the monkey's or mine, it wasn't clear which, slapped against its surface, and it was almost as though the monkey and I, or at least I, since I don't really know how it was for the monkey, was trying to block out those earsplitting—but whose ears? The monkey's? My own?—shrieks with the gruff yet warm, chaotic yet soft and thick splashings that filled the bathroom, which makes every sound echo in upon itself, though at the same time I found myself asking myself why it was even necessary to block those screeches, because if for even a fraction of

a second, I or the monkey, whichever it was that was screeching and flailing, as if on the verge of drowning, allowed itself, or myself, to entertain that question, and if these ears, these eardrums, were to be split, or burst, the monkey would escape through the holes, no, no, that's not it, that can't be right, because if that happened there would be no sound from the outside world, only my voice and the monkey's reeling through my body, I chase the monkey and the monkey flees from me, the monkey chases me and I flee from the monkey, and so it would go, around and around, until those two voices with nowhere to go, the monkey's and mine, could no longer be told apart, two threads woven together—as if they could be told apart now!—and it would be even harder for me to escape from the monkey that had found its way into me—or, from the perspective of the monkey shut up inside me, to get away from me: that might have been an answer, but rather than give that answer I, and the monkey, kicked and flailed, hands and feet, plashing and splashing, spraying water everywhere, as if in extreme vexation at the conundrum, unable, in the end, to get away from each other, unable, either, to drown in a bathtub holding water that reached only as high as my knees, exhausted, legs stretched out in the tub, arms raised above my head, which rested on the rim of the tub, the wet hair in my armpits exposed, and I stared down at my two pale breasts as they heaved, rising and falling, hanging listlessly on either side of my chest, looking as though they were being pulled apart, not simply by their own weight but rather by something within me that was trying to push its way out along the line that ran down the middle of my chest, dividing it in two.

But prod and push as it might from within my breasts, be it the right breast or the left, try as it might to burrow through the thicket of blood vessels and insubstantial knobs of my mammary glands, tearing frantically ahead with its teeth, the monkey would never make it out, nothing emerged from my breasts but the milk that seeped from my nipples to be sucked by no one, and if things continued like this the monkey, finding itself tangled hopelessly among the vessels and glands, its movements increasingly hampered, would become tangled as well in cords of fear, although, who knows, perhaps in that event, if it were to sink its teeth into my glands and vessels once again and scream, though since its mouth would be full it wouldn't really be able to scream, not out loud, at any rate, but if it were to scream in its mind, its voice, that voice in its mind, a scream that was less a scream than a desperate attempt to keep from screaming, would ooze out from my nipples in liquid form, a muddy white stream that might set my breasts trembling, ever so slightly, and in fact as I regarded my nipples, right and left, I could see the monkey's half-liquid voice seeping out, being secreted, and I understood very clearly, without

even needing to see the monkey, that this was its voice, and that it was crying out—but to whom? To its mother? Its mother, living on some island far, far away from here, in the Far East, the whole reason the baby monkey's face is red being that red is the color of blood and the child, which had buried its face so deeply in its mother's breast that it had become one with its mother's body, was violently pulled away, so that the skin of its face peeled off, that, surely, is the only conceivable explanation, and the mother, whose baby was now beyond her reach, although since the mother had no arms to begin with reaching was never an option, but even if she could have she wouldn't have been able to reach her baby, he was someplace so far past the entrance to the bay, far outside the two incredibly possessive, loving capes (but alas, alas, the mother had no arms!) that struggled to hold on to everything, bundling it all up together, everything that lived in the small lead-colored bay, everything, indeed, that lived as though it were already dead, and everything dead that nevertheless continued living, that no matter how she strained her eyes, staring out past the capes, her gaze would never reach him, the mother, the small bay reflected in eyes that look so dazed and empty it almost seems she hasn't noticed that her baby has been taken from her, seems, even in her ignorance, to know, she must, for why else would her face be so red, she must have grasped unconsciously what she does not know, her mind may not know but her body does, and that is why her face is so red, unless, of course, she is simply embarrassed!—for help. But just what was it the monkey was saying, was it really screaming to be let out or was it saying something else, I wondered, placing my finger gently against my nipple, wiping a bead of milk onto the soft, full flesh and then slipping my finger into my mouth, licking the milk, and though it wouldn't have been a surprise if it had tasted bitter, like juice from a patch of grass someone has ground underfoot or torn up, the flavor of despair or agony—yes, I remembered sinking my fingers into grass, pulling hard, then gasping in pain as a blade cut me, before I knew it my finger was in my mouth and I was sucking, the taste of blood filling my mouth, anxiety thumping through me as I squinted fearfully down at the softest part of my finger and saw the spidery red line the stiff blade had left—but it didn't taste that way at all, instead it was sickly sweet, saccharine, suggestive less of a scream than of relief or drowsiness, which meant, I assumed, that the monkey must be sound asleep, still tangled in the intricate web of my blood vessels and mammary glands, its teeth, moreover, still sunk into those glands and vessels, only not, perhaps, as a prelude to a scream, but in an act of ravenous sucking at a sleep gentle as milk and warm as blood, sleep that the monkey, separated from its mother and unable to find any way out of my body, couldn't bear to

be without, because this was its only means of denying the reality of the situation, which meant that the monkey needed to remain, in its sleep, steeped in cozy dreams, and if that were the case, then perhaps the scene I was seeing was its dreaming, a dream of returning home, turned into a clump, the monkey as a clump, a ball of hair from which this dream arises, passing into my blood to circulate all through my body, passing into my mammary glands, secreted through my nipples, and from there expanding into the world, this dreamlike scene.

But I didn't know the monkey was watching me. I didn't notice at all. Where was it, was I, perhaps, on a tram, yes, yes, I wasn't in the bath, or perhaps I was, but I think we must have been on a tram, not I but we, my mother and I, riding on the tram.

Where were we going? Mommy help me, help, please help me, do something about this monkey inside me, please help me, oh, oh, help me help me. I kept crying and screaming and my mother, unable to bear the sight of her daughter crying, in agony, the awful screeching too much for her ears to take, or her heart, gathered me to her chest, pulled me tight against her, but no matter how tightly she held me the racking pain didn't pass from my body into hers, the monkey in my body did not move itself inside her, however fiercely she pressed me to her I couldn't enter into her, and so, while she may have been trying, by folding me and the monkey within me into her, to make my suffering and despair her own, to lift them away from me, the monkey inside me kept wailing its despair and suffering until I sensed that it had grown exhausted with its wailing, it had closed its eyes and fallen into a limp sleep, and that little monkey, abandoned and forgotten by its mother who, far away, on that distant shore, had not only completely forgotten it but felt her forgetfulness in her own reddened face and buttocks, was tumbling back and forth within me, crashing this way, careening that way, rocked by movements less regular still than those of the tram, overcome now by a violent, nauseating fit of motion sickness that instantly took hold of me, too, so that I felt myself starting to heave, only to find that a sort of giant lump in the pit of my stomach or deep in my chest had hoisted itself into my throat and was keeping me from vomiting, much as I wanted to, at which point I realized that this lump, this damp clump of wet hair, since that was how it felt, was the monkey, yes indeed, it was the monkey, willing, if that was what it took, to use this despicable, putrid, puke-inflected trick to try and escape from me, or rather it was the monkey's heart, its being, mean, ugly, hairball-like, I saw that now, all of a sudden, and I clung to my mother, screaming Help me help me help me, do something, please please please, pressing my mouth into her dress so that she felt, perhaps, that I was trying to get back inside her body, but

I wasn't, and although I myself may have believed I was trying desperately to endure the pain, trying to keep myself from weeping and wailing, I wasn't, I know now that unconsciously, without realizing, I was trying to keep the monkey from getting out. I understand that now.

If I'd had a mirror then and could have gazed into it and seen my face flushed scarlet, or if, in the absence of a mirror, I had lifted my skirt, lowered my underpants, then twisted my body around and examined my bottom, I would, no doubt, have comprehended with my body what my mind ignored, yes, yes, and surely if I had done that, if I had rolled up my skirt—but I did, come to think of it, I rolled up my skirt, and if it wasn't me who did it then it must have been the monkey inside my body—and examined my butt—but I did, I did inspect my butt, and if it wasn't me who did this then it must have been the monkey inside my body!—I would, no doubt, have been able to confirm that it was in fact I myself, not the monkey, who was struggling to keep the monkey from getting away, I who wanted that monkey inside me. But I wasn't going to have anyone else lift up my skirt, pull down my underpants, examine, with eyes that were not my own, my butt, and remark upon its redness. I was tired of being touched, tired of people looking. Riding on the tram with my mother, swerving and swaying, rocking and bumping, shaken by the realization that she and I were swaying and bumping, swerving and rocking at the same time, in the same rhythm, and why did it have to be this way, the thought came to me. To the monkey. No, no, to me. That it had to be me, that I myself must be the one to lift my own skirt, drop my underpants, and inspect my butt. Or else the monkey. It could be the monkey, too, so long as it was the monkey inside me. Or my mother. Could it be my mother? I didn't know. But certainly no one else. And there was no way I could see my butt, no way to confirm, unless I lifted my skirt, dropped my underpants, twisted my body around. Because there was no mirror in my room, not in my room, not anywhere else in the house. No mirrors, and thus no way to check and see whether my face—the face of the monkey in my stomach—was scarlet, flushed like the cheeks and forehead of that monkey, the mother monkey who, without entirely realizing it, felt such deep guilt at her abandonment of her child, and at the same time felt shamed—though I am not sure how such a thing might be possible—by her lack of a guilty conscience. Indeed it was precisely in order to maintain this state of affairs, precisely in order to avoid seeing my face, that I stayed far away from all mirrors, that I not only stayed away from them but shattered any pocket mirrors I came across, smashing them against the ground, gathering stones from the courtyard to fling at the mirror set into the wall over the fireplace. And when the shards of glass

scattered across the floor persisted, even then, in their dogged efforts to reflect me, I settled still deeper into my determination not to be defeated, I brought a larger rock in from the courtyard to smash the pieces more finely, I knelt down on the floor over the ocean of broken glass and brought the rock down again and again on the pieces until the rock's coolness against my skin gradually turned to warmth and I broke out in a thin sweat that soon began to collect in runnels and my palms grew warm and damp, sparks of red appeared amidst the sparks of silver that leaped at my face, I felt myself transported, rocked like driftwood on a tide by a great, soft emotion, carried into the distance, carried, no doubt, toward that small seaside village on the shore the monkey within me called home, and though that meant I was being taken from my mother I was not the slightest bit uneasy or afraid, I felt, indeed, a sort of joy at the prospect, and so, unable to untangle all the emotions the monkey must be feeling as it wailed in despair, searching for its mother, but with my own equanimity undisturbed by the hair ball of bewilderment that stuck within me as I considered those emotions, feeling, in fact, all the more deeply and expansively at peace, I went on, or rather, no, it was not me, but neither was it the monkey, something stained red all over that was not me went on, and on, headed who knew how far.

Then, all of a sudden, from a great distance and yet from somewhere so close at hand it seemed the sound would pierce my eardrums, I heard my mother screaming, and the scream dragged me violently from the placid sea—waters unlike any the monkey, who knows nothing but that small bay enclosed by two deeply loving but possessive capes, has ever seen—of emotion, landed me on some unknown shore in the darkness of a mountain's shadow, and I, thrown up on a beach littered with sharp and somehow forbidding stones, began to suspect as I reflected, utterly calm, that it was my mother, that it was these insistently repeated screams, unfurling around me with all the fury of a tempest, that had smashed all these mirrors with their force, and when I saw that the silver shards scattered everywhere around me had been crushed so finely that they could no longer hold my reflection, and that their surfaces were all covered over in red, relief flickered faintly within me.

But a mirror is a terrible thing. Even as I crushed the bits, smashing and bashing them so that I could hear the sound of their destruction, they kept trying to carry me off someplace far, far away. It felt terribly good, unbelievably good, except that my whole reason for staying away from mirrors, not merely staying away but insisting on breaking each and every mirror I happened across, was to prevent myself from being carried away from myself, off to some other place. The mirrors seized me, provided

me with an escape route. But I had no desire to flee. That was the difference between the monkey and me. Hey, are you listening? I said quietly, head lowered so that I spoke directly into my chest. So as not to be overheard by my mother, who was sitting next to me with, for some reason, her own head lowered as well. That's what makes you and I different, you hear? I don't run away. I don't ever run away, I whispered. The monkey was miserable being shut up inside me, yet I was doing the very thing it hated so much to myself. Shutting myself up within myself. I had no use for another me, reflected in a mirror. I was no coward, piling all the dreadful things that had built up within me, body and mind, onto the back of that other me, giving its shoulders a forceful push, sending it off into the depths of the mirror's flatness so I could say I'd been purged, I was pure. That was one thing I would never do. Never.

Besides, little monkey, I said, still speaking in a whisper, talking into my chest so that my mother would not hear as she sat beside me on the tram, there's no need to worry. It doesn't matter whether there are mirrors or not, not to you, little monkey. Isn't that right? Just think about it. Where are you? You know perfectly well where you are, don't you, little monkey? You wouldn't be reflected even if there were a mirror right in front of you.

No sooner were the words out of my mouth than I was plunged into despair. The car shook, banged, and the tram stopped. Supported by my mother's soft body, though I didn't really want to be supported, I did not fall.

No mirror would reflect the monkey. Only I was reflected. Here I was struggling desperately not to be reflected, trying with all my might, sincerely and openly, to block my own escape route, and the monkey didn't even have to make that effort. That's hardly fair, now, is it, little monkey? Is it?

My eyes, burning with rage, were directed at the door, yet I saw no one, not one passenger getting off, or getting on.

And yet I found myself staring at a woman in the seat across from me. I had no memory of her being there earlier, or not being there. She was the only person sitting there. She was an enormous woman, but obviously not so large as to occupy a block of seats spacious enough for five or six adults, and there was, in fact, on either side of her, on her left and her right, at least enough space for an adult to sit, and yet she was the only one there, and she was fat in a way that made this seem somehow expected. Her thighs were full, her kneecaps far apart, though whether she was intentionally opening her legs or trying but failing to close them was debatable, and the skin of her knees and shins was dry and flaky, covered with mud and reddish scrapes, and for some

reason she was barefoot—no sooner had I noticed that than my eyes tried to turn away, to flee from the sight the way the monkey shut up inside me tried to flee, but I mustn't run away, I must refuse to look away, the way I refused absolutely to flee from myself—and the tips of her toes were bruised and rimmed with mud, stuck so solidly to the floor it was as if they had sprouted roots, and still the tram sped along, rocking and banging, and the woman didn't move, and still the tram sped along, rocking and banging, and still the woman didn't move, and the tram kept going, no passengers getting on or off, but since it is possible, even when no one gets on, to arrange for a person to get off, I tried at the third or fourth stop to stand and make myself one of them, but my mother, sitting beside me, grasped my arm and made me sit back down, and I felt unmistakably in the hand that held me both my mother's fear at the thought that I might flee from her and her determination not to let me get away, sensed this in the stiffness of her hand, though perhaps in reality her feelings, that mixture of vague unease and unyielding resolve, were aimed not at me but at the monkey inside me, perhaps, I had no way of knowing for sure, though either way it made me furious that she should harbor such unjustifiable worries because, whatever the monkey was feeling, I had no intention of running away, except that a moment later my anger was gone, as though it had been sucked out of me and consumed by the huge woman sitting across from me, and in fact I noticed a brown paper bag on the seat beside her now, into which she had thrust her hand—a hand so exceptionally, bulbously fat I became anxious that the opening of the bag might tear, and my breath caught in my throat at that vision—she was rustling around inside, and then she removed her hand and brought it to her mouth, then repeated the process, each time chewing and chomping whatever it was, disgusting sounds whose volume matched the size of her body resounding through the tram, and then she went further, sucking each finger one by one, sliding them into her mouth, all the way in, producing yet another repulsive, oblivious sound, like some famished wild animal devouring its prey, that filled my ears and the monkey's ears—I couldn't be sure the sounds I heard were reaching the monkey inside me, yet it seemed implausible that, assuming it was the monkey that was seeing this scene, the sounds would be inaudible—like slobber, so that I forgot the determination not to flee with which I had kept myself in check at every moment, and the monkey, tangled up, as I imagined, in the bewildering thicket of my mammary glands and blood vessels, left its eagerness to flee hanging on some jutting branch and forgot about it, yes, we forgot ourselves, and so of course we forgot each other—neither the monkey nor I was there anymore, that is to say, the monkey and I were seeing nothing, and thus, perhaps, by the same token, were equally

unseen, and if so, if that was the case, then there was no need anymore for me to lift my skirt, drop my underpants, and twist around to examine my butt again and again in order to erase the memory of having my skirt raised and my underpants lowered, and perhaps if I can only believe that my butt is red, even though it isn't really red at all but deathly pale, I will no longer need to pretend that I believe it never happened, that my skirt was never lifted, my underpants never lowered, my genitals never exposed to anyone's gaze, never touched in a way that left them covered in red, and I will no longer need to pretend that the monkey inside me is there, not to fend off all the things that try to enter my body, or rather, since it had already proved impossible to keep them out altogether, not to turn the key in the lock inside me so there would be no further incursions, not to stand guard and make sure none of the various pointy objects that were constantly being pushed into me succeeded in breaking the lock and opening the door, no, it wasn't that at all, it had been carried off from that hill overlooking the small bay on that distant, distant island and brought here inside me for some other reason altogether, not yet entirely clear (and after all, weren't my mother and I taking this tram to go see someone who would clarify precisely that issue?) with the result that the monkey had chewed my mammary glands and blood vessels, or only the blood vessels, if my mammary glands were not yet quite developed, and various other nerves all around my body, with the result that I was constantly racked by pain and fear, no, perhaps I would no longer have to pretend that this was the case? Could it be? And since neither of us were here anymore, not the monkey and not I, someone else who was neither of us, meaning the rest of you, yes, you, could believe that this was true!—and simply stared as if hypnotized at the woman as she sucked her fingers, or so I thought until it began to seem as though each of the fingers she was sucking was me, or the monkey, first me, then the monkey, me, the monkey, me, the monkey, me, the monkey, me, the monkey, cradled in her warm tongue and awash in warm saliva, both of us vanishing, being carried off by some huge force that came upon us from somewhere far away like a welcoming tide, much larger, even, than the woman, unbelievably tall though she seemed, so that we could not hope to resist, until, once again, I was dragged back by my mother from that pleasant intoxication as the air around us, filling the car, began to tremble with the sobbing of my mother who, sitting beside me and beside the monkey inside me, had buried her face in her hands and was sobbing aloud as though it had slipped her mind that the whole reason she had brought me with her on this tram was to try and keep me, with the monkey inside me, from going anywhere, or at least from going where I wanted to go—though I myself had no idea, yet, where that might be,

and no idea whether I would ever know, all I knew was that my monkey had been torn from its armless mother, yes, mother and child pulled apart! Separated! And fiercely as the baby monkey clung to the warm tufts of its mother's fur, determined never to let go, never to let go, the mother monkey had no arms with which to hold her baby close, resolved, too, never to let go, never to let go, and that, as a result, it had been impossible to resist the force pulling them apart!—she seemed, as she kept sobbing, to have forgotten that, and I, the monkey and I, stared out the window all but blocked by the large woman carefully sucking on each finger, one at a time, making the lewdest and most vulgar sound, as the hospital to which my mother had planned to take us, to have us separated, cruelly, horribly separated, receded into the distance. And so, when the woman got off, leaving behind the crumpled-up brown paper bag, which rocked a little as my mother continued to sob—it seemed to me, in fact, that it was my mother's body, not the shuddering of the tram, that was rocking the bag—I wondered where the tram, whose only passengers, now, were my mother and the monkey and I, the monkey and I not yet torn forcibly apart—though I was the one doubled over, clutching my stomach, showing with my body how much it ached to have the monkey inside me, how it pained me, pleading for help, please, someone help me, tearing frantically at my chest, pushing my fingers up into my genitals even though I knew I couldn't dig the monkey out that way, yes, it was me, unless, that is, there was hair on the fingers—was headed, as I floated in the bathtub, gently wiping a bead of muddy white liquid from my nipple onto the soft full flesh of my finger—a subtle ripple shaking the surface of the now lukewarm bathwater—and then thrust the finger deep into my mouth, all the way, and moved my tongue around it, but nothing came to me now, nothing returned, just that cry, the cheeping, from somewhere far away, which is to say from somewhere close, seeping out of me, or oozing into me, ringing, ever so quietly, in my ears.

translated by Motoyuki Shibata
and Ted Goossen

Tales in Tanka*

MINA ISHIKAWA

A tale in which a mountain witch cries a marsh of tears over the many arms and legs she failed to devour

A tale about the tiny key bequeathed by the late art museum director T.

A tale about a fairground haunted house inhabited by a real tanuki**

A tale in which a discarded left arm creeps up to knock on its owner's door one rainy night

A tale in which the wild grapes I absentmindedly pop into my mouth become your finger

A tale recounting the splendorous evil ways of a couple with silver-rimmed glasses

A tale in which the right hand carries the Earth, the left an apple... and how it ends is up to the monkey

A tale told far from the address on one's driver's license

A tale which spends seven hundred pages on the two hours before the brawl began

A tale of a life lost seven times on a quest for missing words

A tale about a desert where a child with a hole in his throat walks wheezing

* The originals of these poems are all thirty-one-syllable tanka.
** Japanese raccoon dog.

A tale about the dreadful teeth of a maniacal baseball manager so ravenous he devoured his players

An ancient tale of cooking chopsticks used to deftly snare a red ogre

A tale of six people meeting in a lobby at 2:00 a.m., five lacking shadows

A tale of a young girl who turned into a mountain witch when the night rose in her mirror

A tale in which a conductor announces, "Although our departure is five minutes behind schedule..." and launches into a story of tragic love

A tale in which you share a pair of shoes with a bum in Ueno Park, only to bump into him again later

A tale that starts the day you stuff a clumsy letter into his shoe locker and go home

A tale full of vows so embarrassing discomfiting awkward they make you itch tingle cringe

A tale where a fresh sheet is ruined when someone smears your body with cocoa

A tale in which his outline faded fast and though I held him tight he disappeared

A tale listened to eagerly one winter night by burr-headed boys with mouths agape

A tale of a whole winter spent shaving one's fast-growing mustache and beard

A tale in which Granny sees coffee for the first time and makes a terrible scene shrieking It's poison goddamnyou

A forlorn tale rising from a piece of chestnut in the chestnut rice that turns out to be a folktale from home

A tale of ten boar babies boiled and eaten in a village without fairy tales

A tale in which soldiers steal biscuits commandeered by their officers under cover of darkness

A tale of a red ogre who cheers up after scarfing down eight portions of peach buns

A tale of wings that soar through a dog's silent dream to cover the universe

A tale of soda water flowing down gullets at a banquet where hate trumps love

A tale of being annoyed when the snowball cookies you bought taste like blizzard balls

A tale in which you gaze from your window at your beloved pretending to be an apple seller

A tale of a letter that faded the moment you stopped trying to read it and now is totally illegible

A tale of a freight train crammed with damaged goods that ran westward ever westward

A tale of a black apple—doesn't anyone know? Is there really no one who knows it?

A tale in which a painstaking investigation reveals the criminal to be a parfait freak

A tale of a hag gazing at the seething sky on the primates' final evening

A tale in which every last book abruptly sprouts arms and legs and flees planet Earth

A tale in which a camouflage shirt sticks to your chest and you can't go home again

A tale in which you wade a waist-deep bog leaving your precious biscuits soggy and unappetizing

A tale of a man who plunges into a ravine crying Ineverintendedtocheatonyou!

A tale where, on the day I leave, I give him a small key I've warmed in my coat

A tale where two continents quietly separate and cease to share a common civilization

A tale containing a beautiful passage about gloves put away that I kept reading over and over again

A tale about a young man who flees from a mountain witch only to trip a land mine and lose his leg

A tale of questionable veracity written by a cloud across a sweep of sky

translated by David Boyd

MEDITATIONS ON GREEN

TOH ENJOE

I admit it: If properly told, it makes for a pretty boring story. Once in a while somebody shows interest—but strictly in a professional sense. Others, unduly impressed, may remark: "It's great that you can make money like that." I suspect that, more often than not, they're mocking me. So I tend to gloss it over:

"I'm looking into whether or not the paramecium is religious."

That fares well. Granted, it rubs experts the wrong way and explains nothing at all. Nonetheless, as icebreakers go, it's extremely effective. From there, you can steer the conversation in any direction you please. It's even worked for me in the Bible Belt.

"Are you religious?" they ask. From the get-go they assume that I must be joking.

I prevaricate: "More religious than a paramecium, I suppose." That one goes over just fine. For some strange reason, everyone seems to believe that they're more pious than the paramecium. Thanks to the widespread assumption that the paramecium can't be religious, I rarely find myself caught up in niggling arguments.

"Let me know when you find out what religion they practice." This type guffaws and slaps me on the shoulder.

From time to time someone delivers a courteous answer in an oddly grave voice: "... They might be Buddhists."

I can outline my research in just three lines. I need to. Most grant applications ask for a summary about that long. I suppose what I write makes some sense, seeing as I get the grants I apply for. Sure, the outlines are short, but they're actually quite painful—both to write and to read. Nothing but cryptic jargon. Maybe if someone flipped through a dictionary, they'd start to get a vague sense of what it's all about. But there's nothing fun about any of it. It's just run-of-the-mill biology. Three short lines.

Nevertheless, if I tried to define each one of the key words, I'd have to explain so many other terms in the process that what started as a mere three lines would end up as long as a biology textbook. Were someone to ask, "Is the paramecium related to the sow bug?" I'd have to explain even more. But going on in that vein is futile. As you know, the paramecium isn't an insect. It's a single-celled organism.

"I'm looking into whether or not the paramecium transmigrates."

Something like this—albeit practically meaningless—goes over a whole lot better than a lengthy explanation.

When it comes to the speed of metagenesis, the paramecium is superior to man. In a decent environment, it will double its numbers every ten minutes. It turns out that the paramecium is something of an expert when it comes to death, as well. In the past, the paramecium was thought to be immortal. We were well into the twentieth century by the time we figured out if the monadic creature was destined for death or not.

The paramecium procreates by splitting in two. Does that make a generation of paramecia an ever-growing number of the same exact thing? Well, if all paramecia are no more than carbon copies of their predecessors, then wouldn't they also inherit their predecessors' age? If that were the case, then all paramecia would have died of old age eons ago.

One man tried to keep track of one paramecium—during World War I no less—but that's no easy feat. Paramecia can multiply at will. Once they split, they start to pair up, which makes it rather difficult to identify a single paramecium in the crowd.

The paramecium doesn't die. Only after we arrived at this conclusion did we come to realize that the paramecium recombines its DNA within its own body. We invented the word *autogamy* to describe this process. When given a drug designed to suppress that blasphemous ability, the paramecium was finally able to reach life's finish line and die a proper death—of old age.

"Say the paramecium has a soul…"

This opener makes for great table talk.

"What happens to the soul when it splits in two?"

Now the conversation takes on a life of its own.

Is a soul divisible? Can it be copied? Does it spontaneously generate within an empty vessel? It's easy to keep a discussion like that going. Everyone has something to say about the soul. Some believe—rather naively—that the only form that a soul can possibly take is that of their own.

"So, if the soul can be divided, can I have a piece of yours?"

"If it can be copied, can you save a copy of your soul on your laptop?"

"Can you back it up?"

"What conditions are necessary for a soul to spontaneously generate?"

When someone insists that the paramecium has no soul, I ask: "What about mammals?" If they reply that only human beings have souls, I may ask: "And what about Neanderthals?" Or, perhaps: "Do you suppose the collapse of *Homo floresiensis* some twelve thousand years ago could have been avoided if they only had souls?"

"Do you imagine you could be the only one with a soul?"

That's a good choice, too.

If, on the other hand, they are willing to accept that the paramecium may have a soul, I like to ask: "What about machines? Do they have souls too?"

Conjectures on heaven—or hell, for that matter—work wonders.

If there is a hell, it would've reached capacity ages ago. There's no way that hell could accept newcomers. Thus, hell does not exist.

"Is that right?" I say, pulling out a pen.

The surface area of the Earth is 5.1×10^{14} square meters. The surface area of the sphere formed by the great circle of the planet's orbit is 10^{23} square meters. The latter boasts a surface area roughly a billion times that of the former. If we note that close to half of the human beings born since the dawn of history are presently alive, then—between the Sun and the Earth—there's more than enough room for the dead. Plus, few regions are inhabited by the living.

If they question why I bring up the giant sphere that encompasses the Earth's orbit, I explain: That's the Dyson sphere, advocated by Freeman Dyson, which aims to provide efficient use of energy for our overdeveloped civilization. If you tacked on heaven and hell, they'd be no bigger than small gardens. You can imagine an even bigger sphere if you like, but for all terrestrial life, a somewhat modest sphere is ideal, as far as temperature is concerned.

I ask: "What's heaven—to a paramecium?"

"An environment with an abundant food supply?" People tend to give very matter-of-fact answers when it comes to the paramecium. Who knows why.

Some worry about a shortage of souls. "Given the world's skyrocketing population, what if we run out?" "Doesn't transmigrating mean that the aggregate of souls stays the same?" If you stop to consider this, you'll soon find yourself up to your neck in doubt.

If the number of extant souls is now what it has always been, then it's been the same since the infancy of the cosmos. In that case the soul, and therefore the meaning of life, is as old as the universe itself.

Having come this far, I have no idea how to call it a day. Why do we take it for granted that we can only transmigrate into the future? Why can't someone transmigrate into someone else in their own lifetime? Why can't the soul inhabiting a strange rock on some distant planet travel across space to transmigrate into you?

"Well, nothing's faster than the speed of light, right?" they say, catching you off guard. Does the speed of a soul's migration—or the speed of rebirth—have to be governed by the laws of physics? Think about it. If the number of souls has remained constant since the dawn of time, then it doesn't make much sense to limit the entire population of souls to our tiny pocket of existence.

A paramecium could transmigrate into a human being for all we know. This stuff isn't exactly written in stone.

And that's perfectly fine. All that matters is that the conversation continue. Nobody wants to have a serious debate about any of this. They just want to pass the time, prevent things from getting awkward. The words we exchange are crystal clear. My mind keeps shifting with the conversation. As if the world only exists in a spotlight of darkness. It feels good to surrender to the flow of the conversation. More than anything, it's easy.

When we use loaded words—like "soul"—the conversation develops all on its own. The specific meanings of the words have already been peeled away. Blown away. The words take on the shape of chess pieces. If you do that, I do this. If you do this, I do that. As predictable as a chemical reaction. Words summon other words. The conversation goes on. There are all kinds of standard moves. Every now and then you discover a new line. It's a game of chess stripped of the goal to checkmate. It's lace coming undone as it's being sewn. The sounds of the words stay the same but the meanings change again and again. This is how the pieces move. Some play shogi, others chess. You flip the board over. You throw it at each other. You ask: What game were we playing? You return to your senses. You laugh. You tell yourself that you were having a serious discussion.

The life of a cicada. The life of a mayfly. The life of a paramecium.

The stock of paramecia I use have evolved to live shorter lives. This is the result of my experiment, in which I administer drugs that block autogamy and then repeatedly select the specimens that live the shortest lives. This is, of course, evolution. It's not the sort of change that occurs in any particular body. Evolution is the name we've given to

a process that takes generations to become clear.

In my lab, only the quick to die survive. Well, they die—of course. But their progeny are favored. That's no one's fault per se. It just so happens that, within the confines of my lab, they're the ideal subjects. That's how things work: disgruntled paramecia can hardly lodge complaints.

When experimenting with evolution, choosing a short-lived organism is of the utmost importance. It does no good at all to set up an experiment if you can't observe the specimen's evolutionary process within your own lifetime. I admit there's a good chance that I'll use up my allotted time whittling away at the paramecium's life span. So as far as I'm concerned, my experiment's pretty much a failure. It's all prep work. But in my defense, nobody did any of the preliminary research before I got here.

I continue to handpick the mutations that multiply and die the fastest. I've located specific life-shortening genetic sequences several times. Sure—you could argue that all I'm doing is infecting the population with disease, but we still know next to nothing about paramecium pathology.

Mankind is evolving: it's flat-out wrong to claim otherwise. At this very moment, our cells are being replaced by new ones. Our DNA is constantly mutating. It's hard to think that humans today are the exact same species as the hominids who walked the earth hundreds of thousands—maybe millions—of years ago. Our evolution never stops. Our immunities grow stronger, our senses weaker. The appearance of new species is not the sole measure of evolution. What is a species anyhow? Roughly speaking, two organisms are said to belong to different species when they cannot mate. But, when something can no longer do something it could do before, that's called retrogression. According to this standard, since they can't successfully mate, one may argue that members of the same gender are in fact different species. Thus, if we use the term *species* in its narrowest sense, only two individuals who have already mated can belong to the same species.

"What a cruel experiment."

Some say. And maybe they're right. Yet, in my experiment, a group that would—under natural conditions—die off is allowed to thrive. I suppose there's no real difference between them and the fowl and livestock that have become so ubiquitous thanks to the flavor of their meat. And they're slaughtered in their prime. If you're going to read into the life of a paramecium, you'd better find similar meaning in the life of a chicken or a cow. Anyway, the success of a life can hardly be measured by length alone.

"Do you see any speculative movements?"

I cock my head in puzzlement. My interlocutor rephrases:

"Sorry. What I meant to ask is: do your short-lived paramecia display any speculative movements unobservable in normal paramecia?"

"Trying to reach enlightenment, for example?" I answer her question with another question, curling up the tail of the final word.

The room is enveloped in laughter. I have no idea what to make of it.

She and I are the only ones not laughing.

"So if a paramecium transmigrated..."

That night, my interlocutor and I continue our conversation in bed.

"It wouldn't have to be aware of its own rebirth, would it?"

"No, not really. All that matters is that we can observe the rebirth empirically," I reply, caressing the small of her back. I move my hand to her butt and continue:

"The particles from one paramecium end up in the body of another. In a sense, these particles are recycled. It's not atypical for a paramecium's body to consist largely of particles that once belonged to paramecia that have since died. I think that's kind of like transmigration. In any case, the paramecium probably doesn't know what's happening. To a paramecium, it's a pretty meaningless supposition, I guess."

"Why don't you put them back?"

I don't understand what she's asking.

"If you favor the transmigrated ones, won't they end up evolving—excelling at transmigration?"

Now I get what she means. If they die faster, then the paramecia will transmigrate more frequently within a given period of time. It's an interesting idea, but the reality is rather basic.

"The ones who eat their friends will survive. That's it."

She listens to my matter-of-fact reply and thinks in silence for a moment. She laughs when I slip my arms under her armpits.

"So..."

Yeah? I brace myself for her next question.

"... does a paramecium have a gender?"

Of all the questions she could ask... I gasp. I start coughing. She slaps me on the back as I wipe a tear from the corner of my eye.

"I'm sorry," she says.

She was just walking by. The presentation looked interesting, so she stopped in.

She tells me that she doesn't know the first thing about the actual species. I ask her what she studies.

"Math," she answers.

I look at her and blink.

She and I are different species. In several meanings—maybe every meaning—of the word.

She claims that anything of significance can be pinned down and defined. I don't reject that idea outright. I mean, you can probably define any meaning in some way.

"It's not... like that." She sits on the edge of the bed.

"I don't know if all meanings can be mapped out, but you can still use definitions. You may be able to do something even more acrobatic than that. Maybe you can define something and then, later, show that it defies definition altogether."

"You think?" I reply unaffectedly.

"Maybe not." She grins at me.

"But you aren't exactly interested in semantics, are you?"

I do the only thing I can do: nod in agreement. I am somewhat interested in her question, but not enough to commit to the process that I suppose is required to understand it.

"Well, you're free to choose. I guess I'm interested in what, in your language, might be called original sin."

Taken aback by the sudden appearance of the term, I let the associations develop.

"Paramecia who have been to paradise acquired forbidden knowledge. Now they're cursed to live out ever shorter lives in an evolutionary experiment."

She nods silently. Her tone becomes explanatory:

"It's hard to say if there is such a thing as original sin. Even if there is, we have no real idea what it is. But once there was—maybe still is—an environment in which believing in original sin made survival easier. Then again, the experiment has nothing to do with evolution in the narrow sense—it's only concerned with genetics. You're the one trying to observe evolution. I'm interested in meaning, so you'll have to forgive me when it comes to minutiae like that."

I just shrug my shoulders. She ought to be able to understand that, as I eke out my living developing this experiment, I'm a far cry from a stalwart evolutionist. It's ironic that my interest in directly observing the evolutionary process has cut me off from the mainstream of evolutionary research. Nevertheless, I'm not confident that she can pick

up on the subtleties of that fact.

She shakes her head from side to side.

"I'm fed up with people saying 'Snow is white when it's white.' I might be inclined to agree if they say 'Snow is white because everyone says it is.' I wonder if we can even formulate the question. I mean, when you believe snow is white, you can't define it as anything other than white..."

I grab the glass on the nightstand and look at her.

"You mean an experiment in which the paramecia are convinced that they transmigrate?"

She offers an immediate correction:

"I mean an experiment in which they really are transmigrating but aren't aware of the fact that they can't prove it."

"That sort of thing is perfectly ordinary."

She buries her face in the pillow. She murmurs: "It ought to be perfectly ordinary, but I don't get it."

An experiment in which the paramecium survives by living a shorter life. It's possible. After all, that's exactly what I'm doing.

The species survives by reaching enlightenment. But something about that doesn't quite fit. I mean, if they all reach enlightenment, I feel like there won't be any paramecia left. Not, at least, paramecia as we know them. Then again, I really have no idea what enlightenment is anyhow, so there's no point in overthinking it. When you don't understand something, you can fill in the blanks any way you like. Apparently I have what you may call a "whatever works" attitude—in spades.

A paramecium with the fast-aging gene gives off a green light just before it dies.

I tried to inject this gene around. It's a part of my experiment. It took a lot of effort, but the effects are more or less visible. I'm pretty satisfied. They've been programmed so that, moments before they die, their bodies collapse and fluorescent proteins synthesize.

Not all of my paramecia emit that light. Some die uneventfully. Others glow, then recover. I've written a paper, in which I called the mutation *Enlightenment*. A journal accepted it without revision, which I found odd. I bet they would've rejected the paper point-blank if I had used the term *Nirvana*.

The ratio of paramecia that glow before they die to those that do not is about one to ten. To me, though, one in ten is pretty high for something called *enlightenment*. At the same time, for a scientific experiment, a 10 percent success rate may seem rather shoddy.

They may doubt my claim when I say that the paramecia light up. But it's no

different from the green fluorescent protein (GFP) that won the 2008 Nobel Prize in Chemistry or the glowing rats and dogs that are created—for no real reason—in labs each and every day. Light like that is commonly used to observe intracellular activity.

It's not a garish kind of glow. No bright light in the dark. It's faint. Calmer and quieter than a candle's final flicker.

I add one more long-term objective, which leaves us with this triple billing:

- Evolve the ones who age the quickest.
- Evolve the ones who shine the brightest before dying.
- Evolve the ones who rush toward that light.

The last one is just a pet project of mine. I don't know if I can expect that much from the paramecium in terms of phototaxis and sensitivity. By sensitivity, of course, I simply mean to say photosensitivity.

What was it I wanted to accomplish with this interminable project?

I don't know. That's all I can say. I just wanted to try it because it looked like fun. If you fail to do something you know you can do, you simply lack the necessary skills. Tackling the unforeseen is the best part of research. With no motives. No causes. You create a chain of events and they begin to paint a picture. All of it can be erased with a single slip of the brush.

Right now, my favorite group of mutants are the short-lived ones that repeatedly give off light as they are about to die. Someone may point out that, if they can *repeatedly* give off light, then they aren't about to die when they do so. But, if you just look at them, it's clear as day: They're in anguish. They look like they're ready to keel over at any moment. You develop a special sensitivity toward this by spending time in the lab. So if they ask for some standard of judgment, I'm afraid I can't comply. When the paramecia are close to the end, green light covers their bodies. Comforted by the light, they slowly start up again.

I'm watching a video of it with her.

I don't want to keep a record of how long it took to get to this point, of all the hardships I had to endure on the way. That would be really boring. So ten years rush by in the blink of an eye.

My interlocutor delivers a request:

"Leave them as they are, but evolve them to live longer."

I ask her why. She lowers my raised eyebrows with her index finger. She pleads in a whisper:

"It can be your present to me, for all Christmases to come."

AT THE DELTA

REBECCA
BROWN

I'm on a raft on the Nisqually River. We've come out of the woods and I can see the open water of the sound ahead of us. We're at the delta. The water is brown but clean, it's just the soil that's been stirred up. The banks on either side are the same color. The river is slowly going out in swirls and slow, slow currents. I'm standing on the raft and holding a pole, dipping it in and finding the ground, then pushing off. I don't really need to do this much—we're moving with the current—so I can stand here in the air and sun and feel them. The banks are brown and muddy, and there are hoofprints of deer, I think, and scratchy little prints that must be birds, and beyond are meadows, grassy and green, but also with red and white and yellow flowers and I think even some blue ones. Birds fly by and chirp and there's an otter on the bank and everything is perfect, kind and quiet. A dog is on the raft with me, my dog.

My dog sits quiet and obedient, content, it seems. Its head is up and sniffing. It likes to be out in the clean, good air. It sits on its haunches, the sun on its back. I wonder if it needs a drink. But it's a smart dog, knows it can put its head over the side and drink. The water is brown but clean.

I've got the pole in the water, pushing and stroking, lazy almost (call me Huck). The sun is clear and bright and the sky is blue.

I feel pressure on the pole and look down and see the water churning, then churning more, unhappy, almost rumbling. There are black things in the water—but things I barely glimpse, and a faraway sound, then round and black—the top of a tire somebody's junked? The back of a fish or two? But then there's more, then more. It can't be sharks. A bunch of eels? I hate them even more although I'm less afraid of them.

It's not.

That faraway purr sound was my dog, rumbling low and worried in her throat. Her trying to wish them away

and warn me and control herself—she gets it even worse than me. But all for naught.

We're in a churning pack of them. Of dark black backs and shiny dripping teeth.

The back of my dog is shivering, her teeth are bared. She's both afraid and gearing for a fight. I don't know what I am.

Suddenly on the shore I see a man. Maybe he's been there all along, but only now I see him. He's standing there alone, and though he's far away, it feels like I see him close. I see his eyes. He looks at me. Across the water seeing me as if he's saying, Come.

My dog looks up. She sees him too. Her ears twitch and she whines. She wants to go to him. She looks at him then back at me. Although she wants to go she will not leave me.

Around us, in the churning froth, a million dogs are swirling like in *Jaws*. There's not that famous music, though, it's quiet. What I can hear is water, still, but moving slowly underneath the way they churn. What I can hear is the less than whine my poor dog tries to hide from me. She wants us both to go to him.

If we go in the water they will get us and, before we get the chance to drown, they'll tear us limb to limb. It's almost like I feel their teeth already.

The man on the shore is watching us. He waits for me to come to him.

In my head, I see that if I did, if I stepped off this pallet, and my loyal dog did too, and walked to him, across the tops of the bodies of the terrible dogs, or if we even actually walked on water, this could happen, but I do not. I do not go to him.

Why won't I go, I ask myself, as he tells me, Come, again, as if it's simple.

Maybe it is. Maybe it's only matter of lifting my foot from whatever shaky base it's on into the air above whatever shifts beneath and then toward the place I think he is. But I do not.

My dog is whimpering again, now more afraid, it seems, than me. But infinitely loyal. Despite whatever else she knows, she neither will forsake me nor abandon.

I still don't understand how she abides with me.

translated by Ted Goossen

THE GREAT CYCLE OF STORYTELLING

HARUKI MURAKAMI

A novelist is best defined as one who tells stories. The thirst for stories dates back to the days when human beings lived in dank caves, gnawing on the roots of trees and roasted scrawny field rats. In fact, we can imagine that it was the exchange of tales that made their long, dark nights bearable as they huddled around their fires, seeking to protect themselves from harsh weather and beasts who were far from friendly.

It goes without saying that these stories had to be told well if they were to be told at all. Happy stories had to be told happily, scary stories scarily, and solemn stories solemnly. This was a fundamental principle. Spines had to tingle, tears had to flow, funny bones had to be tickled—whatever it took to make listeners forget the hunger and cold for a few fleeting moments. Then and now, a first-rate story must achieve this direct, physical effect; it must transport the listener's spirit to a different place, albeit temporarily. If you will permit me a bit of hyperbole, we could say that a good story carries its audience over the wall that separates this world from the next. How well it delivers listeners to that other side is key. Indeed, we could say it is one of the tasks a good story must take up.

Most likely, there was at least one person in each group with the gift of making the stories lively and exciting. To a greater or lesser extent, such people were specialists, pooling the many narratives shared by the group, adding their own dramatic touches and then delivering them in an engaging and masterful way. At any given time we could have observed these specialists performing all over the world; though their languages may have been different, the essence of their art was the same.

When a group acquired a written language, those members who had learned (or, were blessed with) storytelling skills took the responsibility of setting them down in script. The oral myths, folklore, and know-how

of a tribe that had been passed down for generations were etched on shards of rock or wood and then finally written down on paper. Ultimately, these documents were divided according to their function, the category of fiction was established (just yesterday, given the sweep of human history), and the specialists who assembled them became known as "writers." Writers could be covered in laurels and patronized by ladies of rank, but they could also be stoned by the unenlightened masses or, in some tragic cases, beheaded, buried alive, or burned to death for having incurred the wrath of those in power.

I am one of those who write fiction for a living. My stories and novels are published in books, the royalties of which allow me to buy food and Red Hot Chili Peppers CDs and pay my electric bill. I have been doing this for getting on twenty-five years. Thankfully, my head hasn't been chopped off yet. True, my back has been pelted with stones on a few occasions, but, compared to having my head separated from my body, this is an insignificant indignity.

Writing is a rather lonely profession. You sit holed up in your study, wrestling with words, trying to set them in proper order. Day after day passes in this fashion. When your mind is so focused on your work, it is common to go for twenty-four hours without speaking to anyone. I imagine this is terribly hard for someone with a more social disposition. Yet, despite the essential loneliness of my occupation, I am frequently reminded that I am the descendant of the fireside storytellers of the past. Indeed, sitting at my computer, there are times when I hear the crackling of the fire and see the lacquer-black darkness. I can even feel the knot of people straining to hear my story. Spurred by these sensations, I continue to write. Yes, I have a story that needs telling, and the words to tell it, and an eager tribe—how can I express my gratitude to them?—that awaits what I have to say. To a certain degree, I can take them across the wall that separates this world from the other. Has the joy this kind of storytelling brings changed in any essential way over the past ten thousand years? I think not.

Let me say a few words about libraries.

A mild sense of wonder always hits me when I walk through the doors of a library, any kind of library. I felt it as a child, and I still do today. In grade school, visiting the library was my favorite pastime (I loved playing baseball too, but sad to say I was no great shakes on the diamond). As soon as school ended, I would jump on my bike and ride to the town library, where I would head straight to the kids' section. There I would wander among shelves packed with books old and new from all over the world, picturing the countless stories they contained, until my eyes began to swim. I was like a child who

emerges from a deep forest to find, set against the sky, a towering medieval castle he has never seen before.

At first, I had no idea what to read—there were just too many books. So I pulled out the first I saw and proceeded from there, reading one book after another in the order I found them on the shelf. At this stage, my reading required no fine intellectual distinctions of any kind. All I had to do was open the cover and I was swept into a realm of fancy. It was so easy. By entering a story I could set foot in a place that was not here. Eventually I had read almost all of the books on display. Each was a portal to the other side; when I finished it the portal closed, returning me to this side (sometimes, though, this return didn't go so smoothly). When I had devoured all the volumes in the kids' section, like a voracious rat I moved on to forage in the shelves devoted to adult books. Thus was I enticed into the boundless realm of books.

Libraries have been special for me ever since, places where I can find a fire whenever I need to. Sometimes it is an intimate and unpretentious bonfire, at other times a signal fire that blazes to the heavens. Whatever the fire's size and shape, however, I can always stand before it to warm myself in body and mind. It is perhaps because libraries are so special to me, I think, that they play a role in a number of my own stories.

Let me give you just a few examples.

My novel *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* features a library that holds the skulls of a great many unicorns. The young protagonist, trapped in a strange walled town and deprived of his own shadow, spends most of his time in the library "reading" the dreams the skulls tell him one after another. In another novel, *Kafka on the Shore*, the fifteen-year-old protagonist leaves home and, after a series of adventures, ends up living in a small private library on the island of Shikoku, where he encounters a ghost from the past and is unavoidably sucked into the ghost's—and the library's—story. A short work written for young readers, *The Strange Library*, tells the story of a boy who visits the public library and is captured by a creepy old man living in the basement. The old man's scheme involves having the boy read books and then sucking out his brains to acquire his knowledge. The boy has to escape the old man's clutches despite the chains around his ankles.

A library is—for me at least—a place to discover doors that open onto the world that sits on the other side. Behind each and every door is a different story with its own riddles, terrors, and joys. There are passageways of metaphor, windows of symbolism, hidden closets of allegory. I wish to convey the nature of this world, with its vitality and

limitless potential, in my novels.

Stories make many strange things possible. I believe those things can benefit us, and that they are universal. When the writing goes well, a novelist is able to produce these benefits—and that universality—and pass them along to his or her readers. Yet those very things can also rebound on the author. In other words, it is not simply a matter of sending your creations out into the world and forgetting about them; like a boomerang, they are likely to come flying back at you. When that happens, a novelist takes them in once more, chews them well, and then sends them out again in a new form. That, in turn, comes flying back again. Thus is a kind of creative cycle born.

Let me give you a specific illustration.

I set part of my 1995 novel, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, in Mongolia at the time of the Nomonhan Incident. That conflict, which might accurately be called a prelude to the Second World War, took place in the summer of 1939, when the armies of imperial Japan and Soviet Russia clashed over control of the border of Manchuria and Outer Mongolia. It was a limited and local yet extremely bloody conflict. Military aircraft, tanks, and long-distance artillery were involved over a period of several months, and many soldiers were killed. Although the battle ended in stalemate when the Soviet government withdrew on news of Germany's invasion of Poland, the fact is the Japanese army was defeated. As a result, information about the battle was vigorously suppressed by the military, and for many years the particulars of what happened there were buried. When I was writing *Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*—which primarily takes place in modern Japan, but is made up of several connected stories—a situation arose that made me feel I wanted to try and set one of those stories in Mongolia.

Today, the town of Nomonhan is located near the Mongolian border in Chinese Inner Mongolia. As I had never been to that part of the world, my descriptions were purely imaginative; the landscape came to me as I pushed my writing forward. After the book was published, however, I paid a visit to the old battlefield. Although it was my first time there, I had pictured it in such detail—drawing from what could be called my "novelistic imagination"—that it actually felt quite familiar. In fact, a powerful sense of déjà vu left me feeling strangely nostalgic.

Located at the very center of a vast and uninhabited desert, the battlefield has undergone few changes since the last day of battle. There are no roads in the region, and the military has barred all civilians from the area because of the proximity of the border with China. As a result, the site has very few visitors. Moreover, the air is so dry

that anything made of metal—specifically the ruined tanks, battered canteens, and mortar and bullet shells that are strewn everywhere—has retained its original shape, with only a thin layer of rust. It is, in short, a most unusual and eerie place. A vivid yet stifling tension hung over the scene—I felt I had suddenly been hurled a half century back in time, to land in the middle of history. It looked as though a bloody battle had been fought on the spot days before. For hours I wandered about the dunes, at a complete loss for words. Except for the occasional sound of wind blowing across the sand, all was silent. It felt as if time had shifted on its axis.

It was a long, jarring ride back to the hotel in our Russian-made jeep. Exhausted, I climbed under the covers as soon as I reached my room. Sometime after midnight, though, the room started shaking violently, and I was literally thrown to the floor. It's an earthquake, a big one, I thought. My life is in danger—I've got to get out of here. But when I tried to leave I found myself unable to stand. The floor was shaking so hard the only way I could move towards the door was on my hands and knees. Everything was pitch black. Finally, I managed to reach the door, open it, and tumble into the hall. The moment I was outside my room, though, the shaking stopped. The hall was perfectly quiet. No one was flying out of their room in a panic. I peeked into the room next to mine (my traveling companion hadn't locked the door), but he was fast asleep, as if nothing out of the ordinary had taken place.

My mind was racing—what in the world had just happened? It took a few minutes to get my bearings. Finally, I concluded there had been no earthquake. Instead, something had taken place inside me. An internal tremor. This was not terribly logical, but nothing else made sense. I spent the rest of the night sitting on the floor of my companion's room—I didn't dare return to my own—thinking things through until the sky outside the window began to brighten. I imagined the emotions of the men (most were young draftees from the countryside) who had pointlessly given up their lives for that desolate stretch of wasteland in a conflict of no strategic value—their sadness, their anger, their pain. Around sunrise, something clicked within me. I could tell the "earthquake" had led me to understand *something*—physically and intellectually. It may sound exaggerated, but I sensed that, to a degree, this composition of elements I call *myself* had been rearranged by this experience.

Writing a novel is the act of creating a story freely out of one's own head. It may be a complete fabrication, or utterly preposterous. Yet once it is given printed form—if it is a proper story, at least—it acquires a life of its own and begins to operate independently. That means it can take the author and his readers by surprise at the most unexpected

moments, showing them a shocking new aspect of reality. Like a flash of lightning, it can transform the familiar objects around us, making their colors and shapes uncanny. Or suddenly reveal things that have no right being there. To my mind, this is what gives stories their meaning, and their value.

I think my late-night experience in the hotel on the Mongolian border is an example of this kind of unanticipated revelation. My story demanded I incorporate it in a clearer, more concrete way—this is how I see it now. Pure curiosity had compelled me to write it in the first place. What exactly had happened in the depths of the Mongolian desert back in 1939? The scenes I described were a product of my imagination. I chose the material because of the place and time, not because I had any specific intent or message to convey. Yet once the story that emerged from this process took on its own identity, it began to demand a stronger and deeper level of commitment from me, its creator. It insisted that I accept responsibility for what I had written. To that purpose, it led me to the little hotel in the Mongolian desert and made me experience that violent, personal earthquake in the middle of the night. This is how I feel.

A writer creates a story; the story generates feedback, demanding a higher level of commitment. This process enriches the writer, making him dig deeper to realize the story's intrinsic potential. I am aware that perpetual motion is impossible in this world. Nevertheless, if a writer tends to his or her trade, husbanding the imaginative power and diligence that have fueled his peers since olden times, I believe that this great cycle of storytelling can be sustained, pushing literature forward—or, at least as far as it can go. I place my trust in this cyclical interaction between writer and story as I continue to write my own novels.

Perhaps I am being too optimistic. Yet if a writer cannot maintain this hope, where is the meaning and joy in what he does? And if a writer loses that meaning and that joy, how can he possibly appeal to those who crowd around the fire, seeking relief from the bitter cold and hunger, the fear and despair, that surround us?

translated by Hitomi Yoshio

A ONCE-PERFECT DAY FOR BANANAFISH

MIEKO KAWAKAMI

The old woman on the bed at the end of her life, the true, absolute end. In a faint flicker, she dreams a dream all in yellow. A yellow, hot summer's day. The old woman lives there, in the faint flicker.

In her bedroom piled with familiar objects, all we know are the bits and pieces that have kept on piling up. On this day of absolute solidity, in our eyes, she has lived for so long. The curtains always half-closed, at times matching her eyelids. In our eyes, the old woman lies still. In our eyes, the old woman lies still for a long, long time. Very lying still on the bed.

No one comes to visit, save one. The caregiver trots in and out several times a day. Lugging a vacuum cleaner, fresh towels in hand. Comes over with a chamber pot. A pitcher of water, some medicine—familiar yet unfamiliar. Then breakfast. Greetings. Some soup and sticky bread. She liked the cool bit at the corner of the sheets stretched out. The square-shaped air breathed in and out. A word. Caress. Smile. Greetings. The tingling of the door closing. Clear liquid just within reach of the right hand. The caregiver is very kind.

A small chandelier hangs from the ceiling motionless, cloudy with dust. The leaf motif engraved on the hook of the hat rack, the round knobs on the chest of drawers, the walnut picture frame, the curling pattern of ribbons on the wall—none will fly into motion as they once did, no matter how long she stares at them. In our eyes, the old woman has lived for so long. So very long. No matter when now is, it can't be stopped from being now somewhere—and that has become one of the few friends she has left. The true, absolute end, her eyes roam, they roam freely across that world. Without moving, the eyes walk and touch the world, taking along words as company. Lying flat, over the tiny shell-shaped buttons in the fold of her

chest, lined up in six answering signals of raspy whistling. Beyond the strings that encounter one another in tiny embroidered laces frayed around the wrist. The back of the hand, the last surface where blood vessels and discolored skin swell and stroll in succession. Then, skim the dull swelling of two plump legs underneath the thick cotton cover, barely able to move. Then, takeoff. The eyes travel a great distance. Above the large silent mirror directly across. What lies on the other side—a dead end, still open, universally comprehensible.

The old woman on the bed at the end of her life, the true, absolute end. In a faint flicker, she dreams a dream all in yellow. A yellow, hot summer's day. The old woman lives that day, in the faint flicker.

Waiting for the sound of the waves, fragments of piano melody, the soles of the old woman's feet swell a little, then rapidly begin to shrink. The wrinkles fill out, squeaking. Limbs, hips, chest, head fill to the point of bursting, then shrink, steadily tightening. The hair regains its warmth and moisture, expanding, curling, at last recovering its straightness, shining in youthful gold. The small feet, their soles yet to be hardened. Restored to a soft wholeness, the old woman is once again running on the beach.

The old woman is running in a tight two-piece bathing suit.

Running, the ends of her hair stick to her shoulder blades, the hair she is so proud of, unreachable no matter how many times she twists her arms to scratch her back. The irritating smell of the sunscreen her mother carefully rubbed onto her skin before coming down to the beach. Such a strong smell. She runs along, worrying it will stick to the shoulder straps of her bathing suit—her favorite thing this summer after her hair. Then she decides to walk, enduring the hot sand. Pressing the assembly of hot sand particles are the soles of her feet, brand new and freshly made.

On the sand lie many things still nameless, the only thing the old woman recognizes upon close reflection is a castle. She nearly trips over someone's half-made tower. I wouldn't mind finishing this up later, she thinks, but being on her way to meet the young man, mutters an apology in the back of her throat. Almost newborn, the old woman apologizes silently on any and every occasion. The strange face of that young man, her mother's nagging, the lipstick on the straw—they all scared her. She recalls her mother busily chatting away these past few days.

Twisting her boredom, tying and untying a bow, she first bumped into the young

man one Friday ago while walking around every nook of the big hotel.

Big ears, strange face full of lines, polite voice—she detected a thin slice of space. The little old woman looked up at the young man, Are you a recovering pianist? If only he would remain silent, or mutter until tomorrow in a dangling voice. I'll come show you my bathing suit if it's sunny, she makes a kind of promise, pleased with him at first glance.

Climbing into the warm dampening night, she shares a large plate of shrimp with mother, mother's friend, and mother's friend's daughter, a little smaller than her. As mother and her friend become lost in conversation, chasing tails of words, their differences disappear. Stuck in between, the girl, even more a newborn than the old woman, smears her face with sauce in a very affected manner. Sucking the head of a shrimp, moving her clumsy fingers, she mutters something. To wit, are you aware of the young man who was playing the piano in the corner of the lounge yesterday and the day before? Yes, I am, my foot bumped into his just a little while ago, answers the old woman. Me, I played the piano with him, sitting side by side, she announces triumphantly, the shrimp's whiskers swinging to and fro. I'm gonna play with him again. How about you? No, I won't, the old woman answers. I mean, you do it with hands, right? Sorry, but that's so boring—these last parts unuttered.

The summer, disliking solid air, mixes the pale yellow with hands and eyes, chop chops the hot sand. Aiming for the young man, the old woman remembers their second chance meeting by the piano. Countless cold marble pillars bloom, looking stupid, she thinks she wouldn't mind playing tag with him, going round and round together. It's the second time and all, let's introduce ourselves, he says. The young man's name slips and slides into her ears. At that moment, oh my. A beautiful array of letters glimmer around him like the second hand of a clock, within reach. They seem to be manufactured in the world, but actually not. And the meaning, where is it manufactured? Where are they usually made, if I may ask? Her feet move in cheerful steps. Everything floats in yellow, the insides rolled up in yellow.

Again and again, the old woman calls out the young man's name, her favorite this summer surpassing her bathing suit, her superb bundle of hair. Every time she calls it out, she weaves her mother's frown. The sound is so comforting, and the sensation just before the words become sound appears to her eyes like this: how sublime and wonderful! So she wants to say to him, but her newborn freshness thwarts her. Then the young man starts talking. He starts talking, I usually lie on the beach all alone. All we see are his bits and pieces always blown by the wind. In the irretrievable break of

the afternoon, the sunny day covering the sky, the old woman decides, Let's go to him and ask about the piano. In our eyes, the young man lies still on the sand. Lies still, long. The swimming tube just above his head. What a knowing look it has. It's laughing in the shape of a ring, the inevitable sequence of coming in and going out. The chair with the girl passes by. The old woman repeats the young man's name, and in between her breaths he calls out her name in return, and further in between, inspecting shells with his fingers, he skillfully displays how the scenes came about—the forest, his favorite wax, the wasteland, addresses, tigers, his fingernail biting. Clearly. Then mixing together. The yellow water melts the tiger. The trees burn like candles, the jagged tops bite into the sky. When the old woman kicked the wasteland, it rained, creating a mirror like a lake. The knot is clearly visible in the young man's hand. The two gaze into the lakelike mirror in his hand. Who is reflected there, if I may ask? The old woman reaches her hand out to the young man. Who can it be? The young man reaches his hand out to the old woman. He picks up the knot glimmering through his cradlelike hand with the fingertips of his other hand and puts it in his mouth, swallows it without blinking. Her admiration enfolds the moment, all the sand particles of the summer day—the adorable old woman in a yellow bathing suit, tummy slightly protruding. Clearly, so very clearly.

The old woman on the bed at the end of her life, the true, absolute end. In a faint flicker, she dreams a dream all in yellow. A yellow, hot summer's day. The old woman is alive there, in the faint flicker.

The young man and the old woman enter the sea. The waves are soft glass particles; they inhale, inhaling the rays of the sun all over, and exhale, exhaling, illuminate her supple skin, the aloof facade of the swimming tube, the dimple in his gigantic semicircular earlobe. I could squeeze myself into your ears forever! Her feet move in cheerful steps.

So when the old woman, almost a newborn, absentminded, heard from the young man's mouth none other than that that that that *bananafish*, her body was about to explode. Bananafish! More than anything, bananafish was her forte.

Yet, with friendly intimacy, she determines to keep it a secret until the bananafish actually appears. Truly, absolutely, it was her forte, *fortissimo*, if it weren't a bananafish it might as well have been a blue unicorn. Feigning ignorance to test him, she listened to the young man with curly hair and gentle wide-set eyes saying all kinds of correct things about bananafish. Neither too much nor too little, intimately, and above all, empirically! Yeeeess, yeeeess. The old woman rolls up as far as she could the small mouth not of

her bathing suit but of the puffed-sleeve blouse she was wearing just a moment ago, using her even smaller lips, and holding tight, she dips her face into the seawater, the sea enters, enters into every nook and cranny.

Then, at that moment, a bananafish passes before her eyes.

Oh, how boring, how boring it is.

She drops a tsk in the water, making it rotate. So like this, the unveiling ceremony and farewell address took place in just a few seconds, and oh, how boring, how boring it is. She tells the young man what she saw, and sure enough, he drops down to a boring temperature too, and without asking, Well then, let's just get out of the water. Looking up at the sky all pale like a thin omelet, she saw a small bird approach from the long distant past. It was black and old-looking, like something made of iron. How can it fly, that thing, without wings, I didn't call it over. The old woman sees a single dark shadow in her heart, turns toward the young man. Why does it come, that thing, it's not necessary, I wish it would leave me alone. The young man, too, is looking up at the ancient bird. He smiles silently. The old woman's shadow becomes darker. Gazing intently together with him, she forgets to say good-bye. After a few steps, she turns around and sees him lying on the sand in the same position as at the beginning.

The old woman on the bed at the end of her life, the true, absolute end. In a faint flicker, she dreams a dream all in yellow. A yellow, hot summer's day. Though she lived long, she remembered that summer's day only once—in this flicker. She has already forgotten her own name. She forgot, too, the lovely name of the young man from that yellow summer. Such a pretty name. All she remembers is the yellow-tinted "see more, feet, go numb."

While she lived, she was always on the go. But—the old woman on the bed at the end of her life, the true, absolute end. What visited her in her last moment—it was the yellow, hot summer's day. All we know are the bits and pieces that have kept on piling up, day by day. In our eyes, that place, that moment is alive.

Nowhere

STUART DYBEK

He walks as if stepping through a fallen ladder
tall enough to have once reached heaven.
Today, it reaches a line of boxcars
abandoned on the rusty tracks to nowhere.
Haze smolders from cauterized scars
of bum fires. He crosses a charred trestle
above a rapids of shards and startles
a dog pack pulling at a ball of rags.
When he tries reason, they bristle—
bared teeth more menacing for their smiles,
eyes enlarged with rage rather than fear
of the rebar he's picked from weeds
and cocks like a bat until their circle tightens
and he slashes so that at least air whines.
In this dull light, the bedspread snatched
from a clothesline and shredded resembles
a trembling child, though if it were,
he's sure the dogs would not have left it.
The jolt, a shotgun blast, scatters the pack.
Bloodied rags rise on wooly legs, bray,
and totter into underbrush. He stands paralyzed,
listening for the boxcars to couple again,
but they stretch boundless, silent, undisturbed.
If they moved, he'd climb aboard.

translated by Ted Goossen

PEOPLE FROM MY NEIGHBORHOOD (PART 2)

HIROMI KAWAKAMI

GRANDPA SHADOWS

Grandpa Shadows lived on the outskirts of town. His home was a mansion that had fallen into disrepair. Two banana trees and a riot of sago palms dominated his garden. I was told by the old chicken farmer who lived in the neighborhood that in bygone days, the garden had been beautifully tended and carpeted with grass.

We called him Grandpa Shadows because he had two shadows.

One shadow was docile and submissive, the other rebellious. The rebellious one was always pushing the docile one around or running off somewhere or moving in ways that bore no relationship to what Grandpa Shadows was doing. On occasion, it would even attach itself to another person and refuse to leave for three days or thereabouts. The time it snagged Akai was the worst. Since the shadow belonged to a very old man, it tired easily, so when Akai started running, it began to gasp and wheeze in a most theatrical way. Then it verbally attacked him.

"The damned thing's always threatening me," Akai grumbled. "Accuses me of trying to kill it, says it'll send me to hell."

It was Hachirō who told me Grandpa Shadows had once been a baron, a member of the prewar nobility. He had hosted balls in his mansion: aristocrats squiring ladies in evening gowns would arrive in horse-drawn carriages night after night.

"So did you ever see a horse-drawn carriage?" I asked the chicken man. He just let out a big burp.

Rumor had it that Grandpa Shadows had already died. Otherwise how could he have two shadows? It was also said that whomever the shadow attached itself to

* Readers: We started this in the first issue. But you can pick it up anywhere. Read on!

died within ten days.

But Akai didn't die. Instead, he and his vicious dog, Blackie, continued their reign of terror in the neighborhood.

One time, however, Akai did come close to death. He was struck by a car and lay unconscious for a full week. We all shed tears for him. Although Kanae's were of the crocodile variety, Hachirō's were genuine. Akai and Hachirō had always been surprisingly close. Maybe it was because both of them had been labeled pests by their neighbors.

"I was at Grandpa Shadows's place the whole time," were Akai's first words when he opened his eyes. We were all amazed.

According to Akai, he had danced every night. Quadrilles and waltzes and fox-trots. So many of the gowned ladies wanted him as their dancing partner that he had a hard time shaking them off. Grandpa Shadows never danced, just sipped tall glasses of banana juice.

They tore Grandpa Shadows's mansion down several years after Akai's accident. Grandpa Shadows, who was 103 at the time, was moved to a fancy oceanfront nursing home. It appears that the rebellious shadow took to attaching itself to other aged residents, all of whom died soon afterward.

THE SIX-PERSON APARTMENTS

There is a public housing project on the outskirts of town where families of six live in most of the apartments.

Some families have two parents, two grandparents, and two kids, while others are made up of parents and four children, or families that include cousins and the like.

For some reason, families of three or four or five are rare, while families of six comprise a full 90 percent of the project's residents.

It was Mrs. Kawamata, just back from America, who started the whispering campaign against the project. She claimed that the number six was known to be inauspicious abroad.

"It's the devil's number," she would confide in hushed tones to any- and everyone she came across in the neighborhood.

Gradually, people from town began to avoid the apartment complex. Mrs. Kawamata's rumor campaign was not the only cause; there was also a string of strange events that befell those who visited the place.

Mr. Sawaki's beard, for example, started growing at a startling rate: though he

shaved every morning, by evening it would be a bush eight inches long. Ms. Arashimura's feet, by contrast, developed puddles. Not water blisters either, but real puddles that apparently had tadpoles merrily swimming around in them. The case that grabbed me was that of Kanae's big sister, who acquired the ability to speak in the voices of the dead. The day after she returned from her visit to the six-person apartments, for example, she channeled the voices of Prince Shōtoku, Leonardo da Vinci, and Yang Guifei, wailing on and on in the most pitiful tone that the world "had taken a wrong turn." I found the idea so fascinating that I ran over to Kanae's as soon as I could. Say something in the comedian Kingorō Yanagiya's voice, I begged, whereupon her sister's face became a wrinkled mask that looked just like Kingorō. "Oh, my dear lady!" was the only line I could get out of her.

We were terribly excited by this, but Akai put us straight. "Come on," he said, "don't you know mediums can only communicate with the dead? Kingorō's still alive." When I reported this news to Kanae's sister, she replied, "He just died," without missing a beat.

Once it became clear that the town would have nothing to do with it, the project struck out on its own, erecting an independent school, post office, town hall, shops, office buildings—the whole works. It even minted its own currency with a creepy logo of six heads clumped together.

The town grew more and more dilapidated as time passed, but the project thrived. It seceded from Japan and formed its own armed forces, which sometimes held maneuvers in Tokyo Bay. Not long after this, the curse was broken. Mr. Sawaki's beard went back to normal, and Ms. Arashimura's tadpoles sprouted legs and hopped away as frogs, after which the puddles on her feet disappeared. Only Kanae's sister retained her mysterious power. Eventually, she made a name for herself as one of the mediums who speak for the dead on sacred Mount Osorezan, famous for her ability to channel Kingorō Yanagiya.

THE RIVALS

Two girls named Yōko grew up across the street from each other in our neighborhood. One girl's name was written with the character for *sheep*—I shall call her Yōko One. The other, whom I will call Yōko Two, used the character for *enchantress* in her name.

Both attended private girls' schools, unusual in our town where almost all children attended their local public school.

The principal of Yōko One's school was a nun. When Yōko One bragged, "My

principal's really old, but her face is completely smooth," Yōko Two was ready with a comeback. "Big deal. My principal's whole head is smooth, right to the very top. Not a wrinkle anywhere." Her principal, you see, was a Buddhist priest.

The two girls constantly competed with their outfits. If Yōko One flaunted the legs she was so proud of in the current fashion of miniskirts and knee-high floppy socks; Yōko Two retaliated by strutting around in a flared maxi coat, set off by the London boots she had filched from her little brother.

Both Yōkos had been born in the same year. What's more, their birthdays, blood types, and even their faces were identical.

They were constantly after each other from the time they began to talk. "Stop copying me!" one would say and the other would reply, "You're the copycat, not me." Sparks would fly when they passed on the street. In fact, whenever the newscast reported hazardously dry conditions, people in the neighborhood took turns making sure the two girls stayed away from each other. The girls actually had set off a small fire once in the stationery shop near the train station.

After graduating from high school, Yōko One went on to college, while Yōko Two got married. When Yōko Two's husband met Yōko One, however, he fell in love at first sight, and before you knew it the two were carrying on in secret. Since Yōko Two was extraordinarily alert to anything having to do with Yōko One, she was able to figure out the situation right away.

The townspeople held their breath. What revenge would Yōko Two wreak on her bitter adversary? Strange to be said, however, Yōko Two remained calm. It was as if the demon that had possessed her had suddenly fallen away. She greeted Yōko One on the street with a cheerful smile and started dressing more demurely, forgoing the increasingly colorful clothes she had used to compete with her rival. She wore only the simplest makeup and spent her holidays in the park feeding the sparrows and munching rice balls from the basket she had brought along.

It was Yōko One who found it impossible to keep her cool. It drove her crazy—here she had stolen her rival's man and yet no retaliation was forthcoming. She began slapping up posters around town announcing her affair with Yōko Two's husband and making anonymous phone calls to his office to inform his superiors of what was going on. Then she sat back and waited for the response. Since Yōko Two was wholly indifferent to her husband's infidelity, however, there was no chance of a blowup. Finally, Yōko One, her face like a demon, went to a shrine in the dead of night to cast a curse upon her rival. Observing all the formalities, she chose the third quarter of the Hour of the Ox

to post her request, using the requisite five-inch nail: that Yōko Two would die young, leaving Yōko One to marry her husband and live happily ever after.

The death curse worked. But it was Yōko One, the one who had cast the curse, who died of a sudden heart attack, not Yōko Two. The two women were so similar that the god had mistaken one for the other.

Once Yōko One was dead, Yōko Two reverted to her malicious ways. She extorted a huge amount of alimony from her ex-husband and used the cash to launch a company that sold organic vegetables. When the profits started rolling in, she bought two houses, two boats, and two parrots. Whenever she missed her rival, as she did on occasion, she would take it out on her secretary. "You're no fun at all," she would snap. "Even your makeup is so damned sensible!"

THE ELF

The Music House sat right next to the park.

With its chocolate-brown walls, crimson roof tiles, and tan-colored front door and bay window, no one had a clue what style had inspired it.

No name graced its entrance. In the summer, the garden was filled with blooming sunflowers encircled by the dark green of many trees, camphor and locust, redwood and persimmon. Although everything was beautifully tended, no one had ever seen the master of the house in the garden, or anywhere else for that matter.

Only those whose birthday it was could visit the Music House. Even then, you had to be standing in front of the entrance at three o'clock sharp for the door to open.

"So what was it like?" I asked Kanae. She batted her eyelashes two or three times.

"Oh, nothing much," she said at last.

Kanae had turned nine the day before. And although she said it was nothing much, I noticed her eyes restlessly combing the area. She appeared to be afraid someone might overhear what she was saying.

Apparently about half the town had paid a visit to the Music House. Yet, although so many had been there, no one ever talked in any detail about the experience. The dog school principal called it "enchanting." Hachirō said it was "far-out." The old chicken farmer felt like he had heard "a nightingale singing," while little Dolly Kawamata said, "It was just, like, so, oops!" Even the normally loose-tongued Akai could manage nothing better than, "Thought I heard someone playing an old dance tune. Damn!"

Stitching all these comments together, I could only assume that, apparently, some kind of music could be heard at the Music House.

"Of course there's music," Kanae's sister said coolly. "That's why they call it the Music House."

"But what kind of music?"

"It depends. Everyone hears different music. The music that rules their destiny. It's no joke—the music really does determine your destiny, you know."

After that, I couldn't wait to pay a visit to the Music House. When I found out the following week that the grandchild of the proprietress of the bar Love was having a birthday, I borrowed the toddler and, at three o'clock sharp, was standing on the doorstep.

The door creaked open.

"I'm the babysitter!" I called out as I fearfully shepherded the child through the door. Music began to play. It was Teruhiko Saigō's old saw, "Flamenco by Starlight."

We spent the next hour listening to strains of "Flamenco by Starlight." At that point the child started to fuss and we had to leave the Music House. Could "Flamenco by Starlight" really be my song of destiny? Or the child's? Or both of ours? Even now it isn't clear.

Sometime later, the old farmer told me his theory that the owner of the Music House was an elf covered with fur.

"The fur is really shaggy, I've been told, twisted every which way," he said, fiddling with his false eye.

THE BURIERS

An enormous quantity of love letters was found discarded outside the front door of the old farmer who raised chickens. Six cardboard boxes stuffed to the brim. "I read a few of 'em," the old man said, spitting on the ground, "and they were all god-awful."

It appeared that someone had left them there in the middle of the night. The old man had heard the chickens kicking up a fuss, and when he went outside to investigate, there the boxes were, neatly stacked in three piles like shrine offerings.

"In the old days, we would have called for the buriers," he said.

"Who are the buriers?" I asked, puzzled.

"You know, like the club in grade school, the kids who bury things."

When I told him I'd never heard of a club like that he just nodded. "Yep, they're

gone now. But we used to have 'em."

The buriers would bury almost anything, he explained. Diaries you wanted to chuck, unneeded pots and pans. Clothes that carried unpleasant associations, broken glasses.

"The only thing they wouldn't bury was raw stuff."

"Raw stuff?"

"Like rotten taters, dead goldfish, those kinds of things. Boy oh boy," he sighed nostalgically, "old love letters—those would've been perfect for them."

"But are schoolkids really able to dig proper holes?" I asked.

"You know kids that age," he replied, shrugging his shoulders. "There might be a piece left sticking out from the hole, or maybe the rain'd wash away whatever they'd buried. But we didn't care. We just loved watching their backs as they dug, the way they threw themselves into the work." The old man's tone was unusually pensive.

He described how once when a girl had jilted him, he had crept into her house and stolen her socks, then given them to the buriers.

"You mean like those guys who steal girls' panties?" I asked.

"No," he said, "socks and panties aren't the same at all."

The end of the buriers came when someone revealed that they had buried raw stuff. A group of the littler kids had buried a woman's corpse in the back of the school grounds.

"But it wasn't raw, to tell the truth," the old man said. The investigation revealed the corpse was over two hundred years old. When they uncovered the thoroughly mummified body, the children thought that they had found either an old kite or someone's graduation art project.

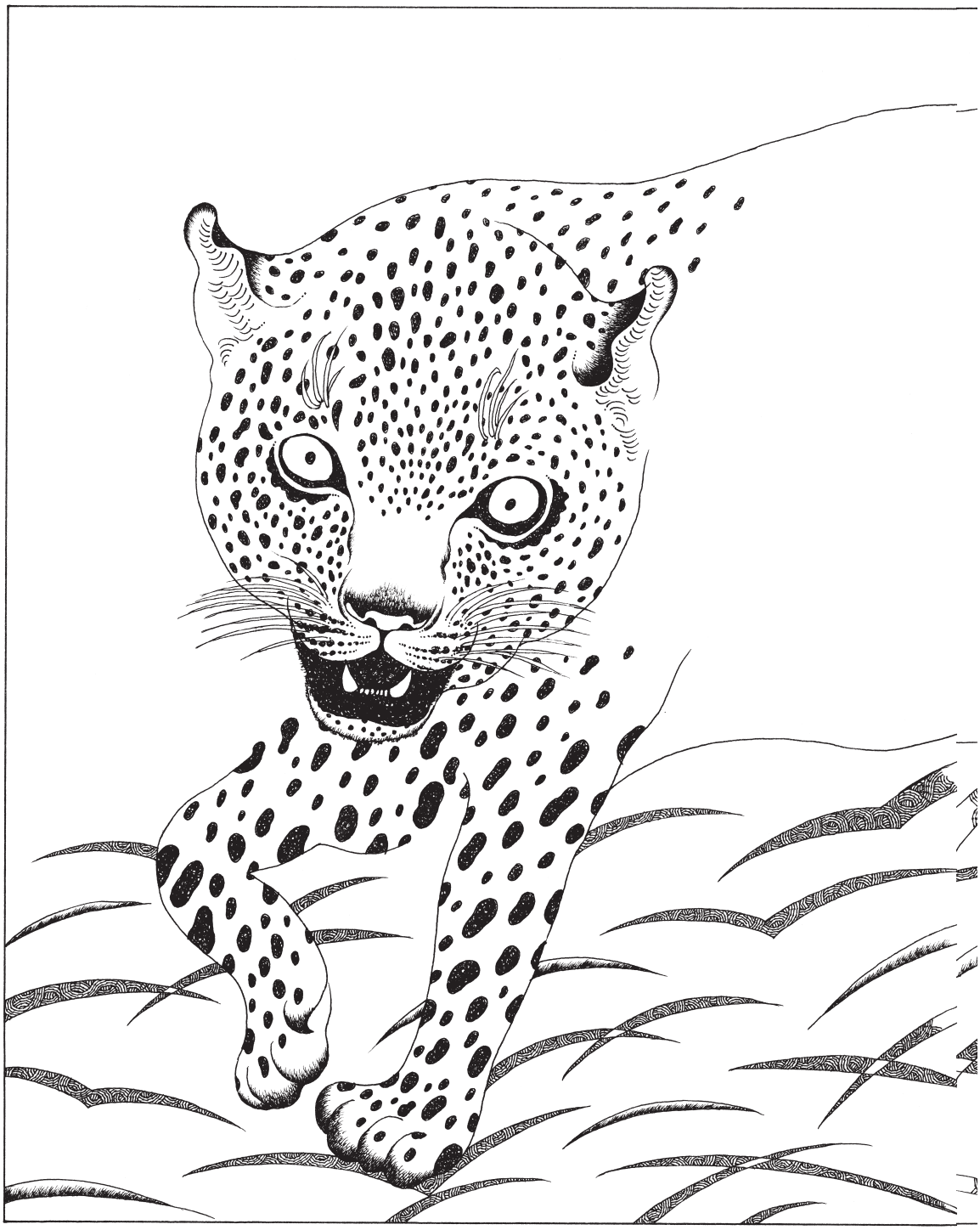
The mummy was unearthed and donated to the community center. Even today, if you visit the center and ask to see the mummy, they will show it to you.

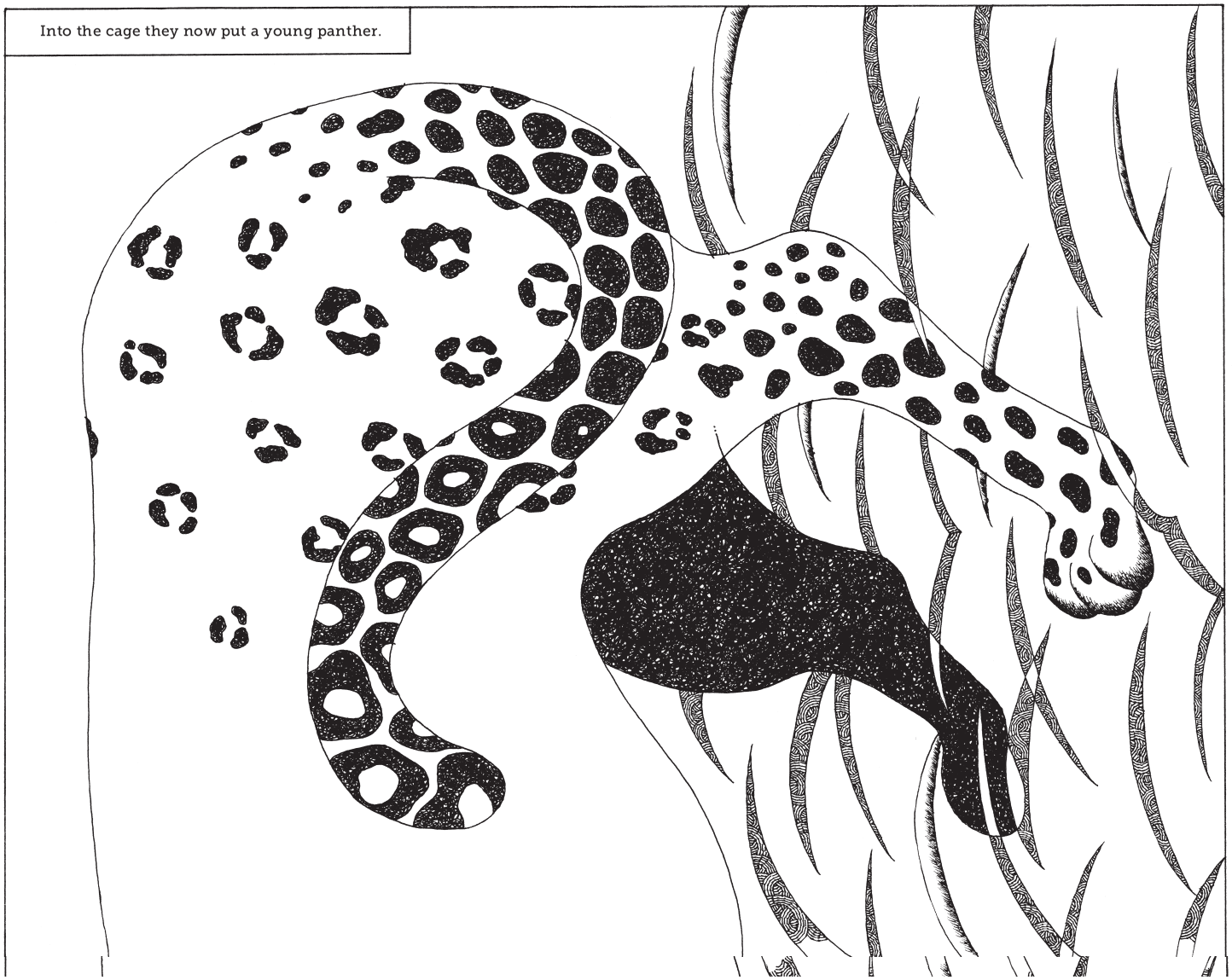
The boxes of love letters left in front of the old farmer's house were finally buried by the policeman stationed in our neighborhood, who, it turned out, had once been a burier himself. He said he read a few before throwing them in the hole.

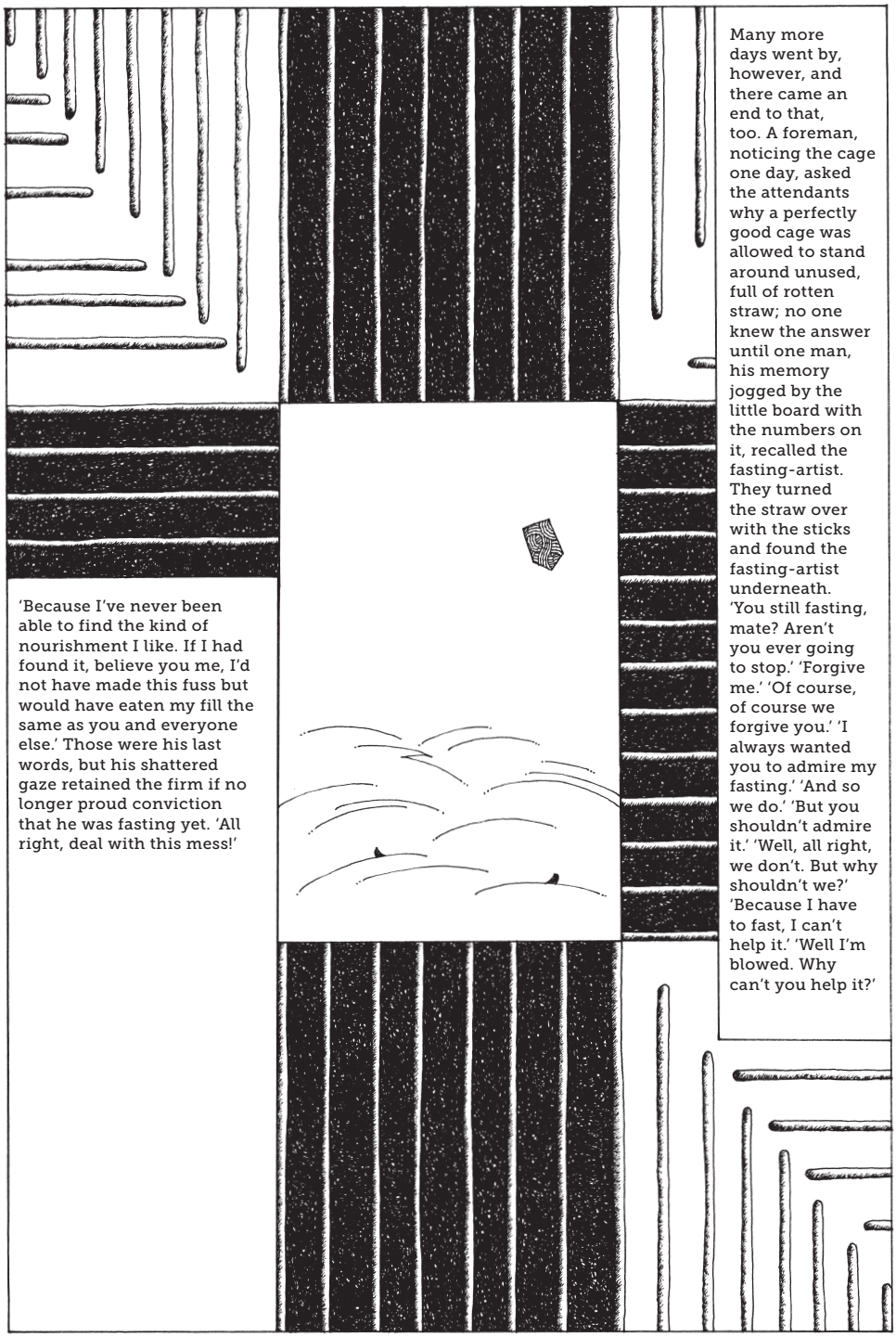
"My god, they were dreadful," he said, spitting on the ground.

Rumor has it that the letters were written by the dog school principal to his wife, but now that they have been buried there is no way to know for sure.

This manga runs from right to left, the order in which it was originally published. It begins on p. 84 and ends on p. 71.

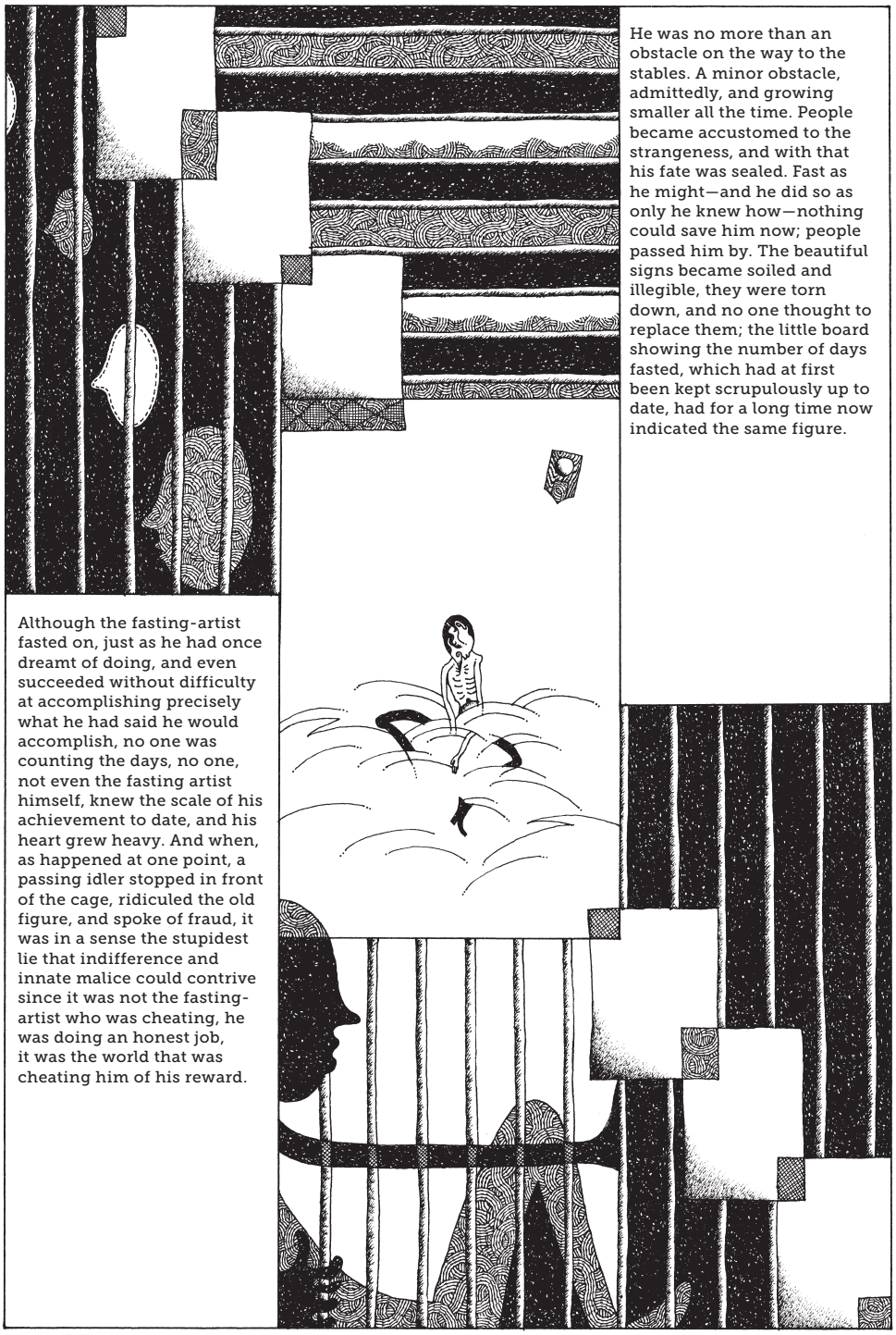



Into the cage they now put a young panther.



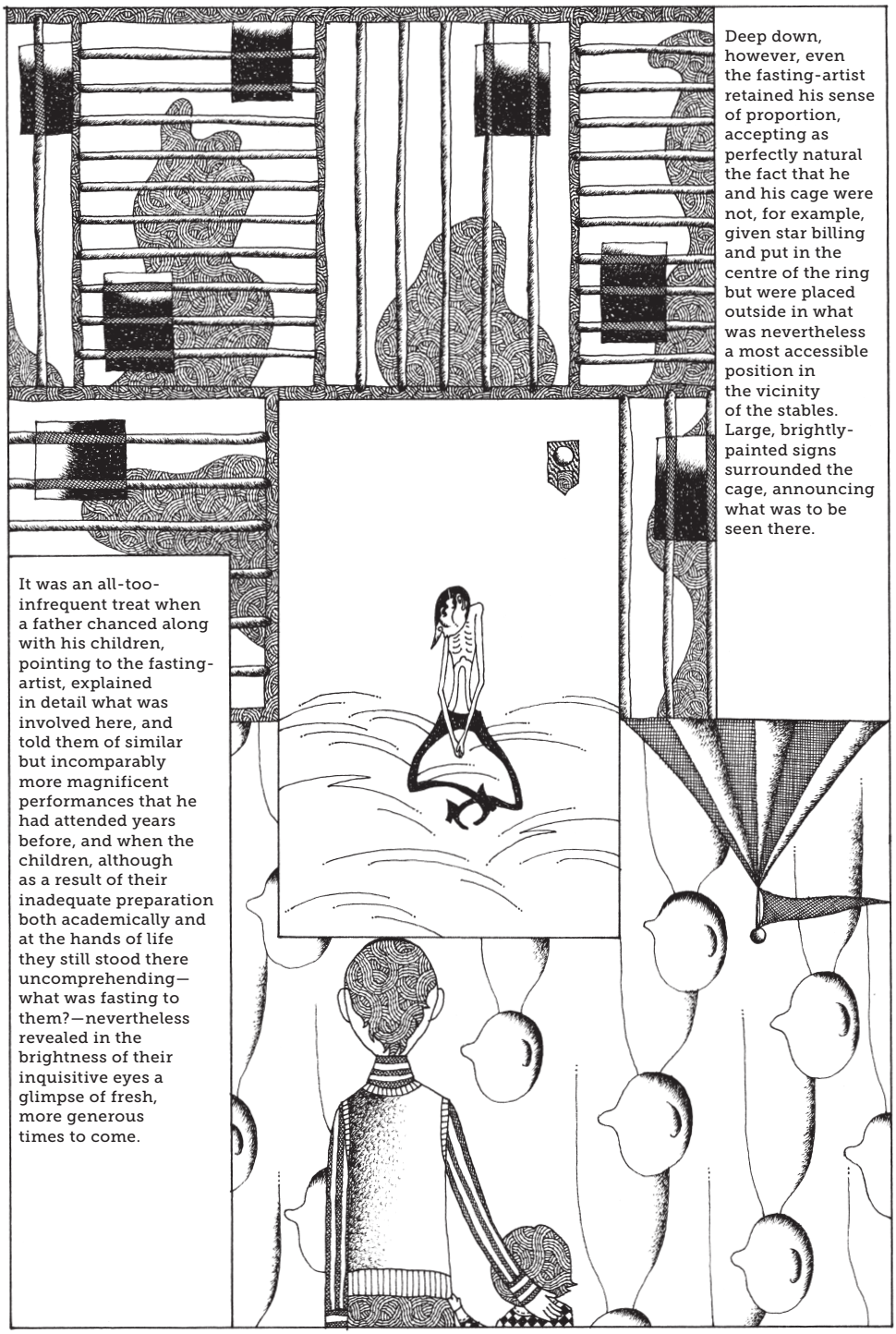
'Because I've never been able to find the kind of nourishment I like. If I had found it, believe you me, I'd not have made this fuss but would have eaten my fill the same as you and everyone else.' Those were his last words, but his shattered gaze retained the firm if no longer proud conviction that he was fasting yet. 'All right, deal with this mess!'

Many more days went by, however, and there came an end to that, too. A foreman, noticing the cage one day, asked the attendants why a perfectly good cage was allowed to stand around unused, full of rotten straw; no one knew the answer until one man, his memory jogged by the little board with the numbers on it, recalled the fasting-artist. They turned the straw over with the sticks and found the fasting-artist underneath. 'You still fasting, mate? Aren't you ever going to stop.' 'Forgive me.' 'Of course, of course we forgive you.' 'I always wanted you to admire my fasting.' 'And so we do.' 'But you shouldn't admire it.' 'Well, all right, we don't. But why shouldn't we?' 'Because I have to fast, I can't help it.' 'Well I'm blowed. Why can't you help it?'



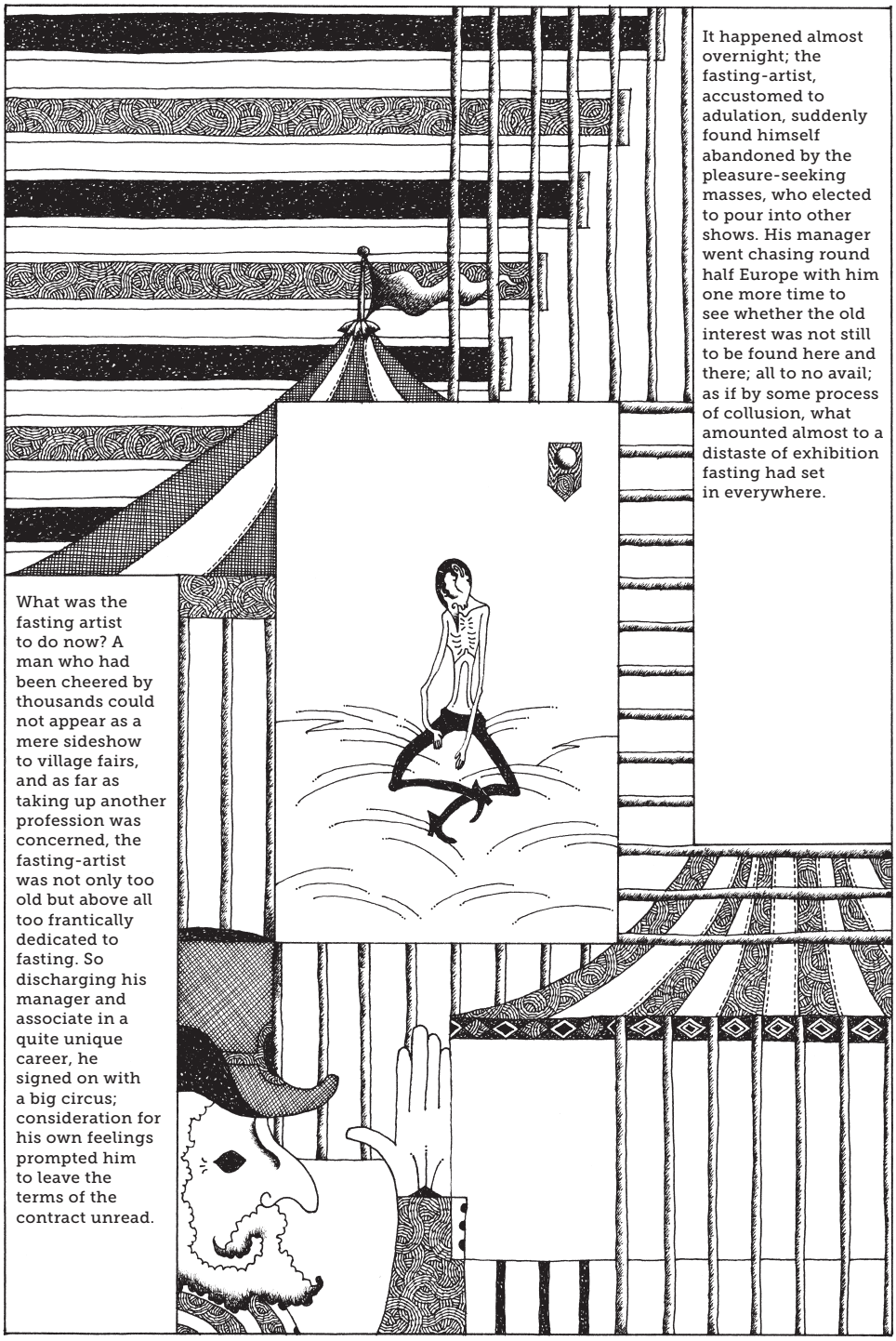
He was no more than an obstacle on the way to the stables. A minor obstacle, admittedly, and growing smaller all the time. People became accustomed to the strangeness, and with that his fate was sealed. Fast as he might—and he did so as only he knew how—nothing could save him now; people passed him by. The beautiful signs became soiled and illegible, they were torn down, and no one thought to replace them; the little board showing the number of days fasted, which had at first been kept scrupulously up to date, had for a long time now indicated the same figure.

Although the fasting-artist fasted on, just as he had once dreamt of doing, and even succeeded without difficulty at accomplishing precisely what he had said he would accomplish, no one was counting the days, no one, not even the fasting artist himself, knew the scale of his achievement to date, and his heart grew heavy. And when, as happened at one point, a passing idler stopped in front of the cage, ridiculed the old figure, and spoke of fraud, it was in a sense the stupidest lie that indifference and innate malice could contrive since it was not the fasting-artist who was cheating, he was doing an honest job, it was the world that was cheating him of his reward.



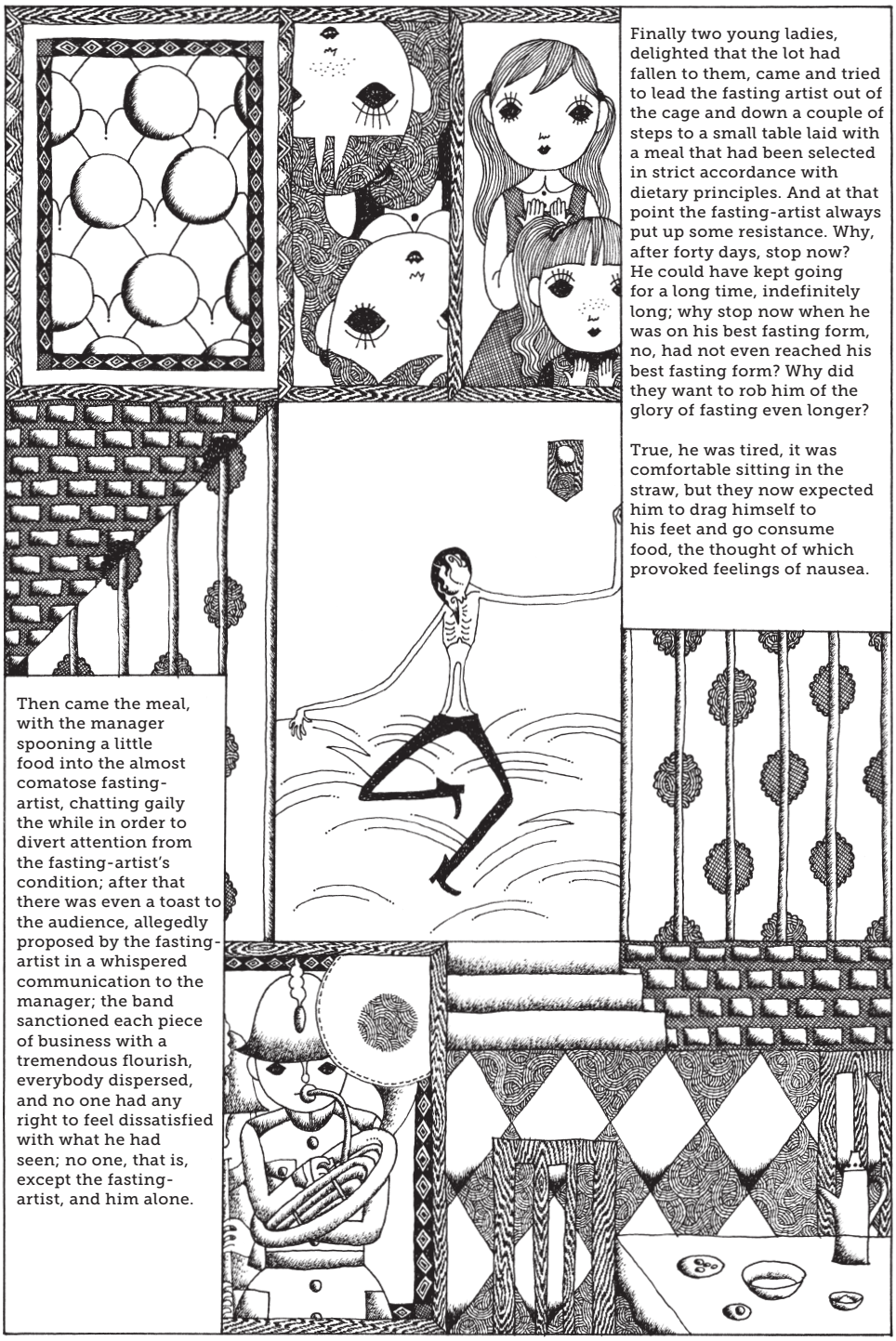
Deep down, however, even the fasting-artist retained his sense of proportion, accepting as perfectly natural the fact that he and his cage were not, for example, given star billing and put in the centre of the ring but were placed outside in what was nevertheless a most accessible position in the vicinity of the stables. Large, brightly-painted signs surrounded the cage, announcing what was to be seen there.

It was an all-too-infrequent treat when a father chanced along with his children, pointing to the fasting-artist, explained in detail what was involved here, and told them of similar but incomparably more magnificent performances that he had attended years before, and when the children, although as a result of their inadequate preparation both academically and at the hands of life they still stood there uncomprehending—what was fasting to them?—nevertheless revealed in the brightness of their inquisitive eyes a glimpse of fresh, more generous times to come.



It happened almost overnight; the fasting-artist, accustomed to adulation, suddenly found himself abandoned by the pleasure-seeking masses, who elected to pour into other shows. His manager went chasing round half Europe with him one more time to see whether the old interest was not still to be found here and there; all to no avail; as if by some process of collusion, what amounted almost to a distaste of exhibition fasting had set in everywhere.

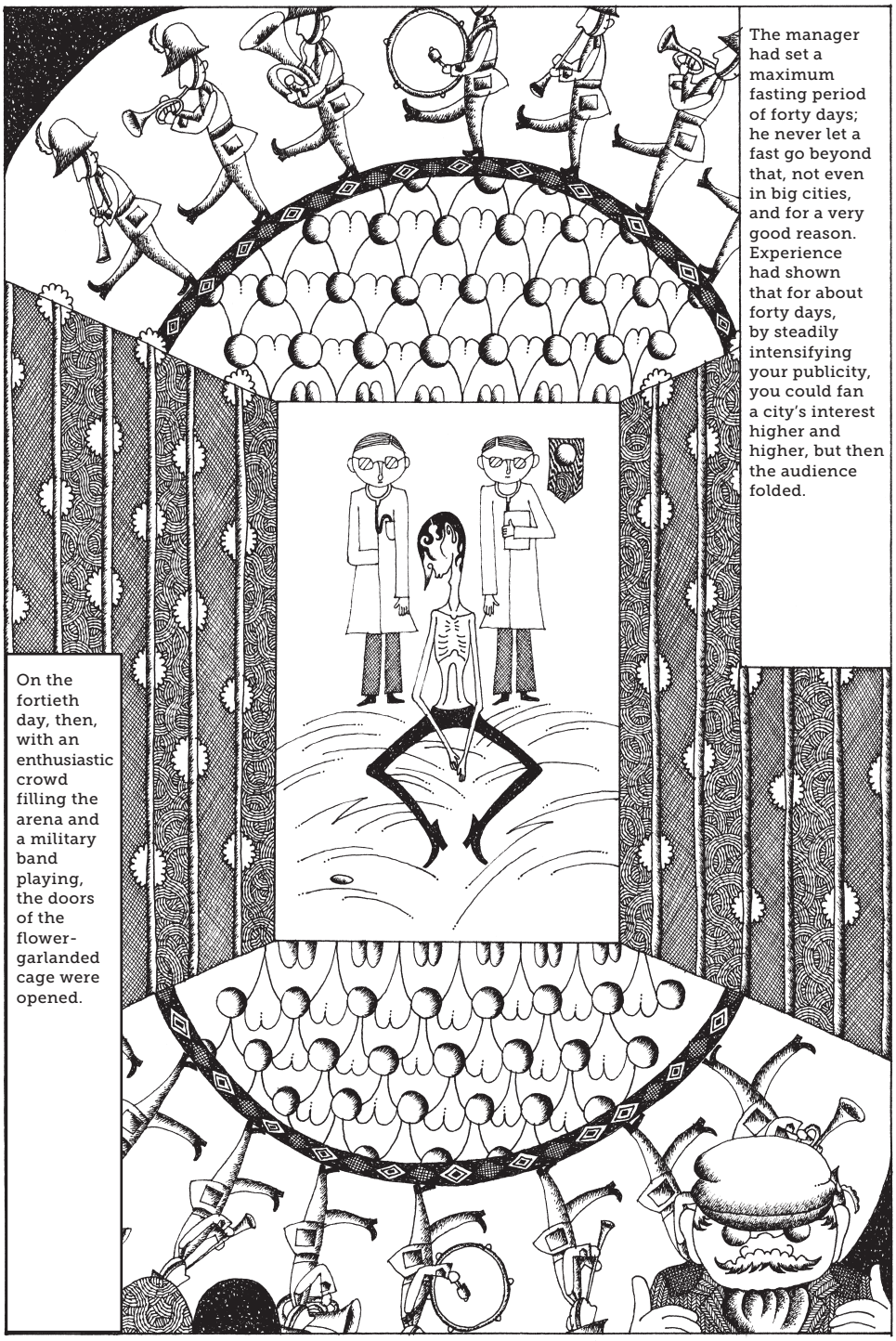
What was the fasting artist to do now? A man who had been cheered by thousands could not appear as a mere sideshow to village fairs, and as far as taking up another profession was concerned, the fasting-artist was not only too old but above all too frantically dedicated to fasting. So discharging his manager and associate in a quite unique career, he signed on with a big circus; consideration for his own feelings prompted him to leave the terms of the contract unread.

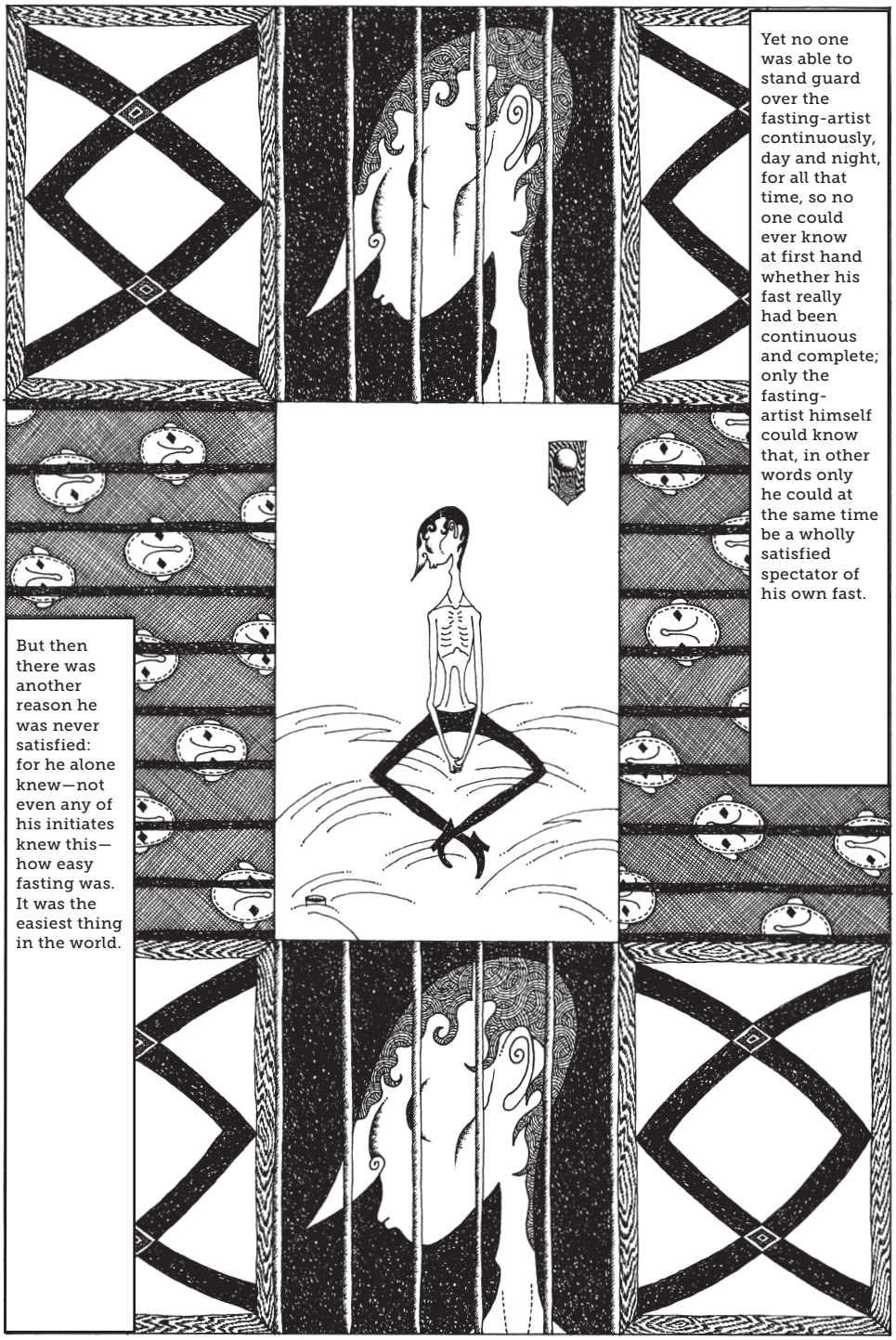


Finally two young ladies, delighted that the lot had fallen to them, came and tried to lead the fasting artist out of the cage and down a couple of steps to a small table laid with a meal that had been selected in strict accordance with dietary principles. And at that point the fasting-artist always put up some resistance. Why, after forty days, stop now? He could have kept going for a long time, indefinitely long; why stop now when he was on his best fasting form, no, had not even reached his best fasting form? Why did they want to rob him of the glory of fasting even longer?

True, he was tired, it was comfortable sitting in the straw, but they now expected him to drag himself to his feet and go consume food, the thought of which provoked feelings of nausea.

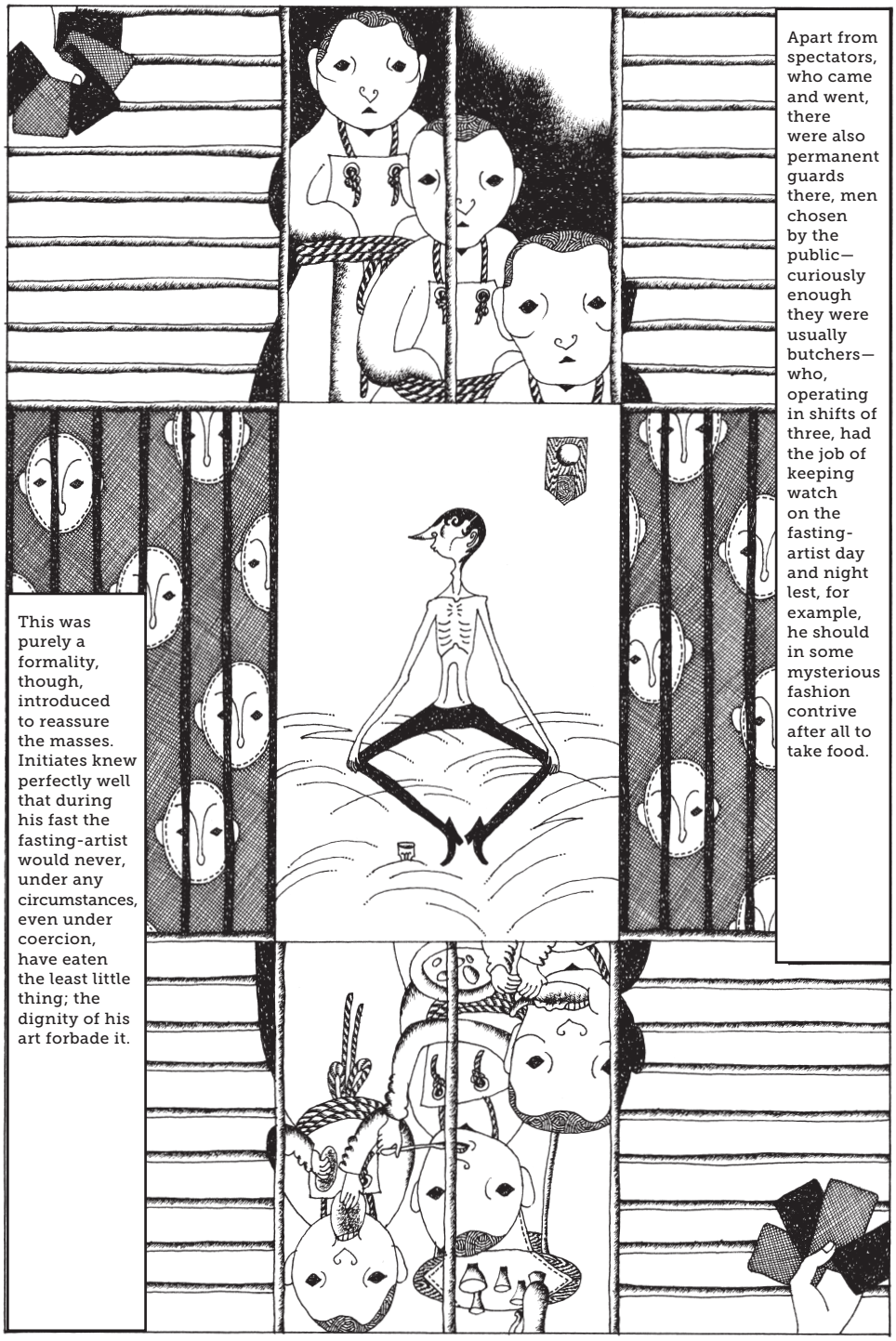
Then came the meal, with the manager spooning a little food into the almost comatose fasting-artist, chatting gaily the while in order to divert attention from the fasting-artist's condition; after that there was even a toast to the audience, allegedly proposed by the fasting-artist in a whispered communication to the manager; the band sanctioned each piece of business with a tremendous flourish, everybody dispersed, and no one had any right to feel dissatisfied with what he had seen; no one, that is, except the fasting-artist, and him alone.


The manager had set a maximum fasting period of forty days; he never let a fast go beyond that, not even in big cities, and for a very good reason. Experience had shown that for about forty days, by steadily intensifying your publicity, you could fan a city's interest higher and higher, but then the audience folded.
On the fortieth day, then, with an enthusiastic crowd filling the arena and a military band playing, the doors of the flower-garlanded cage were opened.



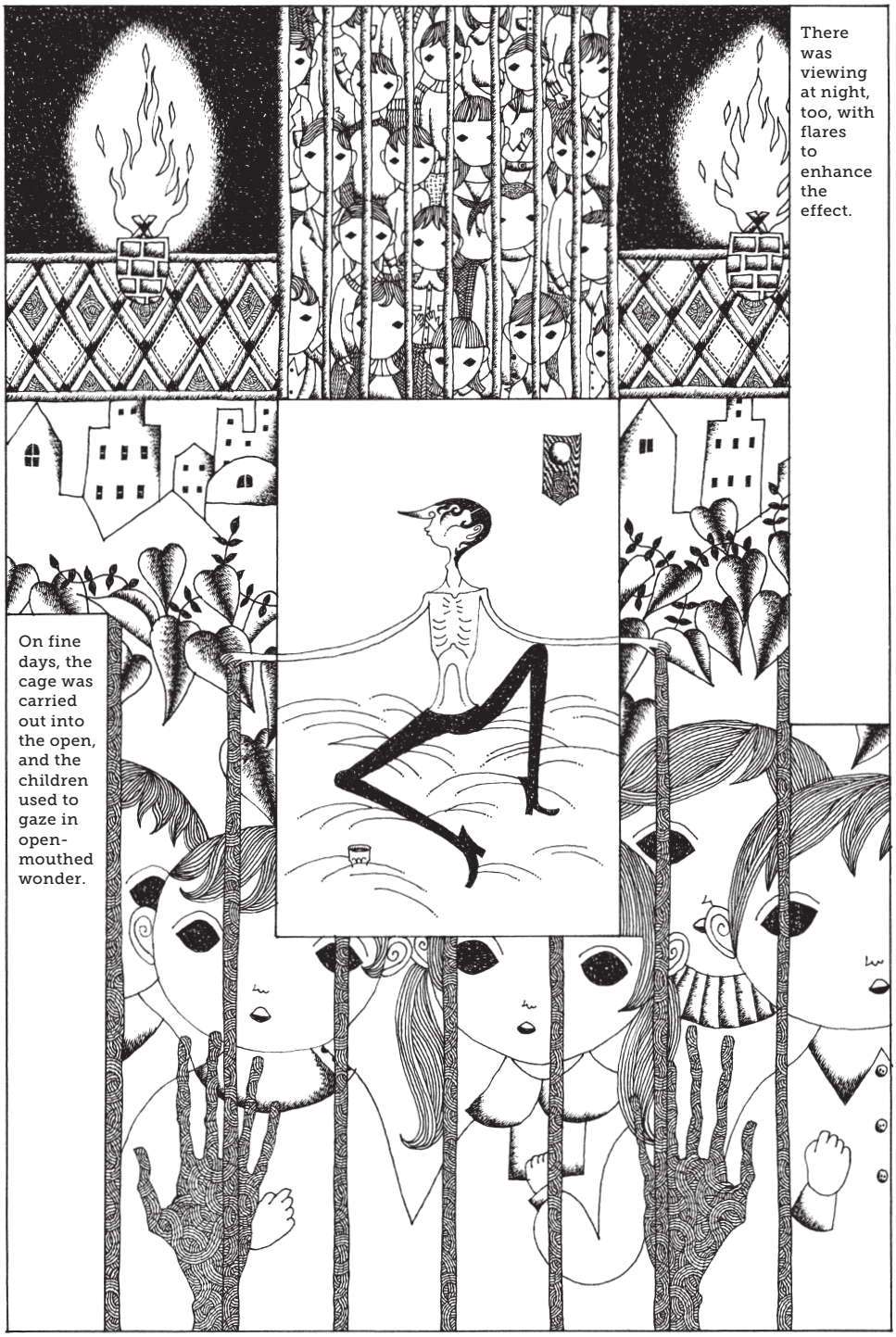
Yet no one was able to stand guard over the fasting-artist continuously, day and night, for all that time, so no one could ever know at first hand whether his fast really had been continuous and complete; only the fasting-artist himself could know that, in other words only he could at the same time be a wholly satisfied spectator of his own fast.

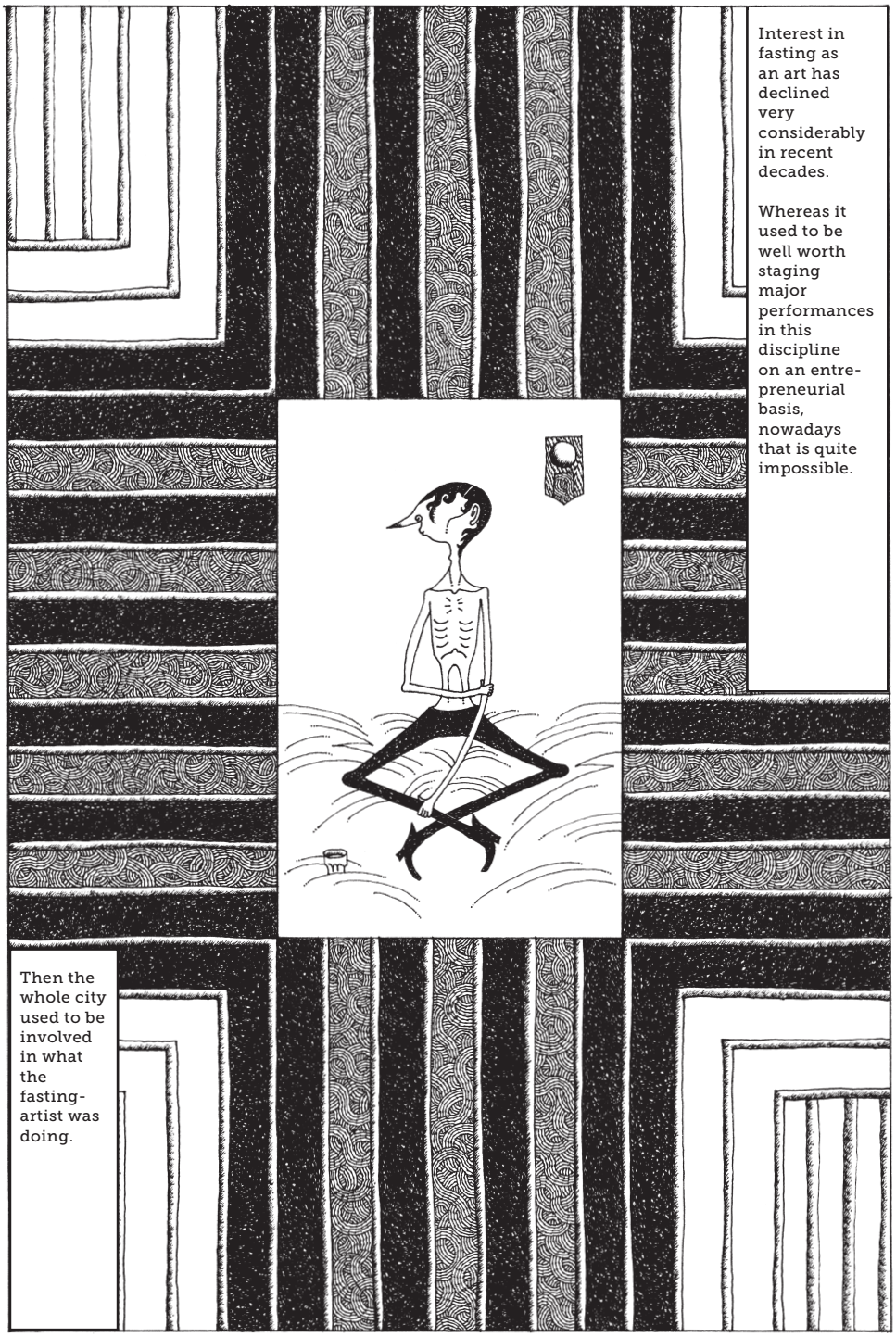
But then there was another reason he was never satisfied: for he alone knew—not even any of his initiates knew this—how easy fasting was. It was the easiest thing in the world.

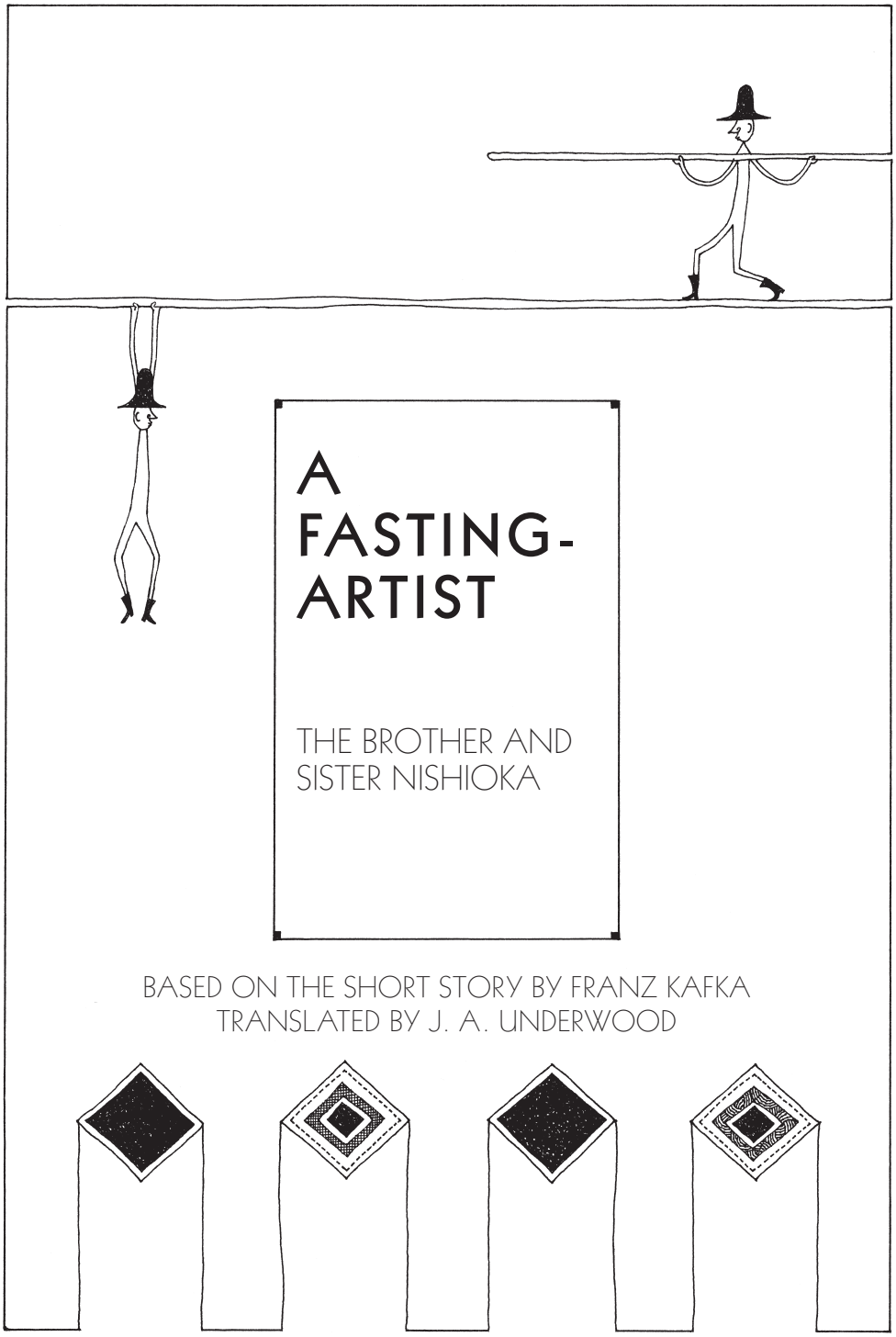


Apart from spectators, who came and went, there were also permanent guards there, men chosen by the public—curiously enough they were usually butchers—who, operating in shifts of three, had the job of keeping watch on the fasting-artist day and night lest, for example, he should in some mysterious fashion contrive after all to take food.

This was purely a formality, though, introduced to reassure the masses. Initiates knew perfectly well that during his fast the fasting-artist would never, under any circumstances, even under coercion, have eaten the least little thing; the dignity of his art forbade it.


There was viewing at night, too, with flares to enhance the effect.
On fine days, the cage was carried out into the open, and the children used to gaze in open-mouthed wonder.


Interest in fasting as an art has declined very considerably in recent decades.
Whereas it used to be well worth staging major performances in this discipline on an entrepreneurial basis, nowadays that is quite impossible.
Then the whole city used to be involved in what the fasting-artist was doing.



A FASTING-ARTIST

THE BROTHER AND SISTER NISHIOKA

BASED ON THE SHORT STORY BY FRANZ KAFKA
TRANSLATED BY J. A. UNDERWOOD

幽霊と幽霊画　Ghosts and Ghost Paintings

小澤實　MINORU OZAWA

translated by Motoyuki Shibata
and Ted Goossen

「幽霊を季題と思ひ寝てしまふ　三橋敏雄」あれば、
「幽霊」などは夏季か。
"A man dozes off believing ghost *is a seasonal word."*
—Toshio Mitsuhashi
So I guess ghosts are for the summer!

幽霊や厠の材の節ばかり
A ghost!
Just a knot
on the bathroom wall

幽霊出づ便壺の闇深ければ
From the black depths
of the toilet bowl
a ghost emerges

三遊亭円朝収集の幽霊画を谷中、全生庵に拝観す
After seeing San'yūtei Enchō's ghost painting collection
at Zenshō Temple in Yanaka

幽霊画収集足あるものは泣き女
Crying women
are the only
ghosts with legs

応挙忽がきし幽霊の前去らぬ女
A woman stands transfixed
before the ghost
by Ōkyo[1]

1. Ōkyo Maruyama, an eighteenth-century painter.

覗きこむものありにけり蚊帳の上
Something was definitely
peering down
from above the mosquito net

骨となりし後妻なほも打ちくだく
Still at it!
The first wife's's ghost pounds
her successor's bones[2]

瞽女死んで幽霊となるなほ歩く
The ghost
of the blind female minstrel
strolls on

おのが持ちおのが頭骨見せくるる
He came with
his skull in hand
to show it to you

わが骨を見下ろしてをる昼寝かな
Afternoon nap.
I gaze down
at my own bones

朝曇髑髏を打ちて鳴らしけり
Cloudy morning.
I hit the skull
like a drum

木魚に棲み木魚たたけば出づるもの
Pound the woodblock
and the living thing inside
will emerge[3]

2. There was a tradition in Japan of the divorced wife assaulting the new wife.
3. A Buddhist priest pounds a woodblock when chanting a sutra.

炎をあげこぶし大なるもの飛べる
A human soul?
A fist-sized ball
flies past in flames

ヒトダマのまつすぐに落ち小さく跳ぬ
A will-o'-the-wisp
plunges to the ground
bounces

幽霊画嵐の柳ゑがくのみ
All you see
is willows in the storm.
The painting of a ghost

幽霊画見て来し坂をくだるなり
Ghost paintings viewed
I stroll
down the slope

translated by Allison Markin Powell

BRIDGES

KEITA JIN

Every day, I'm supposed to think about bridges. That's because nowadays, almost no one ever does. In fact, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that they ignore them entirely. There is no longer anything particularly special about the act of crossing over a bridge. Now whenever we go over one, we never imagine—not in a corner of our minds, not even unconsciously—that it may crumble. Therefore bridges aren't regarded as bridges, rather as mere extensions of the road. Of course, some people live in a constant state of anxiety—they are a different story. And then, everyone may at times become pleasurably aware of the fact that he or she is passing over a bridge (especially when it has a gorgeous view). But such cases are by no means enough to maintain all the bridges in the world; they simply can't serve to assure their existence. People today have all too few opportunities to think about bridges, and what's more, the number of bridges has increased so dramatically that in order to compensate for the public's lack of imagination, people like us must spend our days sitting around thinking about bridges—to keep the bridges from doubting their own existence, losing confidence, and suddenly collapsing.

By us, I mean we three whose job it is, Monday through Friday from nine to five, to sit at a desk in a room in this building, with chin in hand and eyes closed, or perhaps letting our gaze wander, and dream about the many bridges of the world. The ostensible boss here, a most unimpressive man, middle-aged, looking to be in his fifties, who's nominally called the Director, occupies the desk farthest from the door. My desk is on his right, and the other guy's desk is on his left. I don't know much about my coworker who sits opposite from me. A skinny guy wearing rimless glasses, with whom I have probably exchanged a total of ten words. Even still, my memory of our conversation is that it was quite inconsequential.

It was at the height of summer, and I had just returned from my lunch break with some ice cream, when he mumbled, *Ah, ice cream*. Startled by the pronouncement of this guy who until that point had not uttered a single word, I could only stammer like an idiot, *Yeah, ice cream, ice cream*—not once but twice. That is the extent of my memory of our one and only conversation. Other than that, we may have exchanged a brief greeting when I first started working here, but if so, it's slipped my mind. Given that our sole concern here is thinking about bridges, anything else really is superfluous. Even with the Director, we only exchange brisk nods at the beginning and end of the workday.

Thinking about bridges all day long requires great powers of concentration. Of course, it's not unusual for our imaginations to get sidetracked by things that have nothing to do with bridges. When that happens to me, it's my habit to take a sketchbook from the bookshelf at my side and draw a bridge. My favorite kind is a cable-stayed bridge. The ferroconcrete towers jutting toward the sky and the many cables radiating out from them with their muted golden sheen. As far as I'm concerned, the greatest appeal of a cable-stayed bridge can be found in those immense, splendidly massive cables. I draw those magnificent cables one after another in my sketchbook. I never tire of this, no matter how often I draw them. There's no limit to how long the bridge can be, so in my mind I can extend it as far as I please and continue drawing cables. One time I really got into it, just kept turning the pages of my sketchbook, stretching the bridge on endlessly, drawing who knows how many hundreds of golden cables—spent the whole day doing it, to tell the truth.

I'm not sure about my two colleagues' dedication to their jobs. From where I sit, it's difficult to tell if they're hard at work or nodding off. The Director is apt to stare fixedly at the open pages of a thick book of photographs, while my coworker with the rimless glasses exhibits a particular fascination with bridge blueprints. In any case, I would venture a guess that they both harbor more than an ordinary interest in bridges. This kind of office is where people who have that special sort of proclivity end up, usually after suffering minor setbacks at various other places. This last supposition is based on my imagination alone but, having observed this sorry pair, I wonder how wrong I could be. I mean, I must be in the minority—someone who started working here upon graduating university and who has been here ever since.

When people ask if I enjoy my job, my reply is the customary one, that it's not that I dislike my job, but it's not that I enjoy it either. I do like thinking about bridges, so it's certainly no trouble for me, yet this is the sort of job whose results are intangible. Our work is such that our success is never demonstrated by our efforts, rather our failure

is revealed through our negligence. The bridges remain—always imperturbable, never crumbling—and that conventional assumption (based on a naive optimism, pure and simple) is wholly sustained by our labors; still, the relationship between our job and that result is quite complicated, or opaque, or, you might even say, invisible. However, I'm really not looking for adventure in my everyday life, and I think it's fair to say that I like these peaceful days of mine.

The problem began one early afternoon when, in an extremely hesitant manner, the Director addressed my coworker and me, glancing back and forth between the two of us. *Listen*.... The Director sounded truly pained. I mean, up to that point, this had been a workplace where no one even greeted each other. The suddenness of this surprising utterance roused me from my daydream about cable-stayed bridges, while my coworker, perhaps annoyed at being disturbed from his own reverie, cast a displeased look (though I had never noticed him looking pleased) at the Director. *Listen*, the Director said once more. This time his voice sounded a bit more forceful. Maybe he had recovered a sense of his position as director, or had gained strength from our reactions to him speaking. Or else his mouth and tongue were parched from the years of silence and his voice was now warming up. *Listen*, the Director said yet again (this time his tone another degree stronger) as he launched into the crux of the matter at hand. *The fact is, over the past few years, there has been a sharp increase in the number of people who commit suicide by jumping off bridges*, he said. *Well, the increase isn't just people jumping off bridges, it's the number of suicides that's up, and what that comes down to is—with the current state of the world, the economy, the daily advances in technology, the diminishing humanity in our lives, the pathology that grows more rampant with each generation, the gloom in people's hearts, and so on—so many factors must be taken into account—but, the fact remains that the number of suicides jumping off bridges* has *increased, and so, as I was recently notified by upper management*, he explained in an exceedingly halting and roundabout way. I nodded vaguely. As for my coworker, who may or may not have been listening to the Director's talk, he was just staring vacantly at the wall behind the Director where an aerial photograph of the Golden Gate Bridge hung, or else at the shimmer of bright afternoon light that could be seen through the window next to it. *What that comes down to, well, what that comes down to is*... the Director said, his tone now sharp, perhaps due to his impatience with our meager response. *What that comes down to is that it is ridiculous for a healthy, developed nation to experience a further increase in the suicide rate. That is why, that is why... The point is,*

I wonder if there isn't anything we can do. What that comes down to is, bridges make it our business. Because our job is to spend each day maintaining this country's bridges, that makes it our business. It comes down to this—bridges are our business. So, the point is, I wonder if there isn't anything we can do. The point is, because bridges are our business. What I mean is, I wonder if we couldn't do something that might bring down the suicide rate, even a little, you know. Upper management, that's what they're on about. So then, I wonder if there might not possibly be a good way for everyone to do something? The Director wrapped up this long, convoluted speech on an oddly ceremonious note, looking back at the bookshelf behind us. We remained silent. The Director didn't say anything either. We sat there, looking the other way so as to avoid each other's gaze, squirming restlessly in our seats.

I don't think there is, I said flatly, with a hunch that, knowing us, prolonging the silence any further would cause the discussion to degenerate into a never-ending staring contest. The Director's brow twitched. Several more minutes of silence ensued. After a long while, finally, the Director murmured, with a vague smile, *I suppose there isn't*, at the same moment that I began to add, *Because, you see*... My coworker, who until then had been absorbed by either the photo of the Golden Gate Bridge or the light outside the window, spoke out in a quarrelsome and decisive tone, *That's outside our jurisdiction!*

He was absolutely right. A problem like that *was* outside our jurisdiction. It was really barking up the wrong tree, as they say. Just because our work was maintaining bridges, if someone was going to jump off of one and thereby lose their life, it had nothing to do with us. Surely the people in upper management had the wrong idea. Could they have possibly thought we were an entity with some kind of supernatural powers when it came to bridges, capable of wielding our magic to solve anything related to them? Preposterous!

The Director muttered vaguely under his breath, *Well, I suppose*, then dramatically pulled the thick book of photographs off the shelf behind him and began looking at it. Assuming that the discussion was finished, my coworker and I returned to our respective fancies.

After that, I was overtaken by a baffling anxiety each day at work. I couldn't pinpoint this uneasiness. It felt like a slight flutter in my chest, a puzzling whir I couldn't shake off. It was as if the highly unusual act of having a conversation in our office (albeit only the briefest exchange) had somehow upset my mental equilibrium. As a result, my ability to concentrate on bridges was severely compromised. Not infrequently, I would find myself ruminating word for word on what the Director had said and how I had answered,

as well as the timing of my coworker's response and the awkwardness that followed. I went on doing what I always did—I took out my sketchbook and tried to draw those cables. But really, these attempts resulted in nothing more than a jumble of random scratches. The spindly pairs of lines filling the pages looked downright idiotic, radiating from the apex of a tower arbitrarily located somewhere outside my sketchbook. After staring at them from different angles for a while, I couldn't help but conclude they were mere lines. There was nothing captivating or exciting about them. Just idiotic lines.

Not long after, my coworker stopped showing up for work. I don't know why. Maybe I could have found out had I asked the Director, but seeing as how the ripples from the recent commotion appeared to be fading at last, I decided it would only cause another needless disturbance. Nevertheless, the loss of a single staff member increased each of our workloads by that much more. I spent all of each day filling up my sketchbook with lines upon lines. Not very enjoyable, but it simply couldn't be avoided. Every so often, the left side of my chest would whir again and I would apply pressure with my right hand as I performed my task.

Finally, I reached the point where my concentration gave out. Abandoning my work, I slumped down in my chair, thrusting both arms upward. A faint groan escaped my lips. I noticed the Director's brow twitch in surprise. The recent incident had left the Director with an acute fear of other people (though of course "other people" could only mean myself). Seized by a sadistic impulse, I let out various other low moans and groans. He was clearly concerned with my behavior. Though he kept his eyes lowered to the book of photos on his desk, time after time I caught him casting a surreptitious glance my way. Soon, however, I came to realize I shared his fear of people—having taken the joke a bit too far, now I was the one who was disquieted.

One day, I stretched with abandon, repeatedly, then got up and went over to the area that served as a kitchenette. There was an electric pot and several cups, none of which had been used in years apparently. I gave the pot a quick rinse, slowly filled it with water, and switched it on. Then I looked around for tea bags or instant coffee but found nothing of the sort. I turned and saw the Director hurriedly shift his gaze from me back to his book. With no other choice, I poured plain hot water into a cup after rinsing it and returned to my desk. My desire to work had disappeared, while the whirring in my chest continued unabated. Maybe having something to drink would help me regain my concentration. But the hot water tasted of iron.

Sipping the metallic water, I was trying to sink back into my daydream about cable-stayed bridges when suddenly the Director, who had never stopped shooting

glances my way, threw off his hesitation. *That water, you know,* he broke out, *the water from that tap. The insides of the pipes are, uh, rusty. The water is probably murky. But then, I bet it's good for your health. Since it's rich in iron*... The delivery was so forced I knew he must have rehearsed that joke in his head a few times before speaking. His tone made it obvious. I smiled with my eyes and cocked my head slightly. *Hmm, well. I can't seem to get motivated today, huh*, the Director went on. *I know what you mean*, I replied. It was an unexpectedly smooth retort, if I do say so myself. Carrying on an unanticipated conversation led to feelings of surprise and satisfaction, followed by anxiety and bashfulness. Perhaps the Director experienced the same kind of pleasure, for he added, *Well, some days are like that, maybe we can break off early*. His manner of speaking, while still awkward, sounded more affable than a moment earlier. He even vaguely appeared to be in high spirits. Again I smiled and cocked my head slightly but, oddly, the Director's familiarity was only making me feel more ill at ease.

Subsequently, the now somewhat loquacious Director began to express his misgivings more and more often, wondering whether my coworker's absence coupled with our lack of concentration was putting the bridges in danger of imminent collapse. *That may be so*, I replied. Yet the more talkative the Director became, the more disturbed I felt. Shutting out the noise around me, I managed to generate the necessary effort to regain my concentration, but still, even we were forced to admit that our duties now had absolutely nothing to do with bridge maintenance—we were basically getting paid to nap.

On the other hand, we received not a single report or indication that any bridges anywhere had collapsed or were on the verge of collapsing. Ultimately, I suppose that's why we were content to let things remain as they were. This situation continued for about two months. Although our days were as peaceful as before, I was still subject to my inner restlessness and disquiet. And, even though he was the boss, I think the Director may have felt the same way.

This state of affairs went on much too long though. To make a long story short, when the numerical data were eventually released, the decision was made to shut down our office. If our decline in productivity caused no corresponding change in the real world, it was argued, then in all probability, our work was completely superfluous. I thought this was absurd. They hadn't the foggiest idea what it was we'd been doing. But here's what they had to say.

To be sure, in order for bridges to maintain themselves, they must have an illusion, as it were, about themselves and, in that respect, it's the same now as it ever was. At one time, bridges needed a boost to their confidence, a guarantee that they were indeed

bridges. Otherwise, it wasn't uncommon for them to become skeptical about their own identity and, tragically, collapse. Today, however, circumstances are different. Bridges have now realized that their existence is founded on nothing more than an illusion. Therefore, the thoughts people have fed into bridges so as to reinforce their illusions about themselves have become completely useless. Bridges now know that such thoughts do not in any way guarantee the legitimacy of their existence. Whenever self-doubt arises, they must desperately apply their will to deny such misgivings and sustain themselves as bridges. It follows then that the once-certain benefits of supporting the existence of bridges by dreaming about them were an illusion. For the bridges, it's nothing more than an empty consolation. And so on...

That may very well have been true. But nevertheless, perhaps we ought to treat the bridges more like bridges. By doing so (even if we may not be able to resolve their doubts), I wonder if we can't make things a little bit easier for them. Apparently, however, as far as the relevant authorities are concerned, that could only be interpreted as a predictable excuse to justify our jobs.

Now our office is closed and I no longer have the time or desire to devote myself to thinking about bridges. The Director and I were issued official notification of our reassignments. I wonder if at the time when the Director had hesitantly spoken to my colleague and me about upper management's absurd suggestion regarding bridge suicides, if the two of us had just ignored it, had simply kept our mouths shut, whether all this might not have happened. Had that been the case, perhaps our happy daydreams would have gone on, and we could have offered some support to the bridges. Next month, I'm supposed to start my new job in the office of the municipal food service center. The whirring in my chest has shown no signs of improvement. Meanwhile, the bridges continue their solitary struggle.

translated by Ryan Shaldjian Morrison

BREATHING THROUGH GILLS

HIDEO FURUKAWA

The time will come. Soon the time will come. This I admit, and yet do not admit. I sleep with you again. I take you again in my arms, am held in yours. See how our arms entwine. What should have been my single arm is now two, my two arms are now four. There's no telling right arm from left. You have one head, I have one head, and they are kissing. You kissing me, me you. Kisses that come in no order. Who is doing what no longer matters. I lick your body. Forever licking.

I have teeth. You must know this. They are between my lips and tongue. But they are hidden. The feel of these teeth, their hardness, this too is hidden. As I lick your body, I remember that under the skin are internal organs. There is some kind of organ pulsating. This I can feel. But just which organ is hidden from me. Everything takes place under the skin. This is not my apartment. We are at your place. I would never let you into my place. And for this, I think, I am responsible. For this transgression, you see. I knew all along what would happen. I lick you all over. Forever licking your body.

Breasts. And upward from there, toward the collarbone. Then toward the head, and up to the throat, the neck. Here are your gills. They are starting to grow in. Still harmless at this point.

"Talk to me about water," you say.

"Huh?"

"Water is..."

"Is what?"

"Water penetrates sound."

"Is that so?"

"And voices are..."

"Voices?"

"Voices can be heard through the water."

"Fair enough."

This much we conversed. The conversation went no further.

I had much to inquire. What are you thinking? What do you think? So you think? Thus I would shower you with questions. But I cannot shower you with questions, not even one; the only thing I can do is make love to you. We make love to each other. My arm becomes our two arms, our three arms, our four arms. The order and agent of each kiss no longer matters. We are now the same. But we are not the same. Lungs and gills. Both of us, for sure, are equipped with lungs. In this respect, we are the same. But you have two breathing apparatuses, lungs and gills. Isn't that right? We are not the same. I had it all wrong.

Wrong I was. That's the fact of the matter. Otherwise I wouldn't be feeling this guilty. But, alas, the time is come. The time is at hand.

There is a water tank in each room. The tanks appear at first to be for decoration only, but they are actually fully functional. Those made of acrylic resin are slightly greater in number. The witches in charge are of the opinion that the fish's natural colors look so vivid because the acrylic tanks have a higher transparency level than those made of glass. Each tank is equipped with either a built-in or clip-on fluorescent light that creates the effect of day and night in the tank. Air conditioning and heating have been installed. The water temperature is maintained at a fixed level. As a life-preserving device, a filter is also in operation. Each tank has sea anemones firmly attached to the sides. Coral sands line the bottom. Each tank is high in salt content, filled with real and artificial seawater. The tanks are brimming with saltwater fish and invertebrates. They are in every room and are thus many in number. The rooms too are many in number, as are the witches. There are also the Tanks, which are not found in any of the rooms—but these I will discuss later when I explain the relocation of the yellow boxfish, a species related to blowfish, that inhabits the western Pacific Ocean. In any event, all of the rooms are well kept. At the very least, the area around each tank is well kept, for the fish would perish if it were not. Keeping the area well maintained is of the utmost importance for life inside the tank. For the livelihood of the fish. A light switch regulates day and night. Water levels, water temperatures, and water quality are also regulated. As is the distribution of the fish's food. The moon's waxing and waning—an external phenomenon—regulates the spawning cycle of the fish and coral. The witches' cycles too are regulated by the lunar cycle, and to that the witches tip their hats. The witches too are most well kept. They reside mainly on the "other side," far from the chaos of the city. They are that

which brings order, the antonym of chaos, to the city. Antonymous to "that shore" is "this shore," shore of the real, and the witches freely come and go between these two shores. Through discipline and sheer will they summon their powers from "that shore." Moreover, the order that they bring to the city is akin to the regulation of memories, the city's memories, which transcend those of the individual. All the witches of the city were raised in the city and are now fully grown. Together the aquariums constitute the network of witches. This network might be likened to a broadcasting or computer network. Perhaps the best way to understand this is to imagine a TV screen. At first, the witches would catch abortive migratory fish, one example being the yellow boxfish. *Abortive migratory fish* is the generic term for migrating fish that are born in tropical and subtropical seas then ride the Japan Current north to the coastline of Honshū. They live there along the rocky shores until winter, when they are fated to die from exposure to the cold water. The witches do not move about in groups. Each witch fishes for abortive migratory yellow boxfish in seclusion—along, say, the rocky shores of the Kantō region. As the name suggests, yellow boxfish are shaped like a box. Their flesh is safe to eat (unlike their blowfish cousins), and the charming manner in which they swim makes them popular as ornamental fish. The witches read the emotions of the yellow boxfish they catch. Though yellow boxfish are appealing in the way they look (particularly their mouths) and swim, as abortive migratory fish they harbor emotions altogether different from other fellow boxfish species that are bought in stores. *How far north do we have to migrate? Can we breed here? Why is the water temperature dropping like this? Will we perish? Shall we perish?* When winter approaches, the witches collect the fear-stricken yellow boxfish from along the rocky shores and take them away to breed. To breed, of course, in their aquariums. That is, in the aforementioned tanks found in each of the witches' rooms. The witches then extract the sorrows from these yellow boxfish, these bright yellow abortive migratory fish studded with black speckles. Placing an ear to the mouth of each fish, the witches listen for the breath of the tide, the voice of the tide. Their sorrows can be extracted only when the witches are fully synchronized with the moon. In due course, the witches receive sorrows that perfectly fit the abyss that only the city's shadow vis-à-vis the city, the "there" vis-à-vis the "here," and the "other shore" vis-à-vis "this shore," possess (and irradiate), and proceed to the next sequence. The witches then relocate the candidates into pure water aquariums. Referred to by specialists as "freshwater bathing," this treatment is designed to remove bacteria and parasites from saltwater fish. Trying business indeed for the fish, whose lives are put at great risk. Although the yellow boxfish should not swim in this pure water for more than

five minutes at a time, the witches compel each of them to bathe in it long enough to meet the standards of the abyss. After this, only the fish that survive survive. Then these survivors—that is, those that have twice escaped death's grip—enter the next phase, in which they recuperate in a real or artificial seawater aquarium of standard size. What is particularly remarkable about these fish is their mouths. There one can perceive a sign—a quivering—as if they were about to speak. Then comes the final event, which both is and is not part of the sequence. On the night of the new moon, when all lights—even the sterilization lights—have been turned off, every witch in each and every room watches the glow emanating from the aquariums. The light is actually emanating from the yellow boxfish themselves—from the sheen of their colored scales—while in their black speckles lurks a great darkness. Such light-emitting yellow boxfish, "king of all fish," are to be found in every room of every witch's house in the city. "King fish" are, of course, capable of speech. Yet one mustn't respond to them. They are usually waited on in their tank by plankton (their lords-in-waiting), which too emit light. When king fish speak in their unkingly voices, each tank is transformed into a communication device for the witches. Yet these devices only communicate one way. If one were to relocate the yellow boxfish—the newly crowned king of all fish—into a regular saltwater aquarium (that is, somewhere else than the witches' chambers), then the tank would become one of the Tanks. They would materialize in bank lobbies, underground ticket gates (beside the office), on the corners of cafeteria counters, in trendy bars. Thus their order is embedded, so that their memories—the city's memories that transcend the individual—will not be scattered.

You gradually settle into your gills. Your behavior changes accordingly. I cannot say. I cannot say what might be termed the truth of the matter. If only I could say. Confession is a betrayal. Of my being me. Of the city. That's right. City, night, moon. You never seem worked up. The rain falls. You say you're happy for some reason. You don't open your umbrella. You're soaked now. You tell me you snuck into the public pool the other day. You tell me the whereabouts of the water-storage tank, the whereabouts of the well. The well? You say the smell led you to it.

I can offer you nothing. Not even a single well. I have already given everything to the city. All of it. All of it, you see . . . will be taken.

"I cannot talk about the tanks," you say.

"I see."

"The tanks are..."

"Vital?"

"Yes, vital. And made of acrylic resin. And pervious to voices."

"Voices...?"

"Sound travels through them."

"Sound?"

"Underwater. The voices travel."

"I shall make note of this."

I begged the tank. I begged the tank, saying that I would never beg for anything else. I begged for time...

The metamorphosis is proceeding apace. You say it feels good when I cry. We are back in your apartment. You in the bathroom, me in the living room. You've been in there for some time now. Concerned, I peep in. You are there, half-naked. Your face is immersed in the brimming bath. No, not your face. Your entire head. As if you are attempting some odd method of suicide. The water is now up to your shoulders. Your shoulders and head are immersed. I remain unperturbed. I press my face against your naked back. Nuzzling against your body, I weep. You lift your face from the water and happily exclaim, It's saltwater!

Saltwater, saltwater, you repeat. Oh how much better this feels. All right, then, start licking. Lick these tears of mine. Keep licking. Till you drown in them.

We go on a date. We meet at the station. From there we go for dinner, a movie, a walk. You see, dates are an absolute must for relationships. We can't just stay in your room forever. Of course we can't. A river runs alongside the station. You are late—the first sign of a date's unraveling. I keep my eyes fixed on the turnstile, but you never appear. You never got on the train, did you. You came by river. You came, but not by train. You swam here. You say it's easier that way. Easier on the breathing, you say. Your whole body is wet.

In 1998 the yellow boxfish made a prediction: the month that follows October will be November. In 2008 the yellow boxfish issued, as king, a command: the day following Wednesday shall be Tuesday. In 2010, the yellow boxfish, breathing through gills, issued a revelation as it sucked in oxygen underwater: The day following January first is January second *and* Negative February. All kings are in tanks. All tanks are in rooms. All rooms are contracted by witches. Contracted under the names of each witch. The contracts

are made either with the real estate agent or the city's shadow. Those with the former are, in most cases, rental contracts renewable every two years; those with the latter are for an indefinite term. And the "depth" of the contract changes according to the waxing and the waning of the moon. A witch is a witch because she uses witchcraft. Kings are kings because they reign over their riffraff brethren (including nonfish invertebrates and various types of sea algae). On new-moon nights the witches listen to the voices of the yellow boxfish, the king of fish. They try to decipher, interpret. On those nights the witches do not prowl. The witches have never liked to prowl. Prowling is for the familiar spirits. Or for the aquariums that are similarly transformed into surveillance devices except for those nights with a new moon. The witches read in the king fish's voices the order of things. They decipher how to regulate the flow of time. In 2003, the yellow boxfish were rather loquacious. To sustain this loquacity the witches had to carefully select a feed made solely from artificial animal fodder. Wide peripheral vision allows most species of fish to see two worlds at once. Some can even see that which is underwater and that which is not underwater—that is, that which is above water—at the same time. Still more, now that they have become king fish, they can also appropriate two kinds of time into these two worlds. Into their perception of these two worlds. Yet the king fish have never taken so much as a step—a fin's stroke—outside their tanks. They never leave the palace, hence the need for constant upkeep. A contract exists here too. In return for tending to the palace upkeep, the witches are guaranteed the right to keep company with—and even own—any of the king fish. Under no circumstances is that contract to be breached, and punishment will be duly meted out to anyone who disregards it, something which happens once or twice a year. For example, when a witch has her tank shattered by a falling star (but *not* a meteor; only witches can speak in detail of this star), she is required to damage herself in compensation. There have also been cases of witches blacking out (that is, literally blacking out, since they actually disappear both temporally and spatially from the city's surface for a short time). Yet, should they black out at an inopportune moment, resulting in negligence of their palace duties, then their powers of witchcraft will be revoked and they will be sacrificed as offerings to the city's amnesia. One unusual incident was caused when a certain witch ate blowfish for dinner. On a new-moon night, this witch found herself at a blowfish restaurant. After chewing, swallowing, and digesting blowfish sashimi, deep-fried blowfish, soft-roe blowfish, and jellied blowfish broth, she returned to her room. Then, in the wee hours of the night, a yellow boxfish, the incarnation of the light-emanating king fish, asked her, Are you okay with eating human flesh? It continued. Haven't you ingested the meat of

my species, the blowfish, as you would that of a man? The witch suddenly found herself on the defensive. Violating the injunction not to respond to the king fish's voice from the tank, she began to respond to her interrogator—and in a poof, her world vanished. Another case involved what seemed to be an act of Providence. There was a certain witch who had recently lost a close relative. This witch returned home to attend the funeral. In the middle of the vigil, she remembered that she had forgotten to set the timer for the light inside the fish tank. Without the timer set, there would be no transition from day to night. All the same, she reassured herself, it is my father who has died (and still so young!), and it will be seven days before the new moon, and I *have* set the timer for the food dispenser, at least. So she decided, after much hesitation, that it would be all right for the fish to go just this once without night falling inside the tank. For she was, after all, truly overwhelmed with sadness at the loss of her father. Such was her dilemma. She was torn between her own sadness and her concern for the fish missing a single night in the tank. In the end, however, she chose to remain at the funeral. In other words, she put her concern for her own kin over that of the moon. Needless to say, such behavior is not becoming of a witch—for this was precisely the moment she should have employed her special powers. So after the funeral, she returned to her room only to find the yellow boxfish dead as a doornail. In fact, everything inside the tank—from the anemonefish and its sea anemone, to the damselfish, to the blood sea bream, to the akamo shrimp—was dead. And, most crucially, the yellow boxfish, king of all fish, was floating on the water's surface, baring its dead white belly. One night missed and a whole world was destroyed. She had wiped it out, and she knew it. She could sense its wrath hovering about the room. The king fish, having reached his end, had cast out that wrath before departing. And she knew she would pay the price for her mistake. Love would be taken from her.

"There's so much I wanted to disclose," I said.

"..."

"If only I'd brought you to my room."

"..."

"Then the spell would have been cast on me instead of you."

"..."

"But I couldn't bring myself to do it."

"..."

"I cannot, could not. It would not, could not be."

"..."

"Yet you took me in despite all this. You accepted me, accepted all of it. And why? Why do you never rebuke me? Question me? Accuse me? Though you know I am to blame... And why these gills?"

"Gills..."

"There's just one more thing..."

"..."

"I want to ask."

"..."

"How does the world up here look from underwater? Like when I dunk my head in the ocean and look around at what's down there?"

But we never conversed. We've never conversed like this. Not even once. You've never even uttered the word *gill*. That's right. You are never permitted to respond to what I say.

All cities of the world have waterways. Some are visible, others (sewers, for example) are not. Of the former, rivers are the most conspicuously managed. Urban rivers are particularly well kept. Their banks are carefully monitored, and they already contain order within them. While their banks have a right and a left side, they have neither a "this shore" nor a "that shore." Since the concept of "that shore" does not exist for them, they have no notion of its antonym, "this shore." Hence it is the rivers—which are wholly entrusted to the witches—that bring order to each city. They systematically domesticate and flush out all of the city's memories, memories which transcend those of the individual. In other words, the river is a mold into which memories flow. Furthermore, the rivers flow chiefly for the purpose of benediction. By never remaining still they render unassailable the order of time. This city enjoys planting cherry trees on the banks of its rivers. All its energy goes into coloring the rivers in spring with cherry trees in full blossom. Eventually, all its rivers lead to the sea. This city's topography is such that this happens quite naturally. In the gulf, the rivers sometimes merge with the canals, and at other times are regulated (most conspicuously) by sluice gates. All eventually flows into Tokyo Bay. Houseboats, anchored and moored, come into view where the rivers meet the ocean. Years have passed since the city's population reached the ten million mark. According to the figures, there is one witch for every one hundred thousand people. Yet Edo Castle was not protected by witches. Our records all show this. Why, then, were there no witches in the Edo period? The short and easy (or perhaps uneasy) answer to

this is that Edo and Tokyo are different cities. But it is not the witches who answer thus. The answer comes not from any of them. The rivers of the city flow through the city. Headed for the sea, the rivers are flowing. At night the houseboats lose their moorings and depart the coast. They glide over the waters of Tokyo Bay. Gliding, their lights fade into the sea as memories.

The rain comes down hard. The rain falls on us. On you, on me. And on our surroundings. You see. The two of us are walking. This is a kind of voyage, albeit a small one. We are on a voyage to the river's end. The canal starts here. Over there is the end of the river's end, and the first sign of the sea's beginning. Riding the wind, the smell of the tide. Salt-breeze fragrance. There is no sign of anyone around, it's raining so hard. No sign of umbrellas. We too are without umbrellas. You like how the rain feels on your skin. With no one around, no one sees us. We are the unseen.

We kiss afresh. Afresh? You enter the water. I stay back. Do we kiss afresh? Could we kiss again, in a series of kisses where it's not clear whom is kissing whom? You enter the water. You are in the water, inside the canal. I admit—at the level of cognition, the level of language only—yet still cannot admit that maybe we are not the same. Here on land there is oxygen, and underwater, too, is oxygen. Your lungs start to hurt. Maybe we are not the same. Lungs for me and gills for you.

The sluice gate. I can see it, even through the rain. The sluice reminds us that sea and nonsea are divided here, that each begins and ends here. I can see clearly now the sluice's thick columns. The tide has receded a bit and the columns are densely spotted with acorn barnacles that look like a floodometer. The barnacles are marks left by the moon. Marks left by the tide's ebb and flow. The moon is ever present, I think to myself. The sluice gate is open. Maybe underwater the seawater mixes and dissolves. It is saltwater. Saltwater it is, as far as the eye can see. I take off my shoes.

You are swimming. Close by the shore, you are swimming. You cannot hear me now. Can you. "Do you love me?"

But you have not forgotten. You have seen to it not to forget. Thus was your reply. Yes, your reply I can hear. Your voice that whispers—

"Uh-huh..."

"Can you hear me!"

"Mm-hmm..."

"My voice, can you hear my voice?"

"It passes through."

"Passes through?"

"Yes, it goes right through."

"The sound... my voice does?"

"I won't forget."

"Forget what . . . ?"

"I won't ever forget. Look, the rain."

"Rain?"

"The rain is so loud. But here all is quiet. Look, the sea's... The seawater's..."

"Wait..."

"...."

"Hey, don't ..."

"The salt's..."

"No..."

You disappear into the sea. Into Tokyo Bay. I close the sluice. With my own hands. And thus we parted for good.

translated by James Dorsey

SLEEPYVILLE

MIMEI OGAWA

1

Nobody knew the boy's name. I'll just call him K.

K had once traveled the world. One day he arrived at a most unusual place called Sleepyville. There was no activity to be seen there and not a sound to be heard. The buildings were all old and had fallen into disrepair. Not a wisp of smoke rose from a smokestack for there was not a single factory to be found.

The town simply spilled out over the plain. It was named Sleepyville for a reason: anyone who passed through it was overcome by an inexplicable fatigue and a desire for sleep. Travelers who chanced upon the town would begin to feel weary as they approached and, getting ever more drowsy, would sit themselves down in the shade of a tree at the edge of town or perhaps on a rock somewhere close to the center of town for a bit of a rest. Try though they might to recover their strength, they would feel themselves pulled deeper and deeper into the depths of drowsiness, and before they knew it they would be sound asleep. By the time they finally awakened, the sun would have begun to set. Alarmed, they would leap to their feet and hurry on their way.

The story started somewhere, and somebody passed it along, and before long it had made the rounds of travelers far and wide, so that all came to fear passing through the town. Some even took great pains to avoid it, circling far out of their way to give it a wide berth.

But K was different. He wanted to see for himself this Sleepyville that everybody feared, he wanted to pay a visit to this place so dreaded by all. And he made up his mind to be different from the rest—he would not fall asleep, he would stay awake no matter how drowsy he felt. And so, spurred on by curiosity, he plodded toward "Sleepyville."

2

When he arrived, he found the town as odd and unsettling as people had described it. Without a sound to be heard, the town in daytime was as silent as it was at night. No smoke drifted skyward; indeed, there was nothing at all to catch one's eye. Each and every house was shut up tightly. Everything was perfectly still, as if the town itself had died.

K strolled along the crumbling yellow earthen walls and peeked through the cracks of the weathered doors. All was so still that he could not determine if anyone was actually living in the houses. A skinny mutt appeared out of nowhere, limping through the town square. K thought that the dog must have arrived in the company of a traveler, only to have lost track of him. Now the dog was wandering about aimlessly. As K explored the town he felt exhaustion creeping slowly into his bones.

"Aha! Here it is—the fatigue, the sleepiness. But I have to stay awake. I've got to resist the desire to sleep," mumbled K to himself, urging himself forward.

Nevertheless, he could feel his senses begin to numb, as if he had been drugged. Soon the drowsiness that had come over him was impossible to resist; there was no way he could carry on. K collapsed against a nearby wall and within seconds was fast asleep, snoring loudly, and oblivious to everything around him.

3

It felt to K that just as he had fallen into a deep sleep someone was shaking him awake. Startled, he opened his eyes and jumped to his feet. The sun had already set and the blue light of the moon cast a cold glow over the area. "What time is it? How could I have let this happen? I was supposed to stay awake no matter how sleepy I felt," thought K regretfully. There was, however, nothing to be done about it now.

K picked up his hat, which had fallen at his feet, and put it back on his head. He glanced about and discovered standing nearby an old man carrying a large sack over his shoulder. K thought it must have been this old man who had shaken him awake a moment ago. Boldly, he walked toward the old man. Examining his appearance more closely in the light of the moon, K saw that his clothing was ragged and his shoes were worn thin. With a long gray beard, he appeared to be very old indeed.

"And who might you be?" asked the boy, in as strong a voice as he could muster.

With this the old man tottered in K's direction.

"I am the one who woke you! I have something to ask of you. Truth be told, I am the one who built Sleepyville. I am the one responsible for it. But, as you can surely see, I am now old, and thus I have a request to make. Will you hear what I have to say?"

Addressed in this manner K felt it his manly duty to listen to what the old man had to say. "Should it be within my power, I will do as you ask," K vowed.

This filled the old man with joy.

"At last I can rest easy. I will now tell you my tale. I have long lived in this realm, yet others came from elsewhere and robbed me of my lands. They ran steam engines along the tracks they laid down, sailed steamships across my seas, and strung electric wires across my skies. Were this to continue, there would soon come a day when no tree or flower would be left on the face of the earth. Since long, long ago, I have loved these beautiful mountains, these forests, and these flowering fields, but if fatigue did not force humans to rest, the surface of this earth would be turned into a wasteland in the blink of an eye. And so, from the Desert of Exhaustion, I filled my sack with the Sands of Fatigue. I carry that sack on my back even now. Sprinkling even a few grains of it on anything will cause that thing to decay, rust, or tire. I will now share with you the sand in this sack and ask that as you wander the earth, you scatter it." Such was the old man's request of K.

4

Having accepted the old man's mysterious request, the boy picked up the sack and began to walk the earth. One day, as he was walking through the Alps, he came across a landscape beautiful beyond words. It was swarming with hundreds of workers and laborers who were cutting down massive trees that had stood since ancient times, and dynamiting magnificent boulders, shattering them into pieces. In their wake a railroad was being built. The boy grabbed a handful of sand from his sack and scattered it on the railroad line that had just been so carefully laid, bringing the workers' efforts to naught. The once gleaming tracks turned red with rust before his eyes.

There was also a time when K walked through a bustling city teeming with people. An automobile approached from the other direction, struck a shopkeeper's young apprentice, and sent him flying, very nearly killing him. The driver attempted to hurry on without so much as a glance at the site of the accident, but K quickly snatched a handful of sand from his bag and threw it on the tires. The automobile screeched to a halt, allowing the crowd to easily apprehend the inconsiderate driver.

Yet another time K found himself passing by a building site where many tired workers labored and sweat. K felt sorry for them. He sprinkled just a few grains of sand on their foreman, who in just seconds began to feel drowsy.

"Let's take a short break," said the foreman. He pulled his cap down over his face

to shade it from the sun and was soon soundly asleep.

K rode on trains and steamships, he visited ironworks. Wherever he went he sprinkled some of the sand until at last his supply ran out.

He remembered what the old man had told him: "When you have used up all your sand, return here to this sleepy town and I shall make you this country's prince." The boy thought it would be nice to see the old man again, and he began his journey back to Sleepyville.

Some days later he arrived in Sleepyville. The gray buildings that had stood there long ago had somehow vanished without a trace. And that was not all. In their place towered row after row of tall buildings, billowing smoke up into the skies. From the ironworks rose a clamorous din, and electric lines stretched like a spiderweb over the town while streetcars sped hither and yon.

The condition of the town so shocked the boy that he was left speechless. Eyes wide with surprise, he stared intently at the scene, watching, watching.

translated by Ted Goossen

THE SEASIDE ROAD

TOMOKA SHIBASAKI

"Aah," I said, sprawled out on the bed.

"Aah," I tried again, covering my right ear with my right hand. I blocked my left ear with my left hand and repeated the sound, this time holding it a little longer. Spreading out my arms, I turned my eyes to the ceiling, where a pool of light wavered like crumpled cellophane. As I watched the light, an image of my stuff scattered on the floor came to me. I saw a scrunched-up plastic bag, the transparent one my clothes had come in, tossed on the floor sometime before. The breeze coming through the window was causing it to stir. The breeze couldn't get rid of the heat, though—my T-shirt was damp with sweat.

I covered my right ear with my hand again and listened closely. There definitely was a noise, *kiiiiii*. A kind of high-pitched whine. It seemed about to break off, but it went on nonstop, growing neither louder nor softer. *Kiiiiii*. I tried the left side again: nothing.

"Waah," I tried changing the sound. That made a slight difference.

Just as I thought.

I knew I should go see a specialist, but it was already noon on Saturday and I had work on Monday, so it would have to be after that, by which time the problem might have fixed itself, and it was while turning these thoughts over in my mind that I finally dragged myself to my feet. My first step landed the sole of my foot squarely on the plastic bag, blotting out the light on the ceiling. I heard the plastic crumple. It sounded muffled, with a sharper crackling around the edges.

"Hatchan!"

My ears were skewered by the sound of my doorbell being rung over and over. The moment I unlocked the door Miiko pushed her way in.

"Peepeepee!" she squealed, racing to the prefab

bathroom without a glance in my direction. I picked up the convenience store bag she had flung on the floor and looked inside: a plastic bottle of pop, another of green tea, and a box of chocolate-covered vanilla ice cream treats. I stuck the ice cream in the fridge to keep it out of the heat and cracked open the bottle.

"Ah, you're stealing my pop!" Miiko shrieked when she stepped out of the bathroom. I could hear the water whoosh and whirl behind her.

"Don't shout! My ears are killing me," I wailed dramatically, sticking my fingers in my ears. Miiko's big eyes grew even wider.

"What do you mean, your ears?" she said, coming to me.

"I caught another show last night and did it again. Noise-induced deafness. Got to go see the ear doctor."

"Aren't you too old for that kind of thing, Hatchan? Hey, where's my ice cream?"

She followed my finger to the freezer, pulled out the box and opened it. I could barely make out the sound of the ripping cardboard. I picked the clothing bag up off the floor and tossed it in the garbage. A glance at the ceiling told me that, sure enough, the wavering light was gone. It too had been chucked in the garbage can. What if it managed to crawl out—hey, that would be pretty cool, I thought, studying the can. A clump of wastepaper light, tumbling across the floor.

Miiko made no move to share her ice cream with me. I knew she wasn't being mean—her brain just didn't work that way. Maybe because she was just nineteen. I was seven years older, so that sort of thing didn't tick me off. Her long brown hair was still partly damp. She gave off a scent like soap, scrunched up there on the stool with her knees poking in the air.

"Where's Kashiwagi?" I asked her. She and I were both living with fourth-year students from the same college on the second and third floors of the same apartment building. I was on the third floor. Miiko tossed the now-empty box at my garbage can. It landed squarely on top of the pile of trash.

"Ah, that's right. He took off with the key. I phoned and asked him to bring it back, but he said he was already on the train. Some gentleman, huh. Lend me something to wear?"

Without waiting for an answer she stood up, went over to my closet, and opened the drawer of the semitransparent wardrobe where I keep my clothes.

"I know what I want, that pink thing you were wearing the other day."

"Pink?" I replied, but she was already dragging a T-shirt from the drawer. It was more magenta than pink. Close to purple.

"And Masahiko?" she asked, pulling off her sweatshirt.

"At his lab," I replied. Although I had asked him three times what kind of experiment they were carrying out, it was still a mystery to me, so I had quit asking. But since September whatever it was required him to be at school by eight o'clock each morning.

Miiko didn't reply. The bright-colored T-shirt looked a lot better on her than it did on me. She was wearing black shorts and her feet were bare.

"What's that thing feel like, anyway, noise-induced deafness?" she said all of a sudden, catching me off guard. So she had been listening!

"Like your ears are clogged and they won't pop. Then this whining noise kicks in, *kiiiiiiii*. And any kind of machinery drives you crazy. A microwave oven makes you want to scr—"

"Was the band good?"

"Awesome."

It all came back to me: the piercing wail of the electric guitar, the pounding drum, all the other instruments I couldn't place. The band's black T-shirt on the guy in front of me—they were selling those in the lobby. In the crack between people's backs, I could see the bouncing ends of the untrimmed guitar strings shimmering in the lights.

"So then can the complaints."

Miiko squatted on the floor but the next moment she bounced back up and drained the rest of the pop.

"Who's complaining?"

"Right on."

Miiko regarded me with wide eyes. "It's too quiet," she said, moving her hand closer to my iPod, which was hooked up to my speakers. "It's creeping me out."

"Don't touch that!" I cried, grabbing the tail of her T-shirt. It felt like hers now, too, like I would never wear it again.

"You serious?" Miiko said. Yet what could I do? Any other music would drive out the concert replaying itself in my head.

Miiko restlessly walked around my apartment then climbed on the bed and stuck her upper body out the open window to look down at the street below. Seen through the opening in the thin curtain, the sky looked white. Dazzling. Maybe it wasn't just my ears acting strange—my eyes might be as well.

Apart from the occasional car, no noise could be heard outside. The whole area was packed with houses, each presumably inhabited, yet all was still.

"I'm going out," Miiko said, turning to me. "Lend me your bike, huh?"

"Then what will I ride?"

"You serious?" Miiko said again.

The hallway faced west so the sun hadn't reached it yet. The concrete was still cool to the touch. Miiko rang the doorbell next door over and over, as she had mine.

"Gotō-san!"

Finally the door opened and a man with a receding hairline and silver-rimmed glasses poked his face out. We could see magazines and manga piled in the entranceway and corridor behind him.

"Lend me your bi-cy-cle!"

"Sorry, not today..." Gotō said, closing the metal door. Miiko gave it a resounding kick. The boom took a while to arrive, sinking into my ears gradually, as if it had come from far away. I wonder, when sounds enter that inner part of the ear that looks like a whirlpool, do they accumulate somewhere in the body?

"What kind of work do you do?" Gotō asked me as he wrestled with the bicycle pump in the weed-filled parking area in front of our building.

"Office work. Just basic stuff."

I hadn't known before that his name was Gotō, although Masahiko borrowed manga from him on occasion and we sometimes greeted each other in passing. When I asked Masahiko what Gotō did for a living, all I got for an answer was that he seemed to be a writer of some kind. And his age? Maybe forty, give or take.

The neck of Gotō's gray T-shirt was already dark with sweat. His forehead was sweaty too. He seemed to be having trouble fitting the tip of the hose to the tire on the rusty front wheel.

"What kind of company?"

"Real estate."

"Your boyfriend's a student, right?" Gotō said, fixing his bloodshot eyes on me. He looked half-asleep.

"Yes."

"Does he ever rip you off? Always asking you to pay, maybe, or grabbing money from your wallet when you're not looking?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe which?"

"Maybe not."

"Kashiwagi ripped me off," said Miiko, who had been hopping back and forth on

the concrete blocks that drivers park their cars against. "Like last week we made curry together, right? So he stiffed me on the beer money."

"For how much?"

I made a mental note to tell Miiko to get rid of Kashiwagi when Gotō was out of earshot. Any guy who'll rip off a girl younger than him is a real loser.

"A thousand yen," Miiko answered, hopping onto the next block.

Gotō switched the hose to the rear tire and began pumping again.

"Better be careful," he said. "Those things can escalate, you know."

"Yes!" sang out Miiko, raising her left hand in the air. Miiko was a southpaw. Her magenta T-shirt was blazing in the midday sun—I had to close my eyes. Just for a minute. The place I had spent three hours the night before had seemed brightly lit, but it was still a basement, and my eyes had grown used to the dark.

"Come on, Hatchan," Miiko scolded me abruptly. "Go up and change your clothes. You're such a slowpoke!"

I was squatting on the ground, and when she nudged my back, I lost my balance and toppled forward.

When I came down the outside stairs, Gotō was gone and Miiko was standing there with a woman whose skirt and hair were extremely long.

"We're going to the festival," Miiko said, staring blankly down the slope. Despite what she had said, her tone was flat and emotionless. It turned out that the tire on Gotō's bike had blown, so she was going to hitch a ride on the back of this woman's bicycle instead.

"Good afternoon."

"Good afternoon."

She was wearing no makeup and had virtually no eyebrows.

"My name is Nishikawa. I'm a housewife."

"Check out what Mrs. Nishikawa made," Miiko said, pointing to the eaves of the long, narrow, two-story house next door. A blue net was hanging there filled with rows of drying fish.

"Can I have some when they're ready?" Miiko said.

"I'd love some too!" I chimed in.

But Mrs. Nishikawa just giggled. It wasn't clear whether either of us would ever get a taste.

Mrs. Nishikawa's bicycle was the sort that old women ride, the two back wheels sandwiching a spacious basket for carrying things. Miiko squeezed herself into the

basket, I climbed on Masahiko's bike, and we set off for the festival, me following behind.

"You don't weigh a lot, do you," was all Mrs. Nishikawa said. Her long Indian cotton skirt seemed to make pedaling awkward.

Masahiko's bike was a little fold-up job I hated because the distance between the handlebars and the wheels made it so unstable. It was a hilly neighborhood, with twisting streets that branched off in all sorts of half-assed ways—intersections of three or even five streets were common—which made going downhill pretty scary for someone with lousy reflexes like me, but luckily Mrs. Nishikawa was moving slowly. Each time I hit the hand brakes the squeal spiraled deep into my ears, and it hurt. You can turn off your eyes, mouth, and nose without using your hands, but you can't shut down your ears; they register sound no matter what. Even when you're asleep.

Miiko was curled up small in the basket. "This is fun," she said, looking up at the houses, trees, and sky. The glittering leaves were still pale, almost transparent in the sunlight. The minute we reached the other side of the big road I heard the hubbub of what seemed like a throng of people. Then, just as suddenly, it disappeared. People talk about "losing sight" of things, but what do we say when something drops from our hearing?

We passed the little old shopping arcade at the bottom of the slope, circled the railroad station, crossed the tracks, and there we were at the temple. It was said to have quite a long history. I had passed this spot every weekend for three months, but this was the first time I entered. In fact, I had never even taken a good look at the place. Today, the temple grounds were jammed.

"We're going to the festival, the festival, the festival!" Miiko sang.

"It's not a festival, it's a temple fair," Mrs. Nishikawa said, having returned from depositing her bicycle beside the shuttered house on the corner a little way down the road.

"What's the difference?"

"There's no portable shrine, for one thing."

I could hear the clanging of the crossing signal. Thank goodness it went off after we'd already made our way through the back entrance. Even when my ears are in good shape, those things drive me nuts if I'm anywhere near them. The sound of the passing train rumbled up through our feet. The express didn't stop at this station.

The temple grounds were encircled by a number of large trees, whose clustered crowns resembled a small mountain. Who knows, the temple had been built on an incline, so a hill might well have stood here in the past. When we climbed the low flight of stone steps and passed through the gate, we were greeted on the other side by a courtyard

packed with stalls. The ones nearest us had put up red or yellow tents; those on the graveled space beyond were selling their pottery, clothing, wooden chests, and so forth under white tents, blue sheets, or other thrown-together shelters. It was always more crowded when the day of the fair fell on a weekend, Mrs. Nishikawa said. Yet almost all the shoppers wandering about dangling white plastic bags were so old their weekdays were likely as free as their weekends.

"Are you hungry?" I asked.

"Nope," said Miiko. She floated off somewhere. The smell of sugar hovered in the air. Sweets for the kids.

"I collect plates," said Mrs. Nishikawa, kneeling before the pottery stall that occupied the center of the courtyard. Ceramics of all kinds were piled up on slanted plywood shelves like the ones you see in front of vegetable and fruit shops. They weren't antiques but discounted items shipped directly from their places of manufacture. Mrs. Nishikawa's hair was so long it brushed the pebbled ground when she knelt, yet she barely noticed, absorbed as she was by the small square dish of light green she was turning this way and that in her hand.

"What kind of pottery do you like?" I asked her.

"Anything, really, as long as it's green."

She reached farther in to pick up a large plate with a pine tree motif. After that she seemed to totally forget I was there, taking up one piece of pottery after another and studying each intently. I guessed she wasn't going to be leaving for quite a while, so I looked about for Miiko. At some point she had moved to a bench next to the pond in the inner temple grounds. I wandered to the main temple building, where I marveled at the intricacy and age of the interlocking woodwork on the underside of the temple roof, then moved on to a blue-sheeted stall that sold wooden *kokeshi* dolls and used books. By the time I finished there, Miiko was being chatted up by a middle-aged man, probably a monk, in a deep blue robe, but when I ambled over to join them he walked off toward the parking lot.

"Who was that?" I asked.

"One of the customers from where I used to work."

What kind of part-time job was it that Buddhist monks would come calling? I thought of asking her, but then I saw what she was looking at and the question slipped from my mind. A huge golden carp was swimming in our direction, weaving its way across the stagnant pond. I could see water pushed up by its sides like slime. Its round mouth appeared to be gulping water and air at the same time. The shadows cast by

the twisted branches of the camphor trees made the pond look dark and deep, but I guessed it was actually quite shallow.

Suddenly remembering, I cupped my right ear with my right hand. There it was, a faint, somehow gritty *kiiiii*. In a noisy place I could forget the ringing because it mixed with other sounds. The concert of the night before had disappeared as well. After only half a day! An event so mind-blowing I thought I would remember it the rest of my life! When I had glimpsed the stage through the jostling, sweaty line of people up front, I saw the boards where the stage met the floor bouncing up and down, moving in tandem with the audience, now transformed into a single panting mass. The guitarist was lying on his back, clawing at the instrument on his belly. The earsplitting noise coming through the speakers filled the space of the small basement to bursting.

Miiko watched the carp until it jumped and vanished with a splash; but as soon as the last ripples were gone she lost interest and strolled over to the stalls.

"Oh, isn't that pretty!" Miiko said, pointing straight ahead at a glass bowl. It belonged to a stall in a corner of the courtyard that consisted of little more than a shabby cloth laid over a row of empty boxes with a few items on top. The woman sitting behind this sparse display appeared thoroughly disinterested, not even glancing up from her paperback when we approached. The bowl was small, the perfect size for a scoop of ice cream, but somewhat misshapen, and the thick, lime-colored glass had bubbles in it. In other words, the kind of century-old handblown glass object one often comes across at secondhand shops. Miiko knelt down and measured the thickness of the bowl with her slender fingers.

"People who make beautiful things are really something, aren't they," she said. "I mean, I can tell why something's useful, but beauty's another story. How do people create it, appreciate it? The whole thing just blows me away."

Was she addressing me or the woman running the stall? Apparently neither of us, though her voice was clear. She squatted there quietly. Looking down, I could see the pretty whorl at the crown of her scalp.

"I wonder how that works," I answered, though I knew Miiko might not be listening. When she didn't reply, I continued. "I mean, there is something that makes us prefer one object to another."

I recalled the time I'd visited the Sō Kubo Memorial Art Museum with my university class and we'd looked at a pair of celadon vases. One was called the vase of a "thousand voices," the other, of "ten thousand voices." Whereas the former was designated an Important Cultural Property, the latter was celebrated as a Cultural Treasure, the highest

rank. Both vases had such smooth lines they seemed to have just been lifted from the water, but if one looked more closely at the length of the neck, the thickness of the body, the placement of the handle, and so on, their balance obviously differed so that it was immediately apparent that the two were separate pieces. A single glance told me that the "ten thousand voices" vase was superior. Then our professor explained that the sole difference between a Cultural Treasure and an Important Cultural Property was that the former was more beautiful. It was thanks to such discernment that even a discarded object like this glass bowl acquired its value. Although many purchases were based on the artist's name or the dealer's sales pitch.

Miiko made no attempt to pick up the bowl, just sat there caressing its round rim.

"When do you think it started?" she murmured without looking up. I had assumed she hadn't heard what I had said.

"Can I buy it for you?" I said on impulse. I had no idea what it cost. Stalls that appeared this disinterested in making sales usually charged prices that made your jaw drop. Moreover, anything that looked good was likely to command a goodly amount. Clothes, art, you name it. In that sense recorded music and the movies were bargains, since they all cost the same. Although live shows could get pricey.

"I don't want it," Miiko said. I could sense the woman react, though she kept her face buried in her paperback.

'Why not?'

"It's enough if I know it exists somewhere," Miiko said, rising to her feet. "I've seen it now."

Without so much as a glance over her shoulder she headed off to where people were gathered. I chose the stalls with few customers, visiting them one after another, eventually selecting a slender flower vase of yellow glass. They said the price was fifteen hundred yen, but I bargained them down to thirteen hundred.

Mrs. Nishikawa had packed her purchases into a cloth bag she had brought along for that purpose, but when we asked to see them she said it was too much trouble to unwrap the packages.

"Shall we grab a bite to eat?" she asked.

"Yeah," said Miiko. She had said no when I asked her earlier, but now she took the lead, striding to the area where the food stalls were located and pointing at the red tent advertising sweet potato sticks.

"I want that."

The sticks were sweet potatoes in their skins, sliced lengthwise, deep-fried, and salted. They tasted great but I regretted having ordered a full portion, for they were too dry for me and one stick was more than enough. While Miiko and Mrs. Nishikawa easily worked their way through all four of theirs, I still had two sticks remaining in my long paper cone when we left the temple.

Mrs. Nishikawa took great care packing the bag holding her loot, which apparently contained breakable objects, into the front basket of her bicycle. Doesn't her hair get in the way, I wondered, not for the first time. Miiko was buying water at the vending machines.

"Ms. Higuchi!"

I turned to see a large middle-aged woman standing behind me. Beside her was an even larger man dressed in a golfing outfit.

"Ms. Higuchi, I knew it was you! I've got sharp eyes. How have you been? Thanks to you, Rumina's attending a women's college now."

The woman's brightly tinted hair was a ballooning mass of curls, and the shrillness of her voice made her torrent of words hard to take with my ears the way they were. Once I heard the name Rumina, though, I was able to place her in my memory.

"Ah, yes, so nice to see you."

"You lived in Suginami, right? Did you mention you were moving to Yokohama? I guess you're working now. What kind of job is it? Look, dear, it's Ms. Higuchi, Rumina's tutor."

"Why, so it is. How about that."

Mr. and Mrs. Ozawa's matching pair of plump, beaming faces reminded me of one of the seven gods of good fortune. I felt surrounded.

"We're collecting antiques these days—that's why we've come all the way out here. Haven't come across any real bargains, though. When you were coming to our house it was still under construction, wasn't it? Well now we're putting together a traditional, country-style guest room. My mother left me this collection of Imari ceramics, you see..."

Mrs. Ozawa had proudly launched into an itemized description of her collection when Miiko returned from the vending machines.

"Who are they?"

"The parents of a girl I tutored back in university."

"Nice to meet you," Miiko said, managing a surprisingly polite bow, her knees neatly aligned.

"And what's this here? Let me take a look." Even before she had finished talking Mrs.

Ozawa was pulling out the yellow vase protruding from my plastic bag and examining it. Mrs. Nishikawa and Miiko leaned on Mrs. Nishikawa's bike and Mr. Ozawa jangled the keys to his car in his right hand as they waited to see what would happen next.

"This is it, this is just the kind of thing my feng shui master was talking about. He said money would find us if we put a coin in a long-necked yellow vase and placed it next to the staircase on the west side of our house. But I couldn't find a long-necked yellow vase. I looked everywhere but there weren't any! And here one is. How much did you pay for it?"

"Thirteen hundred yen."

"You're kidding! That's all it was? Thank goodness I didn't buy the one I saw the other day—I would have wasted 200,000 yen! Can I have this one?"

"Don't be so pushy, dear. Ha-ha-ha."

"I know, I know. But I can make it worth her while. Tell me, Ms. Higuchi, do you have any plans for today?" she asked, flashing me the kind of smile you give someone when you are about to pull out a surprise present. "We're heading to Hayama after this, to a restaurant run by a friend of ours. That's right, we took you there once before, remember? Well, he's fixed it up, or I guess I should say he's built a new place attached to the old one, designed by an Italian architect, already featured in a magazine, you know, and nothing outside the window but ocean—fabulous! Let me treat you to a meal there. And your friends too, of course."

"He'll get a big kick out of us showing up with three young women. That guy still fancies himself a big hit with the ladies. Ha-ha-ha!"

There was something about Mr. Ozawa's deep, bubbling laugh that made me nostalgic, or at least brought back memories.

"There is an identical vase that hasn't been sold yet," I said, speaking as distinctly as possible. "At least it was there a few minutes ago. The stall is right in front of the main temple building. I'm afraid I can't accompany you today, though I appreciate your offer. Thank you so much."

I gave a brisk bow. Bowing seemed to have started something rotating in my ear: the abrupt movement sent things spinning, bringing back the night before. It made me happy, as if I had remembered something very important.

The Ozawas looked at each other for a second.

"That's too bad," Mrs. Ozawa said, regaining her smile. "I know Rumina would have loved to see you."

"Please give her my very best," I said, nodding one more time.

"Well, please take care."

"Good-bye."

The three of us walked toward the station. Miiko said she was going to go visit a friend so we waited near the turnstile until the red train bound for Yokohama pulled in. Then Mrs. Nishikawa and I walked up the slope side by side, pushing our bicycles.

"You know, there's a shop in Hayama I would really like to visit," Mrs. Nishikawa said when we reached the steepest part of our climb. "A bakery that uses homemade yeast. Do you think they would have given me a lift?"

"They're dreadful drivers, those two," I said. Mrs. Nishikawa gave a big nod as if she finally understood.

"So that's why you turned them down."

"You're darned right. Riding with them means taking your life in your hands."

"Still, they seemed so full of energy, like they'd be fun to be around."

"Tutoring their daughter was a dream job. The pay was great and they fed me every time, with cake afterwards! They even took me out for sushi. Yep, it was fun, all right."

A bicycle flew past us down the slope. The heat had reached its peak.

I had hoped Mrs. Nishikawa might invite me up to her apartment to sample her dried fish but she didn't. Instead, we sat and talked in the parking area beneath my building.

"So how do you treat it?" Mrs. Nishikawa asked when she found out about my noise-induced deafness, cupping her own ear and gulping as if her own hearing had suddenly been affected. I went on intermittently checking the ringing by folding the top of my ear down over the hole and so forth. At times it seemed to be getting better, at other times not.

"The first occasion was in junior high. The doctor stuck a tube up my nose and tried to blow my ears clean. There was this bubbling sound when the air shot through my nose, then something strange happened to my ear canals and the whole world spun around. Made me sick to my stomach."

The scene that flashed through my head—the ceiling, the green floor, the light like that in a dentist's office, all revolving at incredible speed—was indeed nauseating. Yet I felt like I wanted to experience it again.

"Ah," exclaimed Mrs. Nishikawa. "I can't take anything that spins. I got on one of those round revolving things at the playground once when I was a child and it took me a week to recover."

Mrs. Nishikawa said she was thirty-five, yet she continued to use polite language with me. She lived in the house next to the apartment building with her mother and husband, a federal civil servant it seemed, but she didn't reveal any more than that.

"Apparently that wasn't the right treatment," I continued. "When I went to another specialist in high school, he prescribed steroids. Said it was the only cure. They tested me again when the treatment ended and discovered there was a range of sound I couldn't pick up. They couldn't pinpoint the cause, though."

"Ah," Mrs. Nishikawa exclaimed again. "I bet I know what kind of test. They send high-pitched sounds through something that looks like the receiver on one of those old black telephones and you raise your hand if you can hear them, right?"

"Yes, I've had that done. But the tests in the hospital are more rigorous. You go into this little box—it's like a phone booth or tiny recording studio—put on headphones, and push the buttons on a handheld transmitter."

"Oh dear, I couldn't possibly do that. I'm claustrophobic, you see. Just thinking about it terrifies me."

I thought of telling her about another test I had particularly liked, where they used something like a stethoscope to check the conduction of sound to my inner ear, but decided to change the subject instead. People who rattle on and on about stuff only they are interested in are a real pain in the butt.

"So you're into cooking?" I asked.

"Why do you ask?" she said, giving me a puzzled look.

"It's the dried fish," I stammered. I seemed to have asked the wrong thing.

"Oh, those! They're just a kind of experiment. I love experimenting with things. Like my plan to bake bread with natural yeast. Do you know how to make yeast? I use apples or grapes myself."

"The regular kind of apples and grapes they sell in the store?"

"Yes, the normal kind. You begin by sterilizing a bottle in boiling water."

"Really!"

There was no way a slob like me could ever manage to bake bread from scratch, but the Ozawas' behavior was fresh in my mind, so I sat there and suffered through step-by-step instructions as the sweat poured across my neck and down my back. The green of the weeds was deepening as she rambled on; I could feel them rising higher and higher above the dry soil on this windless day.

Masahiko was late so I stretched out on the apartment floor. There was no sign of

Miiko or Kashiwagi either. Every so often I heard doors opening and closing in Gotō-san's apartment. I considered borrowing some manga from him, but gave up the idea. I didn't turn on the TV either—the less sound the better. I closed my eyes and tried to re-create the sounds and lights of the performance I had heard just twenty-four hours earlier. Partway through I began to grow sleepy so I opened my eyes again.

When the Ozawas' only daughter, Rumina, was in her third year of junior high, I had asked her if she was going anywhere for her summer vacation. Just an offhand question, the kind you ask a student before their summer break. I'm going to Rome and Italy with my mom and my friend and my friend's mother, she answered. I didn't feel like correcting her. She was ignorant of so many things, partly because she hated studying but mainly because she lacked any desire to know. She was a simple, cheerful, friendly girl who seemed to appreciate whatever I had to teach her then promptly forgot it. So what sights will you be seeing? I asked. I don't know, she replied. Which is farther, Rome or Italy? As Rumina gazed at me with her big long-lashed eyes, I felt as though I were meeting her for the first time.

"There are so many things you don't know yet," I said. "Don't you want to learn?"

"But I don't know that I don't know, so it's okay," she smiled happily. True, I thought, this girl will be able to traipse off wherever she likes for the rest of her life without having the foggiest notion of where she is headed. A month later she presented me with a box of Chanel cosmetics purchased at the airport's duty-free shop.

Why wasn't I able to preserve my memory of the gig playing in my head right now, to call up whenever I wanted? As things stood, it would gradually slip away and I wouldn't be able to tell if what I remembered was from the live performance or a CD like the one they'd been hawking at the concert. I would lose the sound within me for sure. Right now it still existed in some part of my body, though I didn't know exactly where. I kept cupping my ear, worried that the faint ringing in my ears was disappearing. Please, I begged, don't let that metallic sound disappear entirely!

Yet it was my own weakness that made me feel that way.

Right before I began my last year of university, during spring break, Rumina's parents invited me to join them for a party celebrating her entrance into high school. We drove in their silver car to a cliffside restaurant in Hayama that overlooked the ocean. About ten minutes after we started back, Rumina said she wanted some soda so we stopped at a convenience store and Rumina, her father, and I headed inside. Just when we were about to pass through the automatic door that faced the short crosswalk, there was a

violent implosion of air behind us and at the same time, a resounding crash. I thought at first that a vending machine had toppled over. When I turned to look, I saw that the silver German car we had been riding in had plowed into the corner of the yellow house facing the side street. The car's interior lights were shining on the billowing, spotlessly white air bags and the white smoke that was rising like mist into the air, while the headlights illuminated a budding cherry tree in the garden of the house so rudely invaded.

The door opened and Mrs. Ozawa got out. Her movements were slow but she seemed unhurt.

"Don't worry—I'm okay," she called to us.

She moved around to take a peek at the front of the car. From a distance, the shape of the car appeared unchanged. A number of passersby and local residents had gathered at both ends of the side street but none ventured any closer than that. I could see lights going on in the apartment building across the way and people looking out the windows.

Rumina and I followed Mr. Ozawa to the car. Mrs. Ozawa was standing with her arms folded, leaning from side to side as she surveyed the damage.

"There's something wrong with the car," she said to her husband.

"Looks like the bumper's caved in."

"That's not what I mean. I was just straightening the car a little to the right in the parking space when it did this. Don't you think that's strange?"

"You're right, it is strange."

"You really zone out sometimes, don't you, Mom," Rumina said, gazing raptly at the glittering shards of headlight scattered around the base of the yellow wall. A man in a striped uniform, likely the manager of the convenience store, came running out to ask if everyone was all right.

"The darn car just took off on its own. You can't trust these foreign makes."

Mr. Ozawa was leaning into the driver's seat, searching the inside of the car. He emerged with a slip of paper, which he consulted as he made a call on his cell phone.

"Takahashi? Ozawa here. Listen, we had a little accident. The car took off on its own and banged into a house on the other side of the road. Will our insurance cover it? The house? Just minor damage. A little crack, that's all."

Mr. Ozawa must have been drunk, although he hid it well. His booming voice echoed down the street of well-appointed houses, shattering the quiet. Undismayed by the stares of the gathering crowd, he talked on and on in his magisterial way. Meanwhile his wife circled around to the front of the house and rang the bell. All the windows of the two-story residence were dark.

"Perhaps they're out," she said to the dignified-looking white-haired old lady who had emerged from her home diagonally across the way.

"They're away today."

"What a nuisance. Do you know how I can reach them?"

"Just a moment," the old woman said, returning to her house. I stood behind Rumina, who was squatting next to the front of the car, flicking the plastic shards with her fingertips, and checked out the damage to the car. It was pretty eye-catching—the part that had hit the wall was in bad shape and the air bags bulged through the doors—but the shape of the hood, as well as its metallic luster, were unaffected. Wow, I thought, these cars are really tough.

"Be careful of cars," Mrs. Ozawa called to me. "They're not like human beings—there's no telling what they'll do."

"Mm."

"Otherwise, how could this have happened just exiting the parking lot!"

"Sure."

"And us in a hurry, too... Ah, Minako?" she said into her cell phone, launching into a conversation with someone from the restaurant we had just left. "Yes, it's me. Listen, that car of ours just did the most awful thing. That's right. We're still in your area."

I checked the time on my own phone. Our dinner had begun early so it wasn't even nine o'clock. I went back to the store, leaned against the glass wall that abutted the rear of the magazine rack and went through my photos of all the Italian dishes we had eaten, from the appetizers to the dessert, one by one in order on the tiny screen.

Ten minutes later, Mr. Ozawa squeezed into the driver's seat to move the car, which was blocking the side street, back into the parking lot. The violent clatter the engine made when he tried to start it echoed through the quiet nighttime streets, shaking the air, the houses, the earth—it was an even bigger racket than the crash itself. Even more lights went on; even more people came to their windows to see what was going on. The first three times he failed, but the fourth time the engine caught, and, ignoring the tremendous noise, Mr. Ozawa was able to back the car into the convenience store parking lot, albeit at an angle. Even after he cut the engine my body seemed to be vibrating.

Half an hour passed and still the insurance company had not contacted Mr. Ozawa to tell him help was on the way. Maybe the fact that it was Sunday night was the problem, or maybe they weren't set up to handle fancy foreign cars. I had no idea. Rumina, whose

fascination with the wrecked car and damaged wall had long since evaporated, was wandering in and out of the convenience store.

"Isn't there a coffee shop or anyplace where we could wait? I'm cold."

"We're in the country, dear. There's nothing."

Rumina and her mother sat down on a parking block together and began digging into a carton of Häagen-Dazs they had purchased in the store.

Where were the police, I wondered. Hadn't anyone called them? Was this a case of everyone waiting for someone else to do what had to be done? Or were police only called to more serious accidents, like when someone had been run over? Perhaps the connection between "accident" and "police" I had drawn in my mind was merely a sign of my ignorance. I had never studied for a driver's test so the rules of the road were a mystery to me.

The town was unfamiliar: I had no idea where the road in front of me led or how the community might be laid out. It was as if the convenience store lights formed an illuminated island in a sea of darkness. The onlookers had all become bored and left. Every so often, I noticed a person appear in the window of one of the houses nearest to us, but he disappeared when he saw nothing had changed. There was a mountain looming behind the houses, a black mass so close it seemed an avalanche of darkness might come roaring down at any moment. I had grown up where even nights were brightly lit, so I hated the dark. What would it be like, I wondered, to live in a house like the one our sturdy car had plowed into? A two-storied yellow house with a big cherry tree surrounded by mountains and ocean. A car drove past on the road.

An hour after the accident, the Ozawas pulled their golf gear out of the car's trunk and began practicing their swings in the parking lot.

"Like this, dear. You've got to put your hips into it."

"Let me do it my way—it's just for fun anyway."

Every so often, Mrs. Ozawa would consult her faint reflection in the convenience store window to check her form. She tried to get Rumina to pick up a club but her daughter was glued to the e-mails on her cell phone.

"Excuse me," I said to the woman wielding the gleaming silver stick. I had stood reading magazines from the rack for as long as I could bear. She greeted me with a warm smile.

"Please don't worry," she said. "My friend will show up in a minute. Just wait a little bit longer."

It had been twenty minutes since her friend who ran the restaurant had phoned to say she would come pick us up as soon as she could make arrangements to leave. The owner of the yellow house showed no signs of returning, nor had there been any change in the chunks of concrete and car fragments scattered on the ground.

"What I mean is, will all this really be okay?"

"The insurance will cover it. You worry a lot for someone so young!" She laughed, and her husband laughed too.

The woman who owned the restaurant arrived in a black minivan.

"What a beauty!" she exclaimed after checking the damage to the house and car. Then she went into the convenience store to buy a can of green tea. Mr. Ozawa promptly hopped into her van to make another phone call, while his wife went to ring the doorbell of the house across the street.

"Remind me," she said when the white-haired old lady answered the door. "What was the name of the people who live there again?"

"You mean the Hayashis? They should be back about seven tomorrow morning, I believe."

"Oh yes, the Hayashis. Well, we'll be going now."

"Oh dear... are you?" said the old woman, looking bewildered. She turned back into the house as if to call someone.

"Thanks!" called out Mrs. Ozawa, already walking in our direction.

That was when I was able to finally put my finger on what had been bothering me for so long. I think the problem had started long before the accident, perhaps from the first moment I stepped into that fortieth-floor apartment with its drop-dead gorgeous view of the city at night.

It was not that the Ozawas refused to apologize for their behavior in order to avoid accepting responsibility; rather, the idea of apologizing simply never entered their minds. Once I finally understood that, I felt a vast sense of relief.

"Jump in!" Mrs. Ozawa waved to me from the van's open sliding door. Rumina flashed her charming smile from her seat further inside.

No, this crowd wasn't for me.

Beyond the van, I caught a glimpse of the shining, sturdy car, now deserted.

"No thanks. I'll head back alone."

I squeezed my cell phone in my parka pocket. I had already checked the maps in the convenience store and the bus schedule online.

"There's a bus that passes here. I have a friend in Inamuragasaki who will put me up for the night."

Mrs. Ozawa and Rumina glanced at each other. But that was all.

"That's too bad," the mother said.

"Thank you for dinner. Good luck in high school, Rumina."

"Thanks, Sensei. Good luck to you too."

"Sayonara."

I could hear the metal runners of the car door as it slid closed. I cut across the parking lot to the sidewalk. Rumina waved to me as the minivan drove past, and I waved back.

The schedule posted at the stop showed more than fifteen minutes remaining before the next bus for Zushi Station, so I set off on foot back in the direction we had come from. After a short while the road crossed a small river. The road was dark, the river even darker. Just downstream was the ocean, a solid mass of black. A huge basin filled to the brim with inky water. The nights were still chilly and I had been outside for a while so my hands and feet were soon quite cold. Hugging my overstuffed belly, I continued to walk on. A wet wind was creeping up from the ocean. An occasional car passed, but I encountered no one on foot. As each car went by, its blinding headlights left something like a light or hole in the middle of the night sky. I could hear crows cawing, but there was no way any black bird could be located in the surrounding dark.

The next bus stop was on the seaside road. There was a bench but it looked too cold to sit on. I couldn't really see the ocean but I could hear the waves. Someone came walking up. A woman about the same age as Mrs. Ozawa, pushing a bicycle. She noticed that my bag was from the bakery of the restaurant where I had eaten dinner that evening.

"The bread there is really good, isn't it," she said.

"It's my first time here."

"I see. Do you live far away?"

"Not so far, but it looks like it'll take a while to get home."

"Well, you take care," she said, pushing her bike again.

"Thanks, I will," I replied. Why, I wondered, didn't she ride the bike instead?

Since the bus showed no sign of coming, I stepped down to follow the sidewalk that ran along the shore. When it curved, the whole ocean suddenly lay before me. I could see the lights of several boats moving slowly along the uncertain boundary between sea and sky. Buoyed by the incessant sound of the waves, I could feel my body begin to grow lighter as, little by little, I left the train station behind me.

THE FUTON OF TOTTORI

FUMIKO TAKANO

based on the short story by
LAFCADIO HEARN

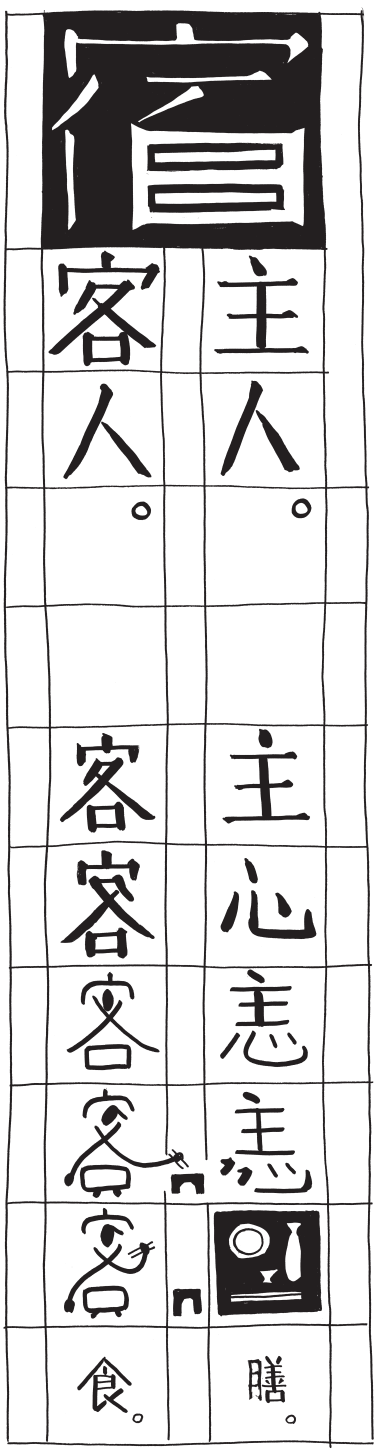
Many years ago, a very small yadoya in Tottori town received its first guest, an itinerant merchant. He was received with more than common kindness, for the landlord desired to make a good name for his little inn. It was a new inn, but as its owner was poor, most of its dōgu—furniture and utensils—had been purchased from the furuteya.[1] Nevertheless, everything was clean, comforting, and pretty. The guest ate heartily and drank plenty of good warm saké; after which his bed was prepared on the soft floor, and he laid himself down to sleep.

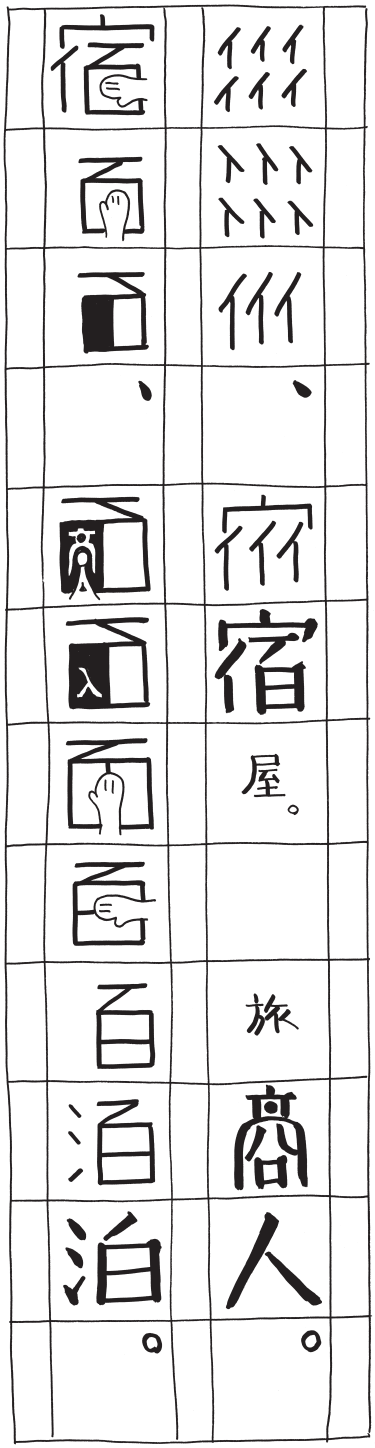
The <亻> at the top in the extreme right column means *person*. The <宀> in the fifth box from the top means *roof*. So the whole picture in the box would mean *three persons under the roof.* <百> in the sixth box means *hundred*, so <宿> would literally mean *many persons under the roof.* <宿屋> is a traditional inn. <旅> means *travel*, <商人> a *merchant*.

In the second right column, <宿> metamorphoses into <泊>, i.e. to *lodge*.

In the second left column, <主人> means a *landlord*; <客人> a *guest*, so here the landlord and the guest are facing each other. At the bottom the former metamorphoses into <膳>, *dinner*, the latter into <食>, to *eat*.

1 *Furuteya*, the establishment of a dealer in second-hand wares, —*furute.*


宿
主人。
客人。
主心
客客
食。
膳。


宿
屋。
旅
商人。
泊。

Now, as a rule, one sleeps soundly after having drunk plenty of warm saké, especially if the night be cool and the bed very snug. But the guest, having slept but a very little while, was aroused by the sound of voices in his room,—voices of children, always asking each other the same questions:—

"Ani-San samukarō?"

"Omae samukarō?"

The presence of children in his room might annoy the guest, but could not surprise him, for in these Japanese hotels there are no doors, but only papered sliding screens between room and room. So it seemed to him that some children must have wandered into his apartment, by mistake, in the dark. He uttered some gentle rebuke. For a moment only there was silence; then a sweet, thin, plaintive voice queried, close to his ear, "Ani-San samukarō?" [Elder Brother probably is cold?], and another sweet voice made answer caressingly, "Omae samukarō?" [Nay, thou probably art cold?]

He arose and rekindled the candle in the andon[2], and looked about the room. There was no one. The shōji were all closed. He examined the cupboards; they were empty. Wondering, he lay down again, leaving the light still burning; and immediately the voices spoke again, complainingly, close to his pillow;

"Ani-San samukarō?"

"Omae samukarō?"

Then, for the first time, he felt a chill creep over him, which was not the chill of the night. Again and again he heard, and each time he became more afraid. For he knew that the voices were *in the futon!* It was the covering of the bed that cried out thus.

<晩> means *evening*. <寝> means *sleep*, and the fact that the kanji is placed sideways suggests that the guest has lain down to sleep. <床> means *futon*. <声> means *voice*, <耳> *ear* and <子> child. In the middle, where the guest is sitting up, you can see the kanji <起>, to *sit up*, broken apart. <点> means *to light*, <行灯> a paper-covered night lamp. So the scene suggests that the guest hears the voices of two children, sits up, and lights the lamp.

2 *Andon*, a paper lantern of peculiar construction, used as a night light. Some forms of the andon are remarkably beautiful.

晚
晚
床
床
己
点
行
灯
子
声
声
子

He gathered hurriedly together the few articles belonging to him, and, descending the stairs, aroused the landlord and told what had passed. Then the host, much angered, made reply: "That to make pleased the honourable guest everything has been done, the truth is; but the honourable guest too much august saké having drank, bad dreams has seen." Nevertheless the guest insisted upon paying at once that which he owed, and seeking lodging elsewhere.

Next evening there came another guest who asked for a room for the night. At a late hour the landlord was aroused by his lodger with the same story. And this lodger, strange to say, had not taken any saké. Suspecting some envious plot to ruin his business, the landlord answered passionately: "Thee to please all things honourably have been done: nevertheless, ill-omened and vexatious words thou utterest. And that my inn my means-of-livelihood is—that also thou knowest. Wherefore that such things be spoken, right-there-is-none!" Then the guest, getting into a passion, loudly said things much more evil; and the two parted in hot anger.

<日> means *sun,* <月> *moon*. Joined they become <明>, and <明朝> means *next morning*. So the whole blackened area at the top right would suggest the shift from night to dawn.

<客> means *guest*, <怪> *strange*, <談> speech, and <酔> *drunk*. So the bottom half of the two right rows signifies that the guest tells the landlord something strange has happened, but the landlord says he is just drunk.

The third row from the right suggests that the landlord recollects buying various items from the *furuteya*.

<内、> would mean *among them.*

<古布古綿、一重> literally means *old cloth old cotton, one-layered*, suggesting a very thin futon.

月月客酔談事。
日草怪事。主談。
宿主覚、手回品々、質求。
内、
古布古綿、一重。千王

But after the guest was gone, the landlord, thinking all this very strange, ascended to the empty room to examine the futon. And while there, he heard the voices, and he discovered that the guests had said only the truth. It was one covering—only one—which cried out. The rest were silent. He took the covering into his own room, and for the remainder of the night lay down beneath it. And the voices continued until the hour of dawn: "Ani-San samukarō?" "Omae samukarō?" So that he could not sleep.

But at break of day he rose up and went out to find the owner of the furuteya at which the futon had been purchased. The dealer knew nothing. He had bought the futon from a smaller shop, and the keeper of that shop had purchased it from a still poorer dealer dwelling in the farthest suburb of the city. And the innkeeper went from one to the other, asking questions.

Then at last it was found that the futon had belonged to a poor family, and had been bought from the landlord of a little house in which the family had lived, in the neighbourhood of the town. And the story of the futon was this:—

In the right half, we see the person lying in the futon waking up, metamorphosing into the kanji <恐>, *fear*. Across the top we see <耳>, *ear* and <問>, *question*, indicating that the person in the futon heard a question. In the left two columns, <兄> and <弟>, *elder brother* and *younger brother*, are saying <寒>, *cold*; asking each other, "Aren't you cold, brother?"

兄
寒
寒
弟
寒
寒
恐。

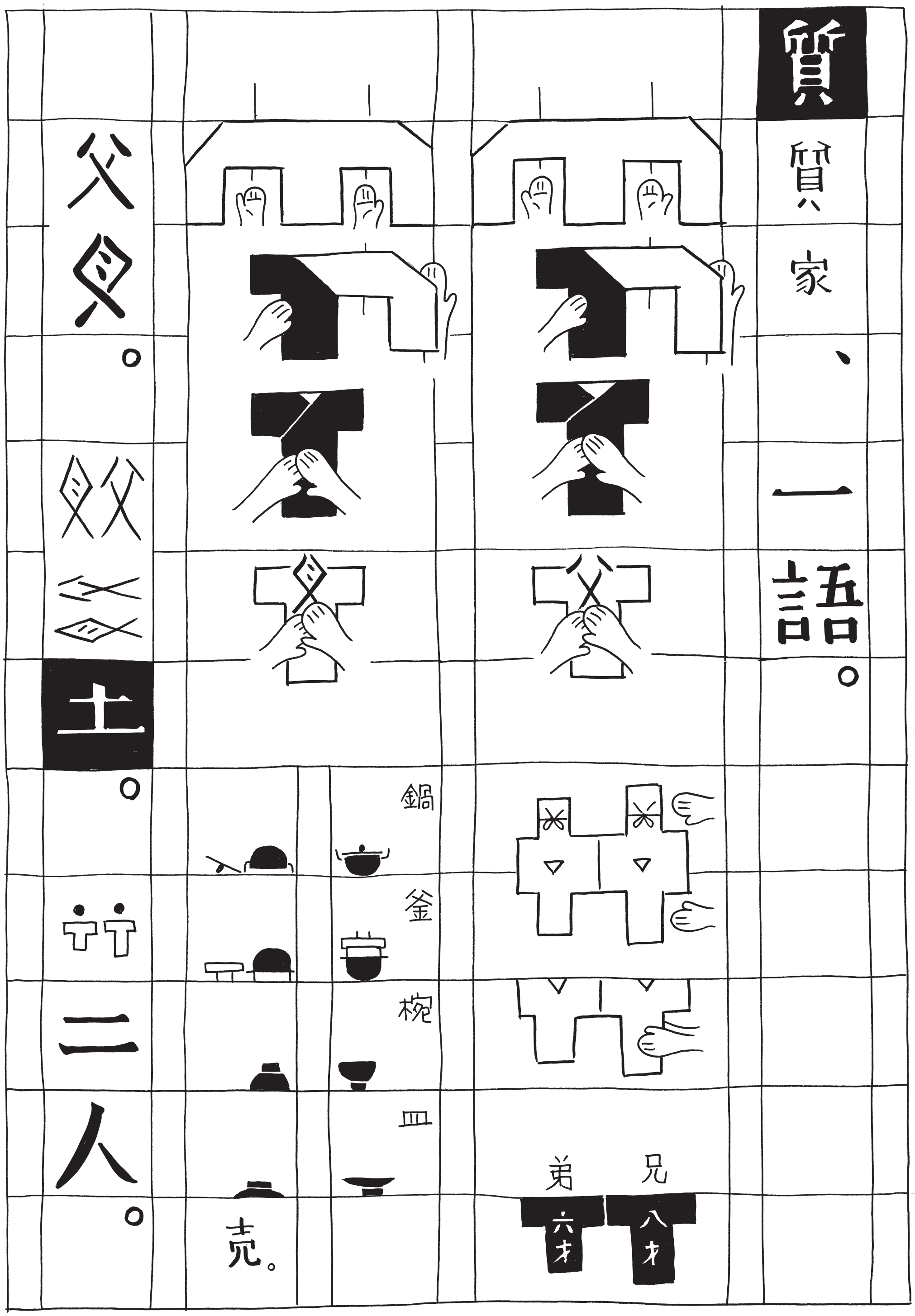
The rent of the little house was only sixty sen a month, but even this was a great deal for the poor folks to pay. The father could earn only two or three yen a month, and the mother was ill and could not work; and there were two children,—a boy of six years and a boy of eight. And they were strangers in Tottori.

One winter's day the father sickened; and after a week of suffering he died, and was buried. Then the long-sick mother followed him, and the children were left alone. They knew no one whom they could ask for aid; and in order to live they began to sell what there was to sell.

That was not much: the clothes of the dead father and mother, and most of their own; some quilts of cotton, and a few poor household utensils,—hibachi, bowls, cups, and other trifles. Every day they sold something, until there was nothing left but one futon. And a day came when they had nothing to eat; and the rent was not paid.

<質屋> is a *pawnshop*, <一> means *one*, <語> *narrate*; so the column in the extreme right would mean the owner of the pawnshop told a story.

<父><母> at the top of the column in the extreme left are *father* and *mother.* The two letters then lie sidewise, indicating that the parents took sick and were eventually buried in the <土>, *ground*. <二人> means *two persons*: the brothers (<兄> and <弟>) were left alone. <鍋><釜><椀><皿> are *pots, pans, bowls* and *plates, and* <売> means to *sell.* The brothers had to sell everything to survive.


質
質ハ家、一語。
兄
八才
弟
六才
鍋
釜
椀
皿
売。
父母。
土。
二人。

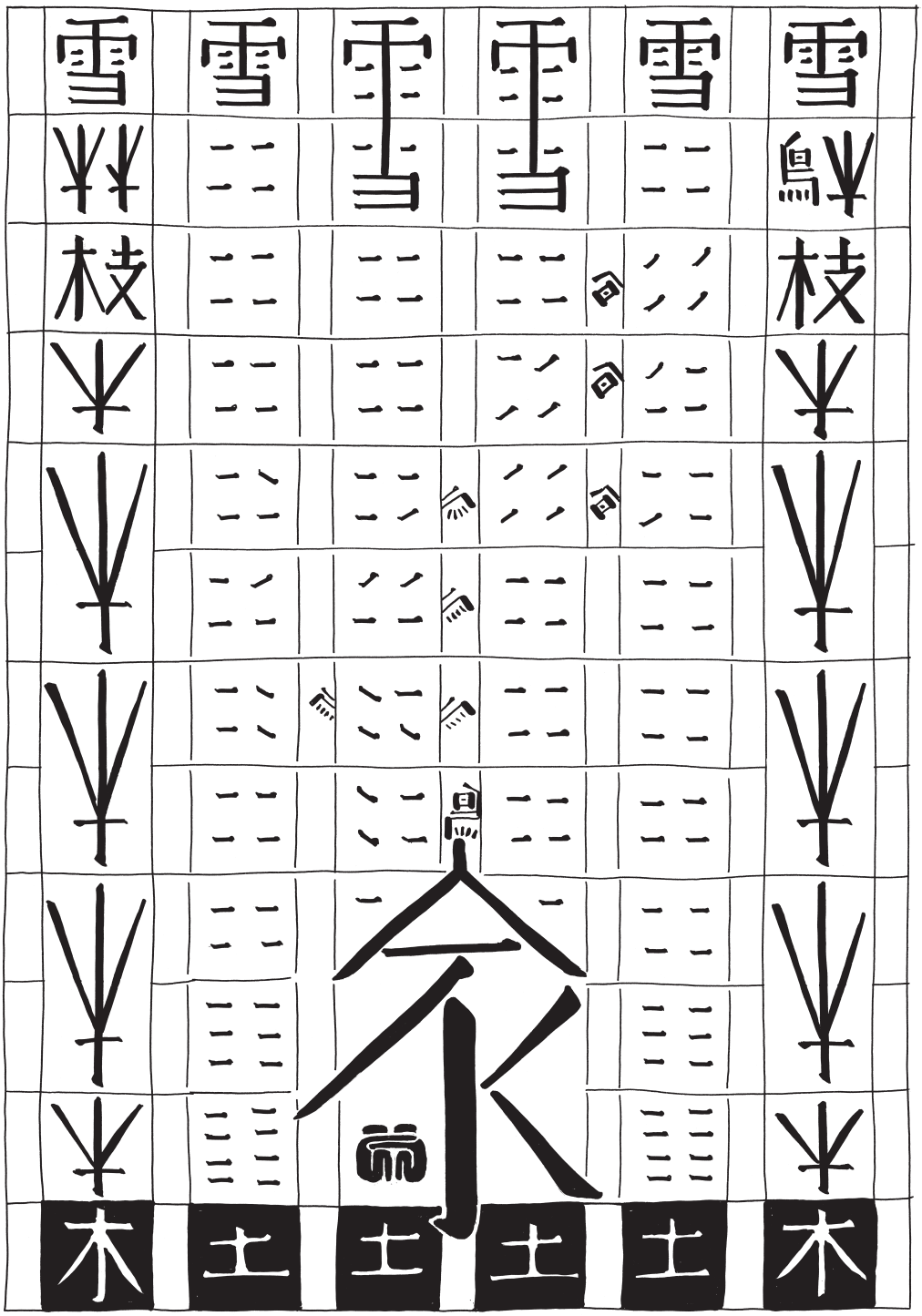
The terrible Dai-kan had arrived, the season of greatest cold; and the snow had drifted too high that day for them to wander far from the little house. So they could only lie down under their one futon, and shiver together, and compassionate each other in their own childish way,—

"Ani-San, samukarō?"

"Omae samukarō?"

They had no fire, nor anything with which to make fire; and the darkness came; and the icy wind screamed into the little house.

<雪> across the top means *snow*. <木> means *tree*, and all the upturned <木>'s would seem to suggest a blizzard. <鳥> means *bird* and <枝> *branch*. We see the two brothers hugging each other under the simplified form of <家>, *house*.

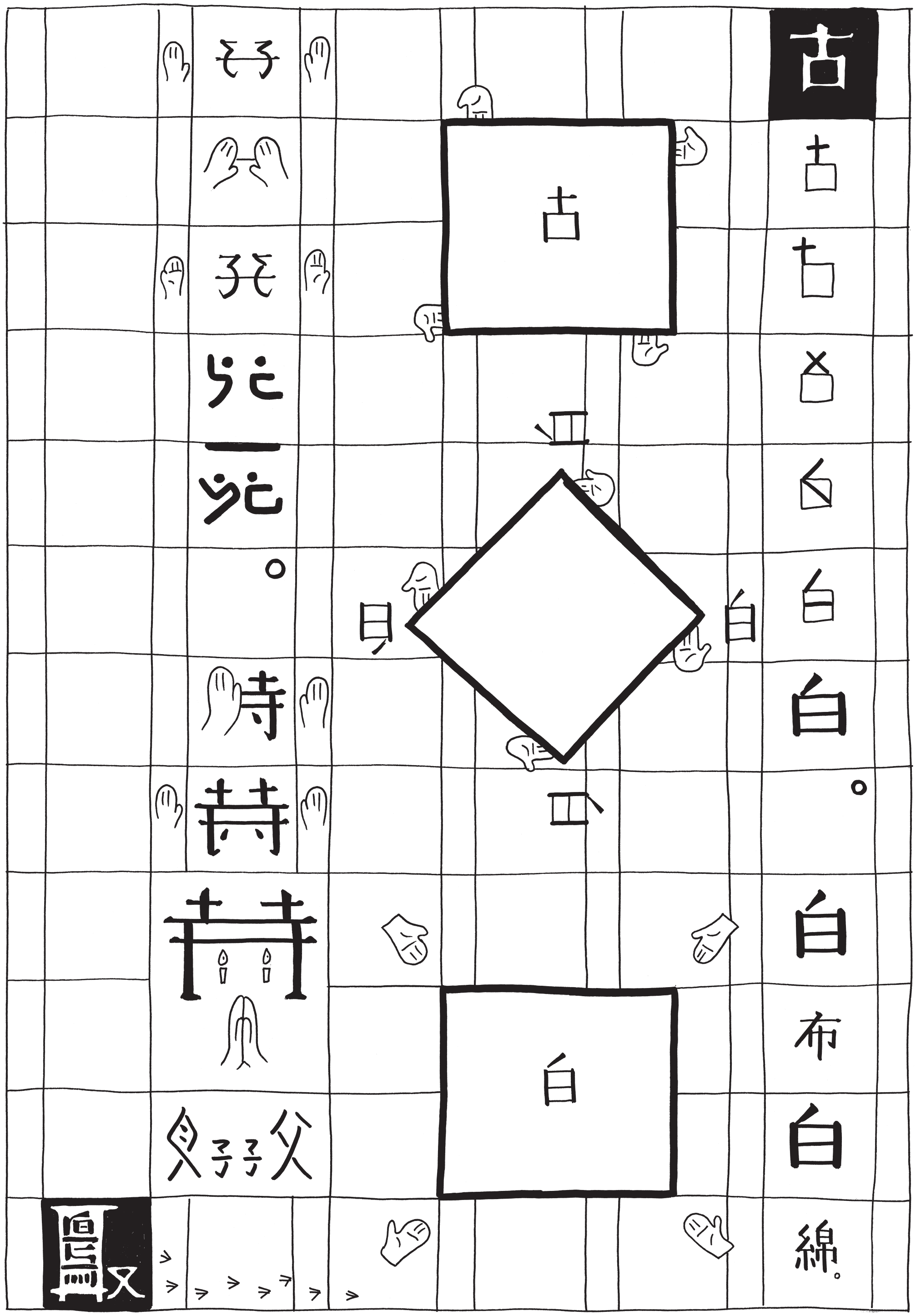


They were afraid of the wind, but they were more afraid of the house-owner, who roused them roughly to demand his rent. He was a hard man, with an evil face. And finding there was none to pay him, he turned the children into the snow, and took their one futon away from them, and locked up the house.

They had but one thin blue kimono each, for all their other clothes had been sold to buy food; and they had nowhere to go. There was a temple of Kwannon not far away, but the snow was too high for them to reach it. So when the landlord was gone, they crept back behind the house. There the drowsiness of cold fell upon them, and they slept, embracing each other to keep warm. And while they slept, the gods covered them with a new futon,—ghostly-white and very beautiful. And they did not feel cold any more. For many days they slept there; then somebody found them, and a bed was made for them in the hakaba of the Temple of Kwannon-of-the-Thousand-Arms.

And the innkeeper, having heard these things, gave the futon to the priests of the temple, and caused the kyō to be recited for the little souls. And the futon ceased thereafter to speak.

We witness <古>, *old,* turning into <白>, *white*. <白布白綿>, *white cloth white cotton*, suggests the metaphorical futon thrown over the boys by kindly gods. And the two <子>, children, facing each other at the top left, eventually turn into <死>, *death.* People have the sutra recited over them at a <寺>, *temple*, and the whole family <母子子父>, *mother, child, child, father,* is re-united at the end. The picture at the bottom left is a clever combination of <鳥> and <取>, 鳥取 (Tottori) being the town in which all this once took place.


古
古
白。
白
白
布
白
綿。
日
白
寺

MEDICINE

BARRY
YOURGRAU

A hoodlum with a very troublesome drinking problem is finally packed off to a place in the mountains, to straighten out.

The place is a ramshackle house sitting in isolation at the side of a lake. A gloomy old doc type in a lab coat presides over it.

"Here, drink," says the sour coot to the hoodlum in the shabby parlor that apparently doubles as his examination room. He has some kind of European accent. He wears a hairpiece.

The hoodlum scowls at the glass of yellowish liquid he accepts with shaky hands. "You aren't gonna lecture me now, are you, Doc?" he says.

"Drink," mutters the other, simply.

The hoodlum obeys. He gags at the taste. "Jesus—" he splutters in protest. He's given the same terse command. He manages to carry it out.

"Okay, go to your room, sleep," the doc tells him. In his accent, the word comes out as *shleep*. "And I don't want to have to lock you in, *ja*? Good boy?"

"I don't want for you to lock me in either," grunts the hoodlum. "Me good boy—oh *ja*." The hoodlum has a sarcastic streak.

He lies on his cot in a drab side room and listens to the wind in the trees. He puts a hand to his head, which throbs familiarly, and clutches it in a woeful, trembly grip.

Repetitions of the vile yellowish drink dull away his cravings. But not his boredom. For company there's just the old doc, who putters at his parlor desk and then shuts himself up in his room, and a dim-witted woman who comes to prepare the meals and tediously clean.

The hoodlum wanders around by the lake for a couple bleary afternoons. He grows more and more edgy. Not "have to have a drink" edgy; just very bored and edgy. He stares across the lake at the trees crowded on the

opposite shore, under a block of mountainside. There's a little cleared landing and the nub of a building with a sign—a store. The hoodlum grunts and prods with his foot at the side of the rowboat tethered by the bank where he stands. "Me good boy," he murmurs.

That night when the oldster has turned in early as usual, the hoodlum squirms out the window of his room. He creeps down to the rowboat. He's not much of a hand at the oars, but he makes do. He cranes around to see the growing illuminated sign on the store, luring him on like the glowing label of a bottle as he churns his way along across the dark lake. His heart hammers with mounting familiar fervor.

Next thing he's aware of, it seems, he's lying heaped in the bottom of the rowboat. The blue sky overhead blinds him. He flaps a hand to his eyes. Booze and vomit reek on his shirt. "Jesus," he mutters through clenched teeth. The goony doc sits over him, working the oars implacably. The hoodlum flounders in slow motion partway up, head splitting. He looks off at the store retreating in the distance, and he slumps back down. He laughs in a sickened way. "I'm a bad boy, Doc," he sneers. The other glances at him, goony and implacable, rowing. The hoodlum suddenly grapples at the side of the boat and is horrifically sick in the water. The yellow medicine must be making the aftereffects of alcohol stronger—all the effects have been stronger. He turns his head, gasping, ribbons of bilious spit hanging, and glares sullenly at the doc.

He's brought back to his cot. When he wakens, the doc is beside him. The hoodlum blinks, skull torturously pounding. The old man's hairpiece, which he's noted so contemptuously, now gives a sinister air to the face with its gaunt cheekbones. "We make the dosage stronger—drink," says the doc. The hoodlum stares at the monstrous yellowish liquid. "What the hell—" he blurts, and he swings out a violent, clumsy hand, knocking the glass from the doc's clasp. The oozy yellow splatters across the floor. "What're you trying to do, *poison me*?" he demands thickly. He twists away.

At this point he realizes a heavy iron ring shackles his leg. A thick chain falls out of sight beyond the foot of the bed. "What the—" he says in disbelief.

"You're bad boy. I don't believe in silly locked doors," says the doc.

The hoodlum in groggy panic jerks at the chain. It's solid and secure. "You crazy senile bastard!" he sputters. "You can't chain me up like a dog—what're you doing, you're a doctor!"

"Who said I'm a doctor?" the other replies. He stands up. He steps back coolly from the hoodlum's sudden desperate lunge. "I will bring a fresh dose," he continues, "and you will drink it. Otherwise, things will get much worse for you... very quickly, *ja*?" He pronounces the word as *quvickly*. He adjusts his hairpiece. A gleam flickers a moment

in his dull eyes. “I’m a very bad boy myself,” he declares. “So you shall see…” he adds.

His last words aren’t heard by the hoodlum, though, he’s too busy sputtering. Then he shouts. Soon he descends to naked screaming. His shouts and screams carry out into the trees, where they drift to pieces in wind.

translated by Jay Rubin

MR. ENGLISH

KEITA GENJI

1

The day after it happened, word spread through the company that "Mr. English," Soichirō Mogi, and the assistant director's assistant, Yoshirō Oda, had slugged it out at the conclusion of a heated argument in the bar Heiroku.

"So they finally did it!" somebody shouted with a clap of the hands.

But Mogi was fifty-seven, Oda fifty-two. At the very least, this was no way for mature men to behave, and everybody found it ridiculous that Mogi not only had to be rushed to a nearby hospital with blood gushing from his wound but that he also went home with layer upon layer of white bandaging around his head. Nobody needed a witness to tell them who was at fault: it had to be Mogi.

Mogi was a temporary employee, as he had been ever since joining the company twenty years earlier. This seemed to be the great source of pain in his life, but he had at least stopped complaining about it in recent years because a company rule gave temp status even to regular employees who stayed on past the mandatory retirement age of fifty-five. It would be hasty to conclude, however, that just because he was no longer grumbling, Mogi had managed to sweep away the deep-seated dissatisfaction he felt toward the company for having kept him on temporary status through the age of fifty-five. Not only was the difference like night and day between regular and temporary staff with regard to both bonus size and severance pay, but each day Mogi reported to work, he had to press his seal in the attendance register below the name of even the most recently hired office girl.

"Humph! What do they take me for?" Mogi would mutter each morning when he pressed his seal in the register, after which he would make a point of tossing the book to the far end of the table. It turned his stomach to see the untroubled faces of those kids fresh from school

who glided into the top ranks of the registry, contemptuous of his twenty years of hard work. He had to find a way to amaze each one with a show of his outstanding abilities.

"Hey, kid, they tell me you're a college graduate," he would accost a newcomer—usually in the company lounge.

"Yes, I am," the young man would reply with a proud swelling of the chest, though of course all the other newcomers were college graduates, too.

"Then your English is probably pretty good. No, excuse me, it *must* be good. So let me ask you a question."

At this point the typical newcomer would fasten a suspicious gaze on the short, scrawny—and obviously nasty—old Mogi, who, despite his advanced age, was neither department manager nor general manager, much less company director.

"How do you say '*Keigun no ikkaku*' in English?"

"Huh? That sounds more like Chinese than Japanese. What's *keigun*?"

"A flock of chickens."

"And *ikkaku*?"

"A crane, of course."

"A crane in a flock of chickens?"

"Exactly. So how would you translate that into English?"

"Come on..."

"You don't know, huh? Too bad. Here's an easier one: '*Abata mo ekubo*.' "

" 'Even her pockmarks are dimples to him'? You want an English phrase for that? That's too hard."

"Too hard? It couldn't be any easier! '*Rabu izu buraindo*'!"

" 'Love... is... blind'? Oh, I get it."

"You *should* get it. You're a college graduate, after all, but you don't know a thing. What good are you? You'd better hit the books."

"I guess I should."

The bewildered newcomer would scratch his head and blush to think the first thing he had done on entering the company was to embarrass himself before the mostly veteran staff now gathered around. Once Mogi had marched off in triumph, though, one of the older men would snicker, "He got you," and explain that Mogi was the temp who worked as the company's English consultant, which only made the new man feel worse. Far from winning Mogi the respect he thought he deserved, this technique only succeeded in convincing newcomers that he was a hateful old man.

Mogi was not a college graduate. In fact, his only education after elementary school

was the training he received at Dr. Saitō's English Academy. Nothing much is known about his subsequent efforts to learn English, but he presented himself as an expert and was in fact quite good at the language. As long as they had Mogi, the company was never at a loss in its negotiations with foreigners. That a man of such ability could never convince them to raise his status from temporary to permanent was certainly owing in part to his truncated academic career, but the main reason should be made clear by the following episode.

Some years earlier, Mogi had put a newcomer in his place as usual. He had done it that time not with "Even her pockmarks are dimples to him" but "*Bancha mo debana*" (The bloom of youth makes even the plainest girl attractive). Mogi was walking off, pleased with himself, when this particular young man vented his frustration by yelling at him from behind, "Hey, you *paypah doggu*, you!"

Mogi whirled around in shock. With his English expertise, he was well prepared to deal with something like *hotto doggu*, but this *paypah doggu* was new.

"What did you say to me?" he demanded.

" '*Paypah doggu*'!"

" '*Paypah doggu*'?"

Mogi cocked his head in puzzlement.

"Don't get it, huh? Well that is too bad!" the young man declared, obviously mocking Mogi's earlier tone with him. "You *do* know what *paypah* is, don't you?"

Mogi could do little more than reply, "*Paypah* is paper."

"Yes, that's *kami* in Japanese, for your information. So how about *doggu*?"

"*Doggu* is dog," Mogi answered with annoyance.

"Excellent! And dog in Japanese is *inu*. Or perhaps you knew that already. So *paypah doggu* should be translated *kami-inu* in Japanese, wouldn't you say?"

"*Kami-inu*?"

"Yes—or perhaps I should say that in English for you: *iesu*. And since *kami* can mean *biting* as well as *paper*, a *kami-inu* is a yappy little dog that bites everybody and anybody: a biting dog. I'm sure you get it. They call you Mr. English, but you don't know a thing, do you? You'll have to do better than that!"

"You son of a—"

Mogi, now livid, sprang at the newcomer, but a moment later he found himself sitting on the floor. The young man had been a sumo wrestler in college. Mogi looked up at his beefy adversary, aware that he had chosen to tangle with the wrong person. Mogi left the office then and there, which later gave rise to some major laughs at his expense.

"The bastard called me a *paypah doggu*! He was making fun of me!" Mogi whined to the bar's proprietress as he drowned his sorrows in sake, eventually slumping to the table in a drunken stupor. He was with Kyōta Kazama, who at the time still thought of Mogi as a nasty old man. Yet Kyōta found the sight of Mogi's sleeping face so sad and lonely that what should have been the pleasant experience of a nighttime drink was obliterated by a deep sense of the transitory nature of all human life.

It later came out that the young newcomer had been put on guard against Mogi by the assistant director's assistant, Yoshirō Oda. The news made Mogi so furious he tried to bite Oda's head off. Though Oda was too bighearted to take Mogi seriously, from that day onward he became the object of Mogi's smoldering resentment.

Paypah doggu! Everyone at the company was delighted that the young man had nailed Mogi so perfectly. A true "biting dog," he was always trying to sink his fangs into people. He scattered curses everywhere he went, angry at the world. Quite naturally, people kept their distance from him, the company director being no exception. Surely it made perfect sense that they had never promoted Mogi from temporary to full-time.

This no doubt encouraged his inborn nasty personality to develop ever more *paypah doggu*–like tendencies; yet the bosses never went so far as to fire him, because they recognized the true value of his work as Mr. English.

2

Kyōta Kazama first suspected that he should see Mogi in a new light when Mogi was called upon to translate a draft application under the Corporate Rehabilitation and Reorganization laws. When it became necessary to explain the gist of the application to the proper authorities, Mogi went with the director and Kyōta and translated for them fluently. It was a thrill to watch him cross swords with the American officer, never backing down an inch. He was magnificent.

Whether or not Mogi fully grasped the contents of the application, he doubled everything the director said. If the director spoke for five minutes, Mogi stretched it out to ten. He was clearly exceeding his authority, but Kyōta had never seen him perform with such gusto, and he realized it was the only way to make the other side fully grasp what the company wanted. Of course, such a brash attitude on the part of a mere interpreter might have backfired, but the application was accepted and Kyōta came out of the deal looking good.

"Now, *this* has given me a whole new appreciation for your abilities," Kyōta said to Mogi.

"Hey, what are you talking about? You've got some nerve, making fun of an old man."

"No, seriously, I'm very grateful for what you've done."

"Humph."

Mogi made as if to pass off Kyōta's praise with a snort, but he was obviously very pleased by it. In fact, he soon came up with an outlandish suggestion.

"If you're really so grateful, why don't you become my apprentice?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"No, really. I was just thinking I'd like to have an apprentice."

"What a terrible idea!" Kyōta said with a feeble smile, hoping this was just a onetime joke, but Mogi, perhaps because he was kept at a distance by everyone else, started dropping by Kyōta's desk at least once a day to proclaim for all to hear that he wanted the younger man to become his apprentice. Kyōta was floored by this, especially when some of the other men began calling him "Mr. Apprentice."

Needless to say, Mogi had none of the dignity of an apprentice's master. Whenever he called Kyōta his apprentice, Kyōta would think of the sad face of the sleeping drunken Mogi he had seen that night in the Heiroku. Maybe it was that loneliness that caused Mogi to give the apprentice label to someone who had shown him the slightest kindness. Kyōta thought he could understand what Mogi was feeling.

One day, however, Kyōta declared, "I want you to stop calling me your apprentice. You have never once given me the special consideration that a true master should show his apprentice."

"You've got some nerve picking a fight with your master!"

"My master? We've never formally shared a cup of sake to seal the connection. The least you should do is treat me to some major drinking!"

"Now you're trying to twist my arm!"

"You bet I am!"

Kyōta had more or less forgotten this confrontation when, a few days later, Mogi announced, "Get ready for some heavy drinking tonight, apprentice!"

"No, no, no, I was just joking," Kyōta said, flustered.

"Too late for that now," Mogi declared. "I'm not letting you get away."

And indeed, that night Mogi dragged the protesting Kyōta to the Heiroku.

Located in Osaka's lively Umeda district, Heiroku was an absolutely ordinary bar, but it was the one most often frequented by employees of the company. It had disappeared for a time after the bombing flattened the city center, but the madam had reopened a year earlier near the original spot. Her husband, Heiroku, had been drafted and killed in

the war, and she was apparently still a widow. If anything, she had put on new curves after losing her husband, and at thirty-seven or thirty-eight was sexier than ever. The men from the office often said what a waste it would be to leave her a widow, and talked among themselves about who might be the first to win her, but what really attested to her character was her policy of never overcharging her customers.

Mogi announced to the madam straight off that "This fellow is going to become my apprentice tonight—my first one! If I'm Robin Hood, he'll be my Little John. Be nice to him!"

"Oh, my goodness! Is that true, Mr. Kazama?"

"Well, ma'am, I wasn't really planning on this, but you know how you can get yourself in trouble just by opening your mouth. I feel like a prisoner of war tonight."

Kyōta's sullen scowl only seemed to energize Mogi. "Too late for that!" he crowed. "Bring the sake right away, ma'am, please!"

"Yes sir!"

As soon as the hot sake arrived, Mogi lifted the ceramic bottle and held it out, ready to pour for Kyōta.

"All right, apprentice. Here comes your first cup."

Kyōta had no choice but to lift his sake cup for Mogi to fill.

"As soon as you're done, hand the cup to me."

"All right. Here it is."

Kyōta handed the empty cup to Mogi and filled it for him.

"That does it," Mogi said after draining the cup. "Now you're my apprentice."

In high spirits, Mogi drank a lot that night. And, most unusual for him, he talked a lot about the past. He had been born into a poor family in the old Tamatsukuri district of Osaka, and between the ages of thirteen and sixteen had spent four hard years in service to a dry goods store in Kita-Kyūhōji-machi. Recognizing that this was leading nowhere, he left for Tokyo with high hopes. There, while studying at the English Academy, he served as a student houseboy at the office of the prominent party politician Tōru Hoshi, which was in the area where the NHK Broadcasting headquarters now stand. In his houseboy position, he had been preceded by important politicians such as Kiyoshi Akita and Yonezō Maeda. Next he boarded a ship to China, where he worked as a newspaper reporter, then quickly joined that small band of Japanese adventurers who wandered the continent, involving themselves behind the scenes in politically and diplomatically sensitive issues. All the while, he worked on polishing his English. Eventually he returned to Japan and went to work for the company on a temporary basis. Yoshirō Oda was

another temporary hire from around that time.

"That damned Oda is a clever bastard, the way he got them to hire him full-time in his fifth year," Mogi growled.

Twenty years had gone by since the company had linked capital and technical forces with the top-flight American company IES; Mogi had been hired to help with those negotiations. Once they were completed, however, Mogi found himself being chewed out by the director.

"All you're supposed to do is give an honest translation of whatever I say. Today, though, you were not only getting involved where you shouldn't have but offering your own opinions. And you call yourself an interpreter?"

Then, when the war was coming and Japan strengthened the Foreign Exchange Control Law, the company was ordered by the army to increase the number of its shares, which necessitated some difficult discussions with IES as chief stockholder. That time, too, Mogi found himself being reprimanded after the negotiations.

"Are you Japanese? Is some other company paying your salary? In today's negotiations, you were clearly taking the side of an enemy country. Do you see what I'm saying?"

Kyōta immediately recognized that this was the very kind of thing for which Mogi would likely be admonished, but he could also easily picture a mortified Mogi glaring back at the boss all the while.

Once the war got started, the company no longer needed English, and rumor suggested that they would never need it again. Instead, the study of Malay took off. Understandably, it must have been a stressful time for Mogi. Under normal circumstances, a "Mr. English" might have been fired as a useless luxury. Yet Mogi was kept on, thanks less to the director's foresight, in all probability, than to the sort of paternalism that prevails at large companies. Mogi must have sensed this. At least, it is not hard to imagine that he felt a good deal of anguish, knowing how dim his prospects of finding a new job were at his age. Still, although he never went so far as to say that Japan was going to lose the war, he earned ever greater disapproval in the company by circulating his outrageous view that America would never lose.

In the end, of course, Japan did lose, ushering in the age of English Almighty. The only thing this did for Mogi was vastly increase the amount of work he had to do. He still remained the temp they called Mr. English, a *paypah doggu*, as lonely after the war as he had been before.

The more he heard Mogi's stories of the old days, the less inclined Kyōta felt to

resist being called apprentice by him.

"Shut up, apprentice! Look here, apprentice! Hey you, apprentice!" The obvious joy with which he yelled at Kyōta revealed how completely Mogi had let his guard down. If Mogi was going to call him apprentice so affectionately, Kyōta was willing to let him get away with it.

Mogi's knowledge of English never showed up in the form of affected Americanisms. When drunk enough to start singing, he never sang English songs but traditional Japanese shrine pilgrimage songs or the standard lively drinking tunes. In any case, tonight he had drunk too much. "You'd better stop," the bar madam said, worried.

He instantly complied with her suggestion, but just as quickly started begging for "Just one more." As a result, when it was time for him to go home he was totally intoxicated—so woozy that there was no question of sending him off alone. They managed to load him into a cab, but he simply lay there unconscious. Kyōta wanted to ride with him, but he didn't know Mogi's address.

"Well, then, I'll go with you," the madam said, climbing right in as soon as she had put a maid in charge of the bar. "I know where he lives." This seemed like more than simple kindness on the part of a bar madam, but once the cab started moving, she mumbled an explanation to the effect that she had seen him home the night he drank himself into oblivion after being called a *paypah doggu*.

3

Mogi lived in Jūsō, a ten-minute ride from Umeda, in a little four-room, two-story house beside the Yodo River dike. He snored the whole way there, leaning all his weight against the madam's shoulder, but he miraculously awoke when she ordered the taxi driver to stop.

"What? I'm home? I was just dreaming I was at the Arima Hot Springs with you," he said to her.

"Don't be ridiculous! Come on, get out of the cab."

"Sure, sure. You, too, apprentice, as long as you've come this far. Have a cup of tea. You wouldn't disobey your master, would you?"

He wouldn't take no for an answer.

Mogi's wife had died during the war. They had a son, a total wastrel, according to Mogi, who almost never came home. So despite his advanced age, Mogi lived alone and cooked for himself. He had hired several maids over the years, but they had apparently all quit, unwilling to put up with his nagging.

Having demanded that his two guests stay, Mogi seemed to find their presence so calming that he promptly collapsed snoring on the tatami.

Kyōta and the madam looked at each other with resigned smiles.

"He doesn't need us here," Kyōta said.

"Let's just accept our fate and put him to bed," the madam said, pulling Mogi's bedding out of the closet and laying out the mattress.

Kyōta lifted Mogi's shoulders and the madam took his feet. Together, they barely managed to dump him onto the thin mattress before covering him with a quilt. Mogi mumbled something incoherent and started snoring again.

"He thinks he's got servants here," the madam said with a touch of annoyance, yet she tenderly patted down the four corners of the quilt.

Having escaped the bombing, the house was well outfitted with aging furniture, and Mogi seemed to keep the place neat and clean.

"Time to go, I guess," the madam said, casting a melancholy glance around the room.

"Yes," Kyōta said. "Well, then, master, we'll be going."

There was no reply, of course.

They stepped outside to find the moon glowing in the early autumn sky. There was time, still, until the last train. The two strolled atop the Yodo River dike toward the Hankyū station. Kyōta thought he could hear the flow of the river. Walking beside the madam like this deep at night gave Kyōta a special feeling, one not at all unpleasant.

The madam laughed quietly, as though suddenly recalling something.

"Mr. Mogi once asked me to come and live with him in that house, you know, just after the war."

"Oh, really?"

"I lost my house in the bombing, I lost my husband, I had no way to start up the business again, I had my daughter with me living with a relative in Takarazuka: things looked pretty hopeless."

The madam had bumped into Mogi when she was walking along Shinsaibashi Street, lost in dark thoughts about the future. He had piped up as usual, "How are you doing, madam? I hope you'll be opening the bar soon. Better not waste time or it'll be too late! And besides, I don't know where else to go!"

He took her to a nearby café, where he said the same things to her all over again. She gave him a moving account of her current difficulties.

"I see," he said. "It must be tough, living with relatives like that. Why don't you come to my place instead?"

With some hesitation, she told him that she had a seven-year-old daughter to care for.

"That's no problem, bring her along," he said.

"Thank you so much," she replied, then gave the invitation some careful thought. Mogi must be a widower, so when he suggested she come and live with him, was it just a matter of offering her a place to live, or was there a deeper meaning to it? This was not merely an abstract question to ponder but a possible turning point in her life. She blushed like a schoolgirl and toyed with her coffee spoon all the while.

Before she could say anything, Mogi suddenly asked, "What is O-Kiyo doing these days?"

O-Kiyo was a maid who had worked in the Heiroku. The madam replied that O-Kiyo was also in great distress with nowhere to go.

"All right, then, it doesn't have to be you," he said breezily, taking a whole new tack. "Why don't you send her to see me?"

"Well..."

"I can put up with either of you, it doesn't matter to me."

The madam felt let down at first, then angry. Mogi had merely been offering her a place to live, so she could hardly object to his easy switch from one woman to another, but "put up with"? And he finally tried to appeal to her sympathies with "I'm lonely living by myself," which was enough to make her want to call him a horny old goat.

Instead, she said, "Thank you very much. Let me give it some thought," and walked out of the café wearing an understandably morose expression, leaving Mogi behind.

After that, the madam succeeded in opening her present bar, but to this day, she said, she had been unable to repress the mixed feelings of gratitude and anger toward Mogi she experienced whenever she thought of her misery in those early days after the war.

"This is the first I've heard of that," Kyōta said with a smile. "But at least Mogi liked you best and O-Kiyo second best."

The madam chuckled softly and said with a little pout, "He probably would have been fine with whichever of us he could get first." Soon the dim glow of the station lights could be seen in the distance.

"I'll bet Mr. Mogi is still snoring," she said, looking back, but Mogi's little house was no longer visible.

4

Mogi missed work the day after the rumored fight. He was probably in bed in his Jūsō

house, his head bandaged as it had been the night before. Kyōta thought of dropping by to look in on him after work. Otherwise, Mogi was likely to accuse him of coldness. Kyōta was thinking about visiting Mogi when along came Oda, the colleague with whom Mogi had scuffled.

"Look here, Mr. Oda," Kyōta said, "I can't have you fighting with my master anymore. It reflects badly on me as his apprentice."

"Well, he's the one who started it," Oda said with an easy smile. "That *paypah doggu* is just too much for me."

"But why did you have to go and punch him? Both of you are way too old to be getting involved in fistfights."

"Fistfights? I never laid a hand on him. He got all worked up and fell off his barstool."

"You mean he just fell off by himself?"

"Sure. And he caught his head on the corner of a table. He's such a loser. I'm kind of worried about him, though. Could you drop in and see how he's doing?"

"Yes, of course."

"Thanks, I'm counting on you."

Oda wandered off toward his desk.

Even supposing that Mogi was jealous of Oda for having been promoted over the years, there was no one in the company who found this unfair. They all viewed Oda as someone special, forgetting that he had ever been a temp. This was due entirely to the fine figure he had cut when he was evacuated from Dalian after Japan lost the war.

The company had sent him to China and made him chief of the Dalian branch. Most people who were evacuated from China following Japan's surrender came back looking like beggars, but Oda walked into the office wearing a 100 percent wool suit and London-made hat and carrying a snakewood walking stick like some kind of fine British gentleman. You hardly ever saw such a well-dressed gentleman in the Japanese homeland those days.

"What's with the suit?" the director asked.

"I wore this all the way back from Dalian."

"Oh, come on, Oda, you—"

"Please, sir," Oda stopped him in order to announce, as though he had been looking forward to this moment, "if I may say so, Yoshirō Oda made quite a name for himself representing our company in Dalian. Japan may have lost the war, but that is no excuse for people to come back dressed like beggars. I decided that there should be at least one evacuee displaying the dignity of a proper Japanese. Of course I disdained anything

so abject as wearing a backpack. This is what it means to be a man."

"Magnificent, Oda!" the director cried. "I couldn't have said it better myself." He added, "You are the honor and glory of our company." Oda was immediately elevated to assistant director's assistant.

Everyone thought it a near miracle that Oda had escaped in such style from the desperation and chaos on the Chinese mainland. The whole company sensed in him the heroism of Japan's old Restoration patriots, and indeed, he carried himself with a dignity and composure one would expect from such men.

Mogi could not help but be at a great disadvantage in tangling with a person of Oda's caliber. When people heard that Mr. English had received a bloody head wound, rather than asking what had caused it, they said, "Maybe he's learned a lesson," or, "He should know better at his age."

Kyōta dropped by Mogi's house on his way home from work that day. Mogi was alone, lying on his mattress in the room facing the garden.

"Oh, thanks for coming," Mogi said with obvious pleasure, as if he had been waiting all day for Kyōta to visit.

"I'm afraid you cut a sorry figure last night."

"I was kind of careless, I'm afraid."

"I hear you got all worked up and fell off your barstool. You really made a fool of yourself. Oda told me about it."

"Oh, really? Now he's sunk to a new low. He saw me getting up and kicked my barstool out from under me. Here, let me tell you what *really* happened."

Mogi had been drinking at the Heiroku the night before. The madam was keeping him company and he was pretty drunk when Oda showed up.

"That son of a bitch has his eye on the madam," Mogi said to Kyōta, "and he's been coming to the bar a lot lately. Anyhow, I never liked him."

As far as Kyōta was concerned, this was a virtual confession that the two men were rivals in love.

Oda gave Mogi a grunt and sat down on the barstool next to his. Mogi just glared back at him without replying, and Oda showed his annoyance, naturally enough. The two started drinking almost back-to-back, deliberately ignoring each other but keeping an eye on each other's alcohol consumption nonetheless.

"Madam, more sake!" Mogi called out, waving his now-empty sake bottle in the air for her to see.

Without a moment's delay, Oda called out, "Madam, more sake, please!" and shook

his own sake bottle, which made a hollow splash, revealing that it was far from empty. Not even the heroic Oda could help but be embarrassed by the revelation, and he blushed slightly as he set his bottle down. Then quickly, as if to hide his embarrassment, he called out, "Madam, beef strips fried in butter, please!"

Not to be outdone, Mogi called, "Beef strips in butter, madam, superior cut."

"Make mine the highest quality, and extra large," Oda countered.

The madam looked back and forth between the two men in disbelief.

"The only butter-fried beef we have is normal grade. We're all out of 'superior cut' and 'highest quality' and 'extra large' today!"

To Mogi she served wasabi fish cakes, and to Oda, miso cucumbers. "You'll have to make do with these," she said, her show of equal treatment eliciting stifled laughter from her other customers. Oda had the good sense to join in the lightened mood, but Mogi was still steaming.

Stealing a glance at the stubborn Mogi, Oda said to the madam, "I gather you had a very difficult time after your first place was bombed. A tough time with men, too. I heard that one man tried to seduce you, using his house as bait."

A shiver seemed to run through the fingers with which Mogi held his sake cup, but Oda went on to the shocked madam as if chatting about everyday things, "And the way I heard it, when you didn't answer him, the fellow said he could 'put up' with O-Kiyo instead of you. I saw O-Kiyo the other day, and let me tell you, she was mad! 'For him to say something like that—he can "put up with O-Kiyo"—just goes to show what a horny old goat he is! What nerve!' she said. I don't blame her for being mad. I don't suppose the fellow comes here anymore, does he? If he does, I'd like to see what he looks like. Or maybe I'm wrong—maybe he's somewhere close by. But what an idiot!"

Following his little speech, Oda ostentatiously sipped his sake amid a second wave of stifled laughter.

Then it was Mogi's turn to address the madam. "Here's a little scoop for you I've never told anyone before."

Now the others pricked up their ears in anticipation of a third wave.

"A few years ago, I just happened to be passing Osaka Station when I saw a group of evacuees from Dalian. One of them was a man I knew well. It made me so happy to see he had found his way back from the Chinese mainland safe and sound! But he was very impressive. While all the others were dressed in rags, he was a veritable crane among chickens, wearing a suit and carrying a stick like a fine English gentleman. 'Japan may have lost the war,' he said, 'but as a true Japanese, I didn't want to evacuate to the

homeland looking shabby.' This was the genuine samurai spirit. The samurai flaunts his toothpick even when starving. Of course, this particular 'samurai' came from a long line of Kyushu farmers."

Mogi took a slug of sake. The madam glanced at Oda, who was looking rather proud of himself.

"So anyway, standing behind this preening peacock was his wife. And was she dressed in a gorgeous kimono to match his suit? No, she had on a hideous pair of farm trousers, a towel wrapped around her head, and the pack on her back looked big enough to snap her in two."

"I've never heard of anything so ridiculous!" the madam said, fuming.

"In other words, this fellow had evacuated all the way from China, letting his wife carry a gigantic pack while he himself wore a fancy suit, sported a walking stick, and carried on as if he was the one true Japanese. The poor woman! This turned me against him then and there. 'You call yourself a man, treating her like that?' I said to him. 'No no,' he says as if it was nothing at all, 'she wanted to do this. She's a model wife.' And maybe he was right about his own wife, but to me, in that precious suit of his, he looked like some black marketer making a big show of his fancy clothes. It was like catching some big, famous guy with a snot ball hanging from his nose."

"Hey," Oda said.

"What?" Mogi answered.

"Black marketer? Snot ball?"

"Horny old goat?"

Both men ran out of things to say after that, glaring at each other as if ready to bite each other's heads off. To be sure, they did not start throwing punches, but the longer Mogi focused on Oda's face, the more his accumulated resentment boiled up until, almost unconsciously, he emptied his sake cup onto Oda's suit. Certain that Oda would strike back, Mogi started to get up from his barstool to brace himself, but in the next instant, he and the barstool clattered to the floor.

5

"There's no way a guy like me would just fall off his chair like that. Oda kicked it out from under me, no question," Mogi insisted again.

Kyōta struggled to keep from laughing. "So it was two old guys in a love feud," he said.

"Well, I suppose it boils down to that," Mogi admitted with surprising ease. "But

hey, I'm not such an old guy."

The two men fell silent at that point. Kyōta looked outside toward the corner of the garden, where a white flower glowed softly in the darkness.

"You know, Kazama, it's lonely sleeping alone like this."

"I know."

"Hey, do you think the Heiroku madam could ever fall for me?"

Mogi said that the Heiroku madam looked a lot like the young daughter of the family who ran the dry goods shop where he worked as a boy. This meant she looked like his first love of forty years earlier, whose memory he had carried with him in his travels around the Chinese mainland. Whether or not it was actually possible to remember a woman's face for forty years, Mogi believed he did.

"Even if she does like you, nothing's ever going to come of it," Kyōta said.

"Well, that's a pretty mean thing to say. What proof do you have?"

"It's just a guess, but I suspect the madam found herself a patron who helped her open her new bar. And I also imagine that even if he decided not to make any demands on her at first, it's becoming harder and harder for him to control himself. The madam is plenty attractive even to us, and all *we* can do is look at her, so you can imagine how worked up this patron of hers is getting. And with that special kindness of hers, she's bound to respond to his passion. In fact, I imagine she has already responded."

"You've got a pretty ugly imagination."

"No, just an imagination."

"So how about Oda?"

"It's probably the same for him, I imagine, but—"

"Well, if you imagine it's the same for him, there was no point in us fighting, was there? So I got hurt for nothing?"

"I guess I'd have to say that."

"And O-Kiyo's out of the question, too. It's a hopeless situation."

Mogi seemed to have resigned himself to losing both women. Just then the front door slid open.

"Good evening, father," said a young voice, instantaneously transforming Mogi's newly softened expression into a stern mask. In walked a young man in his midtwenties. Kyōta knew at a glance that this had to be Mogi's son, the "great playboy" who never came to visit him. This shameless profligate looked utterly unconcerned as he walked in, trailing a lovely young thing perhaps twenty years old.

Kyōta seized the moment. "Well, then, I guess I'll be going," he announced, getting

to his feet.

He stepped outside and lit a cigarette. He was starting to walk away when he heard Mogi shout at the top of his lungs, "Get the hell out of here! You've got some nerve coming here to tell me that!"

Kyōta stopped dead in his tracks.

"But Father—"

"Don't 'But Father' me! You never come to see me, and now all of a sudden you show up with a girl and ask me to let you marry her? You selfish little twerp!"

"We want to get married and take care of you."

"Ridiculous! I can take care of myself perfectly well, thank you! I don't want to become beholden to some unfilial idiot who thinks he's going to 'take care' of me all of a sudden!"

"But Father, I only left the house because you wouldn't stop nagging me. You never tried to understand me."

"What are you talking about? I nagged you *because* I understood you! Now listen to me, will you? The only reason I have had to endure the shame of being a mere temp all these years is that I didn't have a college education—because I never went beyond grammar school. I wanted to make sure I put you through college so you wouldn't have to experience the pain I've lived with. I was willing to do anything to make you into a college-educated company man. That was my dream!"

Mogi's voice seethed with righteous indignation. Kyōta couldn't help believing that, deep in his heart, Mogi was almost certainly crying.

"As soon as you finished middle school, though, you started saying you didn't want to go to school anymore. I finally managed to get you into high school, but they called me in and told me you hadn't been attending at all. That's when I found out you had been studying drawing—that you wanted to become an artist! Well, let me tell you, mister, it's not that easy to make your living as an artist. I had to put my foot down. I threatened to stop paying your rent to try to convince you to abandon that dream, but you gave me all this big talk about making your own way in life, and then walked right out of here. Do you have any idea how that made me feel? And after bragging about how you're going to become this big artist, what do you end up doing? Painting posters!"

"But father, I've had work accepted in an exhibition."

"You what?"

"This is the time for me to come home and take care of you and—"

"You idiot!"

Mogi's ferocious shout seemed to shake the air around Kyōta.

"So you think getting one picture accepted in an exhibition makes you an artist? Well, let me tell you how I got to where I am today. I have unshakable confidence that my English is second to none—and I've never been anywhere outside this country but China! I did it with sheer hard work, pouring every ounce of my strength into studying. That's how I made it my calling, my life's work—and I'm just talking about English. To become a real artist, you have to work even harder than I did on English. You have to give it everything you've got. But here you are, walking on air because you had one lousy painting accepted, all pleased with yourself as if you've got it made."

"No, father, I don't feel that way at all."

"You've got to do better than that! I don't want to be 'taken care of' by some dreamy-eyed son who wants to play filial piety games with me all of a sudden. If you really want to practice filial piety, come back to me after you've established yourself as a full-fledged artist. I'll stick it out here by myself as long as it takes—ten years, twenty years, a lifetime."

With that, the house fell silent.

Kyōta peeked through a knothole in the fence to see the son and his girlfriend kneeling on the matted floor, their heads hanging down. Beside them knelt Mogi, his head still wrapped in bandages, staring with gritted teeth at a spot in the garden. In the lamplight, Kyōta thought he saw a glistening tear glide down from Mogi's eye.

6

Mogi stayed home from work for three days. On the fourth day, he removed his bandages and went to the office. Kyōta had been sent to Kobe that day, but as soon as he returned to the office at two o'clock, he went to see Mogi, who was just then engaged in a verbal tug-of-war with the errand boy.

"I don't want this," Mogi was saying. "Give it back to the director."

"But—" The young man stood there in confusion, holding a sheet of paper.

"What's that?" Kyōta asked.

"Here, sir, have a look."

Kyōta saw that it was a notice of dismissal for Mogi.

"What's this all about?"

"The director says I'm fired, damn him. He thinks I'm worthless."

As soon as he had arrived at the office, Mogi said, the director called him in and growled at him, "I hear you got into a bar fight, a man of your age. Don't you see what

tremendous harm something like that can do to the company's reputation?"

Mogi, unbowed, shot back, "The company's reputation? Come on, it was just a little bar fight. Don't make such a big deal about it."

"So you've decided to be insubordinate, huh? It's that rash attitude that makes everybody here hate you."

"I do my job the way I'm supposed to do it."

"The problem is with your humanity. Humanity is everything."

"And my English ability is nothing?"

"Your level of English is nothing special anymore. Everybody can speak as well as you these days, especially the younger employees. I've been thinking for a while it's about time to have you hand in your resignation."

"I will never resign."

"And why not?"

"It's the rule: temps stay on until they turn sixty."

"Unless the company no longer needs them. Then it only makes sense for us to have you resign."

The director had probably not intended to go that far, but both men were worked up, and one remark led to another.

"Not me. I will not resign."

"I'll see to it that you do."

"No, never."

With that, Mogi had stalked out of the director's office. At that point, Oda came strolling along.

"What happened? Did the boss give you a dressing-down? I got mine the other day."

"Oh, really? You, too?"

If that was the case, Mogi concluded, there had been no favoritism involved.

"I don't suppose he fired you, though."

"No, of course not."

"He says he's going to fire me."

"That's crazy."

"I know. So I refused to quit."

"That's the spirit!"

"You think so? Even you?"

"I do."

"That's great. I'm surprised: we see eye to eye."

"What are you talking about? Back when I was the hit of Dalian—"

"Oh, shut up! You make me sick to my stomach with that stuff."

"What the hell—you *paypah doggu*, you!"

"You had to go and say it, huh? Snot ball!"

"All right, enough of this. It's just going to lower my dignity. Let's stop the fighting for now," Oda said, calling for compromise.

That afternoon, however, the director was still boiling, it seemed. He sent the errand boy to deliver the separation notice again. Mogi again refused to accept it and sent the boy back where he had come from. A short time later, the boy brought the notice again, "on orders from the director." Kyōta came in at that point, and so did Oda.

"Mark my words," Mogi said, "if I resign now, the company is going to have big problems. Negotiations with IES will be starting soon. It's totally presumptuous to think that some greenhorn can take my place at a time like this. That's how much confidence I have in my own English. It kills me to think that so little value is placed on my skills that I can be fired for a mere bar fight. I refuse to resign. I will come to work every day. I couldn't ask for a better opponent than the director. And why is that? Because I'm the one and only *paypah doggu*."

After delivering this speech to Kyōta, Mogi said to the boy, "Hey, snap out of it! Take that notice back to the director immediately and tell him I don't want it. That's what your job is all about."

"Yes, but—"

The boy was at a total loss and finally blurted out, "I feel like Taira no Shigemori."

"What the hell are you talking about? You're nothing like Shigemori!" Mogi barked.

"Well, kind of... evil general's son... tried to be a good guy..."

"Hey, errand boy Shigemori," Oda interjected, "nobody's going to take that scrap of paper from you, so throw it in your desk drawer for a while."

"Oh, all right," the young man said with a sigh, as if he had finally found a way out of his predicament. "I'll do that."

"Do you really think that's all right?" Kyōta asked. "Wouldn't the safest thing be to take the humble approach and apologize?"

But Mogi said he absolutely refused to apologize.

Even Oda egged him on: "No, you really shouldn't apologize."

True to his word, from the following day on, Mogi came to work as usual. All the office gossip suddenly focused on him, much of it in his favor:

"This is the strangest thing that's ever happened in the company's history."

"You have to hand it to Mr. English. He's not all bad."

Employees always had to worry about being let go. If Mogi's high-handed tactics worked, they should be taken as a model of the best way to respond to a firing. No, Mogi was probably the only one who could get away with such a thing. If some other guy tried it, he might be in for a rude awakening. The director who had fired Mogi was acting grumpy these days, as if his authority had been slighted. But what was most likely preventing him from adopting a more decisive attitude was his unease about the approaching negotiations with IES. Mogi was undoubtedly aware of the director's nervousness, but a young employee in administration had already been chosen to do the interpreting. The fellow could be depended upon to handle ordinary interpreting, but when it came to negotiations like these, which presented major problems for the company involving the introduction of both technology and foreign capital, the interpreter had to have a commensurate amount of sheer guts.

The negotiations started. If they proceeded smoothly without Mogi, his reputation would be ruined. Not surprisingly, even Mogi appeared nervous that day. He came and sat by Kyōta's desk first thing in the morning. Kyōta deliberately avoided mentioning the negotiations. "So, what did you do about your son?" he asked.

"The rascal! Of course I sent him packing that night."

"Sounds coldhearted to me."

"Coldhearted? It was the only thing to do."

"No, it was coldhearted, even cruel. I'm not going to call you master anymore."

"Hey, wait a minute now, apprentice, don't be so hasty. To tell you the truth..."

"The truth? About what?"

A look of embarrassment came over Mogi such as he had rarely, if ever, displayed.

"Tarō told me he had worked hard and made himself into a real artist, so I figured I had to light one last fire under his tail. And that young bride of his wouldn't have been able to stand me nagging her from morning to night. Let's call it a father's love at work."

"Very impressive, master."

"Hey, enough with the flattery. I can see right through you," Mogi said shyly.

"Doesn't this mean you're going to go on being lonely?" Kyōta asked.

"I'm used to being by myself. If I get lonely, I can just take aim at the Heiroku's madam. I'm still full of energy, and I will be for a while yet. Hey, what do you say we invite Oda along and go to the Heiroku tonight?"

Mogi gave him a big smile, but Kyōta was thinking about Mogi's face as he had seen it through the knothole in the fence.

The errand boy came running up to them at that point. "Mr. Mogi," he said, "the director wants you in the reception room right away."

"What for?" Mogi asked, playing dumb, but his face was suddenly brimming with life.

"I don't know, but he says you'd better hurry."

"No, first I want you to go ask what this is about."

A moment or two later, the director himself came running in.

"Mogi, come *now*!"

"Oh my, what could this be about?"

"It's your old friend Mr. O'Brien from IES. He says he misses you. Come and say hello to him."

"If it's just a matter of saying hello, I can do that later."

"Look, don't needle me at a time like this. Mr. O'Brien wants you to interpret."

"But I thought you fired me."

"Yes, but you wouldn't accept the notice, would you? That makes us even. It's still your duty to follow company orders. Come *now*!"

"Go ahead," Kyōta said to Mogi from the side.

"Well, then, I suppose I ought to go..."

Mogi rose up with a lordly air, the eyes of the entire office focused on him. Never before had the countenance—indeed, the whole physique—of Mr. English, Soichirō Mogi, shone with such splendid vigor, like a fish that has finally found its way back into water.

translated by David Boyd

WHAT'S EATING SOICHIRŌ MOGI

NAOYUKI II

I am going to begin by writing about a new paperback of mine which is slated to be published late next month,* not that mentioning it here will do much for promotion. In any case, please bear with me. The book is a paperback entitled *Yatarō Iwasaki*. Now, I doubt that the book's title will inspire many *Monkey Business* readers to rush right out and buy it. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if many of you have never come across the name Yatarō Iwasaki before. Moreover, those of you who actually do know a thing or two about Iwasaki may even be less interested in the book than those of you who don't.

At any rate, the book is about Mitsubishi's founder, Yatarō Iwasaki. He was born in 1835 and died in 1885. The mogul, who built his empire from the ground up, was once quite famous—even infamous—but was relegated to obscurity some time back. Recently, Iwasaki has enjoyed something of a revival recently as a prominent character (and narrator) in *Ryōma*, the 2010 installation of the popular *Taiga* drama television series on NHK (the Japan Broadcasting Corporation).

Not interested, right? To be honest, I personally haven't watched any NHK period dramas in over thirty years. Likewise, it's hard for me to imagine *Monkey Business* readers tuning into NHK every Sunday night at eight. If any avid readers out there happen to be *Taiga* drama fans, I apologize. In any case, such readers—if they do in fact exist—would clearly represent only an infinitesimal fraction of the magazine's readership.

An even smaller fraction of the magazine's readers—*Monkey Business* readers who also read *me*—might be wondering if, desperate to sell some books, I've started to dabble in commercial tie-ins. Let me assure you: that's not the case. Not at all. As the paperback's editor told me when looking over the manuscript, *Yatarō Iwasaki* is the

* This essay first appeared in *Monkey Business* No. 9 (Spring 2010).

kind of book that "picks its readers," which is his gentle way of saying that copies aren't exactly going to fly off the shelves.

So I suppose I'd better explain why I'm talking about a book that at first glance seems to have nothing at all to do with the story I'm introducing in this essay: "Mr. English" by Keita Genji.

As I mentioned, *Yatarō Iwasaki* has not yet been published, so the title is still subject to change, but at least for the time being the book's subtitle reads: "The Birth of the Company." The book, you see, is "ambitious," arguing that Iwasaki's Mitsubishi was Japan's first "company." It would take some time to explain why that idea is considered ambitious, so I won't get into it here.

Now, any Naoyuki Ii fans out there—I imagine you as a private, dignified, and shy breed, as rare as the Tsushima leopard cat—will know that, in addition to writing novels with imaginary animals like the Rewaniwa, novels that possess what Motoyuki Shibata terms "an appeal that's hard to put into words," I have also written several novels about the company man—the so-called salaryman. But even so rare a breed of reader may not know just how much time I've spent racking my (what I would term "subpar") brain thinking about the company and the salaryman. It would take a long time to explain why I find them so fascinating, so I'll try to limit myself here to the CliffsNotes version.

While I've done a good amount of reading on the subject, I haven't yet shared my thoughts with the rest of the world. Quite recently, however, I've reached the point where I feel like I should throw my ideas out there and see if anything sticks. *Yatarō Iwasaki* is my first attempt at this.

In the process of reading up on companies and the company man, I stumbled upon "Mr. English." While I had known Genji's name for a number of years, I had never gotten around to reading any of his books. Genji was the force behind the so-called "salaryman novel" from the fifties into the seventies. Although he's been more or less forgotten and most of his sizable oeuvre has gone out of print, the writer was wildly popular in his heyday. In 1951, Genji was awarded the Naoki Prize: "Mr. English" won the judges over. In fact, the novelist said that he wrote the short story with the specific intention of taking the prize. While I've only read a small part of Genji's massive body of work, I can say with the utmost confidence that "Mr. English" stands out from the rest. The story contains a universal appeal that transcends time. For this reason, it's worth reading today and will continue to be worth reading for years to come.

Genji's incredible popularity is manifest in numbers provided by the novelist himself.

This is hardly a surprise given that Genji had a career as an accountant with Sumitomo, one of Japan's largest corporations, and was later the head of accounting for the Japan PEN Club. Genji—versed in all kinds of charts, figures, and graphs—was exceptionally good with numbers for a novelist. In his volume of essays titled *My Life in the Literary World*, published by Shūeisha in 1975, Genji wrote: "In 1957, Shinchōsha published *The Collected Works of Keita Genji* in twelve volumes. About eight years later, in 1965, Kodansha published *The Complete Works of Keita Genji* in forty-three volumes. Eight years after that, in 1973, Kodansha also published *Keita Genji: The Author's Edition* in twenty volumes."

In retrospect, Japan's period of rapid economic growth was also the golden age of publishing—a print-media bubble. Nevertheless, even then, not many novelists saw multivolume editions of their work published on multiple occasions within their lifetime. While the publishers were no doubt trying to stay on good terms with the popular writer, it's fair to assume that, when printing the bulk of the novelist's catalog in eight-year intervals, Genji's publishers expected his massive collections to yield some kind of a profit. It goes without saying that Genji also had to be quite prolific for this to happen.

Genji wrote, "I recently calculated that I've published eighty-three novels in the span of twenty-five years. Also, I've just published my thirty-third volume of short stories. I haven't actually counted them all, but I imagine I've written about three hundred stories. On top of that, I've published eighteen essay collections and four children's books."

These numbers may make you feel a bit light-headed. But don't let your jaw drop just yet. Genji's success was not just a matter of how many books he published. Genji wrote "Hope-san," a story Tōei adapted for the cinema in 1951 which, in addition to being regarded as the genesis of the salaryman movie, was one of more than eighty film adaptations of his fiction: "Most were based on my novels, but roughly twenty of the films were adapted from short stories." Put differently, three out of four of Genji's novels were made into movies. In the history of Japanese film, even in arguably its most productive period, the proportion of Genji's novels and short stories that made it to the screen is nothing short of amazing.

Genji enjoyed tremendous popularity, yet his readers seem to have been less than fanatical: his stories were by no means eccentric, and neither were the people who read them. As a self-possessed author of light, humorous novels, Genji didn't tackle the dark side of humanity like writers of so-called pure literature, nor the grave social problems sometimes addressed in mystery novels. People understood that, in his fiction, Genji embraced the sorrows and the joys of the company man's world. For this reason,

even though Genji might have sold more books than Osamu Dazai, Yukio Mishima, or Kenzaburō Ōe, he was not considered as "literary" as they were.

In the late sixties, I started to choose the books I read. In between middle school and high school, I read Dazai, Mishima, and Ōe—in that order. Although I knew about Genji, it never dawned on me to add him to my list of "must-read" novelists. That wasn't because I was some kind of pure literature purist—I read a good amount of sci-fi and, who knows why, police novels—but because, like most kids, I thought that the world of the salaryman had nothing to do with me. It was easier for me to identify with alien life on distant planets and police officers in foreign countries. Man alive.

When I was about to graduate from university and step out into the real world, my mother suggested I read Genji, perhaps as preparation for the life of the salaryman. But I never picked up any of his books—not until the late eighties, when I started to think about who the company man really is. I had been programmed to associate the term "salaryman novel" with Genji, so I decided to finally give his work the once-over. What I found surprised me. Genji's salaryman fiction takes place within the office, but it makes surprisingly few references to what might be called work. Genji's novels are about workplace interactions, interoffice romances, and abacus practice during lunch breaks. Genji writes extensively about the office and the company man, but when it comes to what those companies make and what those employees do—or how they turn a profit—he tends to keep us in the dark. At first, I was taken aback by this, but over time it started to make sense to me.

You may be wondering if it's possible to write about the workplace without writing about work, but in fact it's a cinch. Plenty of novels and films have pulled it off—in fact, I've even done it myself. If anything, literature tends to follow an unwritten rule that—even when you're writing about the company man—you shouldn't get into the nitty-gritty of his job. The books that really dig into such matters, like Akiko Itoyama's *Waiting in the Offing*, are actually a rather recent phenomenon.

Genji once boasted that he "paved the way" for the contemporary salaryman novel. No doubt, he earned those bragging rights. While avoiding work in a novel set in the workplace might not have been Genji's invention per se, he took the practice to the next level. Even in Genji's extremely long novels, the reader often has no idea what kind of company he's reading about. In any case, Genji's exclusion of work-related content was undeniably intentional.

This strategic omission allowed Genji to depict an employee who could reasonably be a part of any company anywhere—a veritable company everyman. Undoubtedly this

approach made it easier for a large number of readers to access Genji's "world within company walls." He carefully erased work-related particulars and instead depicted the archetypal salaryman, someone whose life consisted solely of his interpersonal relationships at the office. It speaks to Genji's talent as a novelist that this actually worked, his vast sales testifying to his success in that regard. By the same token, however, Genji's tactic can also be viewed as having limited the possibilities of his fiction.

Genji's decision to not write about work was an observance—or perhaps an intensification—of one of literature's unwritten laws. Similarly, Genji followed (either consciously or unconsciously) a variety of rules and codes both within society and the workplace. He wrote his novels within the boundaries of what was deemed acceptable. Of course, when it comes to entertainment fiction, this is the road most traveled. This is why Genji's novels are so understandable and relatable. Yet the "universality" that Genji's fiction gained in this way wasn't meant to last; when the rules and codes of the time lost their validity, Keita Genji was quickly forgotten.

While "Mr. English" can be considered one of Genji's most representative stories, it also diverges from his MO. Above all, "Mr. English" is highly entertaining. Each character is portrayed so clearly, each with his or her own distinctive charm. On top of that, the story is excellent. Although at first the protagonist, Soichirō Mogi, strikes us as little more than a common schmuck, by the end of the story—quite remarkably—we come to admire him.

Mogi's rival, Yoshirō Oda, the Heiroku madam, and even minor characters like the sumo-wrestler-turned-company-man who calls Mogi a *paypah doggu*, the superficial director, and the confused errand boy are all endowed with unique personalities. Surprisingly, of all the characters in the story, the least interesting is Kyōta Kazama, through whose eyes the reader sees the story world. Yet as so many novels fail to make narrators and viewpoint characters like Kazama interesting, perhaps we should commend Genji for writing Kazama half-decently. Kazama, by the way, plays a similar role in several other Genji stories: significantly, the Chinese characters in the name Kyōta can also be read as Keita. In this way, readers are invited to identify Kazama with Genji himself.

Although "Mr. English" was written six decades ago, it's still a surprisingly easy read. The only thing that I couldn't make sense of was the company called IES. Genji writes about the company very matter-of-factly and perhaps the reference was obvious to readers at the time. Now, however, even when armed with a range of dictionaries and the Internet, I can't figure out what kind of company it is. If anyone out there can shed

some light on this mystery, please let me know.

One thing I did figure out, however, is the meaning behind the rather nonchalant line in the novel that reads: "When it became necessary to explain the gist of the application to the proper authorities..." What Genji refers to as "the proper authorities" is none other than the GHQ (the General Headquarters of the Allied Forces). When Genji's story was first published, novelists could not mention the GHQ—as he wrote, "writing about the American occupation in novels was forbidden"—so Genji camouflaged the term. Quite a while ago, the literary critic Jun Etō called the same phenomenon "postwar Japan's closed linguistic space." Yet it really hits home when you hear about it from an eyewitness like Genji. It was in fact the act of censorship itself that the censors were most keen to censor. In this sense, the GHQ was unrelenting.

To be sure, the humor and humanism found in "Mr. English" are hallmarks of Genji's fiction, but there are two points that separate the story from the rest of the pack.

First of all, work is—to an extent—represented within the story. You may think: "This has practically nothing to do with work!" Yet, Genji's other stories are far less forthcoming in that regard. In general, Genji was consistent in his avoidance of work. Granted, in "Mr. English," we have no idea what Mogi's company does, and anything that might have been considered a "work scene" has been left out, but we do have a clear sense of what Mogi does as an interpreter.

Second, the story is about a particular gap, the difference in rank and status. *Gap* is a word that has been thrown around a lot in recent years without any real definition. To be honest, I'd rather not use the word, but "Mr. English" is unmistakably about a gap. So I'll use the word here without scare quotes.

These days, keeping a temporary employee on the payroll for years on end, as the company did with Mogi, is not allowed. Yet, from the time the story was published until quite recently, nobody raised an eyebrow over the issue. In *My Life in the Literary World*, Genji spends quite a few pages relating the story behind the fiction, but makes no mention of temporary employment. Instead, he explains that the Mogi character is based on an actual person—Genji did not often model his characters on real people—who was well-known at Sumitomo. The man was infuriated by Genji's story since the novelist hadn't obtained permission to write about him.

Because Genji tailored the story specifically to win the Naoki Prize, he was clearly confident about the combined effect of his novelistic talents and the appeal of the person upon whom he modeled Mogi. But was Genji fully aware of the appeal of the story's subject matter?

What makes "Mr. English" good fiction is its humor, good characters, and good story. But all of these elements are rather common, especially in popular fiction. Even when all are present, a story may end up simply *good* (which isn't that easy to pull off, either). When they appear in moderation, these elements may even make a story mediocre. To tell the truth, most of the Keita Genji stories I have read fall into this category. Of the few stories I encountered that escaped this fate, only "Mr. English" was truly spectacular.

I got my hands on the *Keita Genji: The Author's Edition* and leafed through it, looking for other stories about temporary employees, but—excluding stories about characters who turned to part-time work after reaching retirement age—I found none.

Genji had a very clear vision for his world of fiction. It was his policy never to write outside of that world, a rule that he followed to the letter. In short, he chose to write within the framework of the company. Within the office, Genji portrayed the lives of people as they moved about. Interestingly, women who work in bars appear in most of Genji's stories; yet those bars are clearly extensions of the office. These women may live and work outside of the company, but they are only allowed to enter Genji's fictional world as mediated by the company. Take, for example, Heiroku's madam in "Mr. English."

On the other hand, while it may seem that Mogi exists within the office, he does not. This is the source of Mogi's discontent. For while he may physically exist within company walls, he is not really a part of the company. Mogi is always aware of his outsider status. By contrast, the people around him are clueless about what's eating him. They seem to constantly forget that he's not really one of them. Genji's authorial intent aside, the reader can easily interpret the story this way. For this reason, the Mogi character takes on a certain depth and the novel becomes more profound than the run-of-the-mill "good read." I would argue that one of the elements responsible for that depth might be bitterness. What oozes out of this bitterness is much more than simple entertainment.

The "gap" I mentioned earlier has been a formative part of storytelling since the olden days, whether the gap be in status, gender, or class. And then, of course, there is the greatest of all gaps—the one between life and death, which has also been a major focus of fiction. If novelistic fiction is a descendant of storytelling, then the same gap can be found in its DNA. But writing about such gaps scarcely guarantees a story's success. Why, then, does "Mr. English" succeed? There is really no simple answer.

When Genji's writing career began to wane, he became disenchanted with his career as a comedic novelist and headed in a new direction: writing about ghosts. He plugged

the greatest gap of all—life and death—into the workplace. Yet Genji's experiment ended in failure, both commercially and aesthetically. The office forbids death. A person can die at the office, of course, but a dead employee is no longer an employee. The way I see it, Genji developed his ghost employee to overcome this problem. Genji's ghost was a company man, even in death. Yet, ultimately, this ghost only calls greater attention to the fact that the workplace has no relation to the world of the dead. Genji's novels are set in the workplace—where death cannot be permitted. Constructing a world of fiction within the workplace was thus both Genji's forte and his limitation. When he began to feel restricted by the shackles of comedic conventions, he unfortunately failed to remember the roots to which he should have returned: "Mr. English."

Keita Genji was born Tomio Tanaka. He was born in Toyama Prefecture in 1912. After graduating from Toyama Commercial High School, he found employment with Sumitomo Limited in Osaka, before being drafted into the Pacific War as a naval officer. When Japan's zaibatsu (business conglomerates) were dissolved in the wake of the war, Tanaka transferred to one of Sumitomo's associates, where he was working when he won the Naoki Prize. At the time, the prize was of such little importance that no reporters bothered to show up for the award ceremony. Nevertheless, Genji wrote, "my coworkers saw me in a different light after that."

When Tanaka graduated from school and began working at Sumitomo, he thought: "I may not have graduated from college, but I'd at least like to make department chief by the time that I retire." While Sumitomo was a zaibatsu founded by its eponymous Edo-period magnate, the age of apprenticeship had already ended. At headquarters, non–college graduates like Tanaka must have been looked down on as second-rate employees. Mogi's bitterness was the kind that the author easily understood. Yet the life of Tomio Tanaka—and Keita Genji—went swimmingly after that, or at least it seems that way on the surface. Tanaka's success was undoubtedly a product of his ability and diligence. He was just forty-three, well before retirement age, when he quit his job at Sumitomo. By that time, he had already earned the position of assistant manager of general affairs. Tanaka died in 1985. What he left behind was truly, to borrow from one of Genji's titles, "a magnificent life."

Note: Earlier, I suggested that Genji was perhaps unaware of the role that the gap depicted in "Mr. English" played in the story's atypical success. However, that appears to not *have been the case. After completing this essay, I came across the following*

words by Genji: "My stories are hardly known for their artistic perspective, and that's fine by me. I'd actually prefer to develop the everyman perspective." By abandoning a certain form of literariness, Genji discovered his own style. For those of you who can read Japanese, please see my article "On the Salaryman Novel (8)" (Sararīman shōsetsu wo megutte [8]) *in the February 2011 issue of* Gunzō *for more on this.*

translated by Hanae Nishida Vuichard

JOHN

YŌKO
HAYASUKE

Knives in hand, a couple hundred men are peeling and chopping vegetables as the wind from the river blows against their foreheads. In a corner of the park, huge pots have just been put over a fire to make soup for four hundred people. It will be simmering in half an hour or so. On this particular Sunday in early summer a man asks me for help with a dog that a dead friend of his left behind. He cannot take care of him himself. Homeless people from all over Tokyo have gathered in the park to cook a meal, using tables brought in by volunteers, an event one can witness every Sunday afternoon.

"Hold on a minute," I reply. The fact is, I didn't know this dead friend of his. Maybe no one in our group knew him, either. This seems to me a small but important detail, so I ask, "Did he ever join us for the communal cooking?"

Mr. Sasaki, the man who has asked me for help, is a good-natured "outdoor sleeper," a natty dresser with a small, pink, heart-shaped face and a tight, high ass. As a matter of principle we don't call people like him *homeless*: that term has become so loaded with symbols, signs, and images within our social and cultural context that it has become meaningless. So we simply call them *outdoor sleepers*. Mr. Sasaki is sixty years old but is as full of energy as a naughty teenage boy. In blue shorts and a tank top, he looks like an ordinary jogger who just stopped by. He is also wearing an orange cap pulled down over his eyes.

He starts to yell.

"Awright, awright, awright!"

"What is all right?" I ask.

"I'll take care of John. The dog. Even though I'm just getting by myself. Even though I can't possibly take good care of him. 'Cause John was my good friend's dog. A real pal, you know. He died there in the hospital. If I let you people look after him, you'll ditch him in a shelter or something, right?"

Both of us are silent for a while. The May wind lifts the sand, so I close my eyes. I hear the grains crackle on the smooth surface of my down vest.

When Mr. Sasaki starts to yell, "Awright, awright..." again, I cut him short. "We'll discuss it at the meeting," I say. "I guess someone can take care of him. After all, my name is Yōko and the dog's is John. Ha-ha."

Mr. Sasaki nods. "Okay, then, can you come pick him up on Saturday morning? Thanks."

The organizers' meeting is a noisy affair. A revolutionary suggestion is made to add a twist to the name of our annual May Day for Outdoor Sleepers.

"What kind of twist?" someone asks.

"May Day for Outdoor Sleepers and the Unemployed. It makes a lot of sense these days."

Objection, objection! Voices rise.

"Our movement is about supporting the outdoor sleepers. When did we get involved in the movement for the unemployed?"

Our group consists of middle-aged individuals who are very fit both in mind and body. Engaged in social movements since our twenties, we have grown old together, fighting the good fight and helping each other out through a number of crackdowns. We are an inimitable and invincible team, with well-balanced gender distribution (unlike so many organizations where the great majority of members are men). Meetings always run until eleven at night.

"Outdoor sleepers started out being unemployed, didn't they?"

The activist who has been repeatedly sticking her hand in the air in objection looks at the speaker as though she pities him for his ignorance. "Of course, you can use words however you like."

"How about 'the proletariat'? Or 'the have-nots' or something like that?" someone calls out.

"No, no. It should be 'the unemployed,' " the guy who made the proposal responds. "Dozens of our people were laid off this spring. Don't you guys know that much? Ha, this is a real graveyard of activists. Not one of you sees the world with their own eyes or thinks using their own heads. No fresh brains here. We should go with the times. We should try. At least."

Ha, ha, ha! The female activist starts laughing out loud, lowering her naysayer's hand to pound on the table with both palms.

"Oh yes, sure, activists also started out unemployed, right?"

The proposer flushes. He lost his university job this spring. Yet thanks to his penetrating intellect he has glimpsed the future. At this point in time, the last light of capitalist society is shining on us as tenderly and sweetly as fireworks at the end of summer. It would be that fall that the blood-sucking capitalist bastards would start collapsing one after the other to writhe about in agony.

"Hey, stop fighting! We're just wasting our time."

"Actually, I lost my job, too," a quiet voice says somewhere.

"Oh no. Really? What are you going to do now?"

Aaaaahh. The brave woman, who has been signaling her opposition in a one-woman stand, groans. I can feel her wordless objections fly beyond our small meeting room out into the world at large.

Aaaahh, I want to quit my job, too!

"Wait, we digress," says the facilitator.

"Er, about the dog," I speak up. It is the only thing I utter at this meeting.

"Oh yes, the dog. Who in this room can take care of a dog? Impossible. It's none of our business, either. You can use the office car on Saturday. Take it to the shelter. Everyone agrees, right?"

My thoughts run as follows: most activists are just getting by themselves, so a dog is too much for them to take on. They are struggling to live in this big city with its dire housing conditions. Therefore, they cannot afford to keep a dog. What about the outdoor sleepers who live in riverside huts or in parks? They are barely surviving this harsh economic climate. When the price of aluminum cans plunges one hundred yen a kilo, how can they afford to feed a dog? Consequently, hut-dwelling outdoor sleepers cannot look after the dog, either.

I must admit that, ultimately, this is not such an important issue for our outdoor-sleepers support movement. Why? Because neither we organizers of the Global Justice Movement nor the participants in the communal cooking knew either the late Mr. Kaneki or his dog. If we had known them, it would be a whole different story. We would feel somewhat responsible for the late Mr. Kaneki's dog. It's a matter of trust, et cetera.

An outdoor sleeper is presently sacked out in my shabby apartment in the Negishi area. He is slightly younger than I. Even now, as he moves from middle to old age, his shoulders and arms are muscular, a body built by hard day labor. His words are few, his manner polite. He has neatly cropped hair and all his teeth: when he smiles, the several that protrude peek out, making him look cute. In an otherwise grim and serious face, these teeth hint at his friendly side. Facing him, you feel that you are looking at a

compact and efficient machine. As we lie side by side (lying next to me, he looks like a baby sleeping beside an enormous coffin, since I am such a big woman), I can feel the rhythm and power emanate from him like a wave of heat from a hidden engine. He lives among tall summer grasses by a river, in a hut that he built, which is as compact and sturdy as he.

"Isn't it too hot? Shall I open the window?" he asks, ever solicitous.

My reply is brief. My voice sounds tired; I am overcome by an inexplicable fatigue. Stomachache. Headache. As alcoholics eventually lose the ability to taste alcohol, I have become so numbed by this situation I can no longer tell if it's hot or cold. I'm completely submerged, paralyzed. I wouldn't know if my toes caught fire. I woke up one morning to the knowledge that my energy was spent, that I could no longer hold myself together, a change so dramatic it surprises me every time it hits me. When it happens, all I can do is accept the days of tedium that lie ahead. I do nothing from morning till night, just lie there feeling the sun travel down from my scalp, eventually watching it sink beyond my toes. These days continue with no end in sight. Yet is it really so important to know the day of the week, or the month for that matter? Who cares? All I want is to see, with my own eyes, the coming of the revolution that will put an end to this abject, inhuman capitalist society.

"Say, Mori, has the revolution arrived yet?" It takes all my strength to utter these pleading words.

"What, have you had a dream?"

He lies there stretched out on his back with his rough hands on his stomach. The interlocked fingers look like a knot sealing his youthful energy and vigor within his recumbent body.

"You know what I'm doin' now?"

"No."

His voice is very calm. "I'm givin' birth to a baby."

I sit up and look at him. His face is turned straight to the ceiling.

"What did you just say?"

"Just jokin'."

My head falls back onto the pillow.

He's making a stab at humor to lighten my mood. I know that, and it touches me. But at the same time, I also know what he can't—that a sudden uplift in mood will inevitably bring about a rapid downturn. I'm no exception to this rule, and so I slide down into a deeper depression.

Through a gap in the curtains, the first golden sunlight streams in, scattering bright patches around the dark room. As the light shifts second by second, it throws glittering fragments on the dark CRT television screen, the pile of books, the closet. Soon the light floods the room as if this were a summer afternoon. And then it gets dark like an ebbing tide. The light has slipped away, heading toward its next destination. The room becomes tinged with blue as it loses heat.

He seems determined to cheer me up. He opens his mouth, looks up, and tries hard to recall something.

"Hey, have I told you about the time I was mistaken for a bike thief? I haven't? Nah, it's not much of a story, but anyway. I'm on my bike one night, when this cop stops me. 'Come along to the police station,' he says. Pretty crappy, huh? Happens all the time, though.

"So when we get to the station he makes a call. He gives my name to the guy at the other end of the line and asks him for my criminal record. It's a quiet night, so I can hear everythin', even the cop at the other end. That cop says, 'Well, wait a minute. You want his whole sheet, right? It's not that simple. I'll get back to you in a minute.' It was weird. The cop with me was puzzled, too. But what can you do? He says 'All right,' and hangs up. And we wait for I don't know how long. Then the fax machine beeps in the back room. When we hurry in to see, the machine's green light's blinkin' and the paper's comin' out. The paper keeps rollin' out. A long, long sheet of paper. It goes on and on until it eventually drops off the fax table. But still it doesn't stop. We both think the machine is busted. I say, 'Must be broken, Officer.' But it isn't. The cop is really impressed. 'Wow,' he says, 'you've got some kind of record!' "

"I remember now!" I cry suddenly.

"What?" he asks gently, not offended at all.

"Mr. Kaneki. I met him, I remember now. He was a little guy."

"Oh, Mr. Kaneki, the owner of John the dog, huh. Tell me 'bout him," he says.

This is what I remember. One day, when I was being tough on some student volunteers there to help with the communal cooking, someone tugged at my sleeve to draw my attention. I turned and saw an outdoor sleeper so small I could easily have tucked him under my arm. And that was Mr. Kaneki. He was bundled in a down jacket that reached his knees, with a knitted hat, and thick glasses perched on a crooked beak of a nose. He looked up at me accusingly with his small, watery eyes and muttered, 'Missus. Missus, why d'you speak so mean?' "

Mori frowns.

"I don't understand. Why was Mr. Kaneki cryin'?"

"Because he'd had a shot already," I say with conviction. "Now listen. Let me explain."

First of all. In an attempt to gain popularity, our group, known to be on the radical left, had invited a number of student volunteers from a nearby women's university to join us. To make a long story short, the idea was a failure. The volunteers were nice girls but rather plain. You know, the type that spend a month of their summer break digging wells in developing countries. Anyway, these angels tried hard to please the outdoor sleepers—they wanted to soothe the troubled souls of men exiled to the bottom of the social ladder. The men (of course) took advantage of this. They squeezed the girls' white, soft hands, or massaged their delicate shoulders. "Your neck's stiff," they coaxed. "Let me fix it for you." They were much more cunning than the naive girls. They preached to Mai, Yuka, Haruna, and all the other babes in the woods, imparting the invaluable lessons their hard and painful lives had taught them. According to some calculations, each man was supplied with three new girls every half an hour in this manner. One male activist complained that we were running a hostess club.

Second. Twenty-two years ago, in winter, we lost a fellow activist, shot dead on a freezing street in the middle of the night. One of his sayings was, "The poor line up." He knew all about the long lines poor people stand in to get work or food. Taking his words to heart, we reconsidered the traditional soup kitchen, where outdoor sleepers lined up to receive meals, and decided to try communal cooking instead. Hoping to inculcate the spirit of rebellion and resistance in those forced to sleep outdoors, we came up with the slogan "Your Food with Your Own Hands." We occupied the park by the river every Sunday afternoon, bringing in our own pots and pans, vegetables and tables.

Third. Despite our efforts, the horizontal communal cooking model—free of discrimination, prejudice, exclusion, dominance, and hierarchy—was crumbling. That was because the cooperative spirit withers where the ground is contaminated by male chauvinism. It was so obvious, yet many activists were blind to the problem, since male chauvinism is not as visible as government pressure (the eviction of the outdoor sleepers, subsidies with strings attached, laws to ban the use of the park, et cetera), the conflict with local residents (their petition to stop the communal cooking in the park), and so on. Not me. The sharp, gloomy sensibility I had picked up during my lonely adolescence made me able to see the truth behind it all.

So I slipped quietly in from the rear and circled round to stand, arms crossed, in front of the female students and the male outdoor sleepers who were sitting and chatting happily in a corner of the park. They gaped at me. I looked long and hard at

the faces of the men and the women, one by one, then spat on the ground. A gesture more eloquent than a thousand words.

The truth was I was tongue-tied by shyness. But my shoulders were broad as a bull's, my body thick as a tire, my height greater than anybody else's. I stood erect, the mysterious deep wrinkles on my face testimony to my years of suffering. Seeing me spit, all the men started acting like crazy (and therefore innocent) old fogies who bore no responsibility for the situation. The girls were scared. When the setting sun cast my huge shadow over them they looked like they were going to faint.

These unexpected responses embarrassed me. In the face of the oceanic silence that divided me from the young students, I felt, as a typically timid but eager-to-please middle-aged woman, that I needed to say something. So in my low throaty voice, I rasped: "Don't push your luck, girls. This is no playground."

"Hey, hey, Yōko." Mori sits up. "That's too harsh. Poor students."

"That's what he said, too. Mr. Kaneki. 'Poor students.' "

By that time, everyone had run away. Only Mr. Kaneki, who was too drunk to stand up straight, and his small dog remained. I told Mr. Kaneki that we didn't have to feel sorry for them. That since they came only once a month for two hours or so, it was easy for them to fawn over the men, like bar hostesses.

Oh, I can still hear how my voice sounded when, after hesitating a moment, I made up my mind and said to Mr. Kaneki: "With all due respect, maybe you don't understand anything at all." (At this point, faithful John barked at me.) "Are you familiar with the principle behind our communal cooking? We have to maintain the community's radical autonomy here. Because, you see, we are trying to change the world."

Anyway, the dog doesn't end up in the shelter. I decide to look after John myself, even change my lifestyle for him. I repair the dead outdoor sleeper's hut by the river and move in. My boyfriend visits me at least four nights per week. Lo and behold, I am reborn as an optimistic, tough, and cheerful middle-aged woman. I've finally overcome my depression of twenty years.

The supporters of the outdoor sleepers hold a long meeting that lasts over five hours and features a lively exchange of opinions. I am part of their agenda. I hear that they have held a heated debate over whether I should still be considered a supporter or have become an outdoor sleeper, whether a supporter can enter into an intimate relationship with an outdoor sleeper, what its influence on the movement would be, et cetera.

Around the same time, I am involved in a camp set up to protest the international summit taking place in Hokkaido that summer. I take John with me. He barks at the riot police as the demonstrators march toward the summit compound, a scene recorded by a Chinese media activist in tight jeans and sneakers. So now John is playing his small part, attesting to the increasing enthusiasm for the Global Justice Movement in this Far Eastern country. His bark spans the globe, through the laptop computers in nursery rooms, in basements, on the streets, on vacant lots, on the whitewashed walls of squatters' buildings, and last but not least, in the souls of those nameless youths so determined to survive this rotten world.

translated by Ted Goossen

THE FORBIDDEN DIARY (PART 2)

SACHIKO KISHIMOTO

JUNE–JULY

THE ARAKAWA ALPACA GARDENS

JUNE 3

Around 9:00 p.m., there was a fearful rumble, as if the earth were shaking. When I stepped outside to find out what was going on, I saw my neighbors all racing from their homes and heading toward the river, where a crowd had already gathered on the bridge. Everyone was staring up at the western sky. A booming was coming from that direction, accompanied by whistling noises, but nothing was visible. It was the black fireworks.

Their very invisibility made the sound seem louder, as if it were resonating in my chest. When I strained my eyes I could see the stars in that part of the sky flickering on and off. Moments after each explosion, the reeds on the riverbank would rustle. A faint fragrance of flowers hung in the air.

When the booming stopped, the crowd all headed back to their homes. Voices could be heard exclaiming that this year's fireworks had been the most magnificent of all.

JUNE 5

Watched *Tetsuko's Room* on TV. Tetsuko's guest was a female pop star. "There's a rumor," the young woman said, "that you've got food stashed away in your hair in case of emergencies. Is that really true?"

"You're very well informed," Tetsuko laughed, plunging her hand into her bouffant hairdo and pulling out a small steamed bun, which she handed to her guest. I was so surprised I immediately began calling all my friends to find out if they had seen what I had, but they were all

* Readers: We started this in the first issue. But you can pick it up anywhere. Read on!

** The italicized passage is inspired by Stacey Levine's collection *My Horse and Other Stories*.

either busy or away, so in the end I had no one with whom to share my amazement.

Got a bit of translating done. The cicadas that plagued me all winter have suddenly stopped their shrilling.

JUNE 9

A drizzly day. The futons I was airing out got soaked.

An invisible something is lurking in my house. For the first few days, I tried to convince myself it was just my imagination, but now I'm sure it really exists. It can turn up at almost any time, when I'm sitting at my desk, for example, or eating my meals, or washing my face. When I sense it near and swivel around in my chair, for an instant I can see a jellylike blob of air quivering in the corner of the room. It fades away as I watch, but its presence lingers for a while.

The blob appears to be following me around. It hovers in my study when I'm working, in the bathroom when I'm washing my face, in the bedroom when I'm sleeping, even in the toilet. Since it doesn't seem especially malevolent, though, I have decided to let it be.

I thought I was translating, but before I knew it I was fast asleep in my Gendō Ikari pose, elbows on the desk and hands clasped in front of my nose.

JUNE 13

The designer M-yama, who has a tendency to phone me up out of the blue, called to invite me to go with her to the Machida Squirrel Park. When I asked her what that was she replied that she didn't know the details, but she'd heard about a park in Machida that is absolutely teeming with squirrels. She went on to tell me of her recent trip to the Arakawa Alpaca Gardens, and how blown away she was by the many alpacas there. Take a look—I sent you the photo by e-mail, she said and hung up. I pulled out my computer and checked, but no such e-mail had arrived. What a scatterbrain. A photo of the Arakawa Alpaca Gardens? Fat chance.

Dozed off while working on my translation (still no headway) and had the strangest dream. I was on my way to visit the professor who had helped me in college, and I wanted to take some gifts so I stopped by the supermarket and bought a few things. Sardines, squash, bok choy, bananas, and so forth. Exiting the market, I was in the middle of the crosswalk when my shopping bag suddenly began to move. Looking down, I saw that the sardines, bok choy, and the rest had turned into a white mass, all fluffy and wriggling. As I stood there in shock, the weird substance left the bag, slithered up my body, circled my neck, and slipped down through my collar and under my clothes. It

itched like crazy. The other people crossing the street were all writhing like me from the same white stuff. The traffic light should have turned green long ago, but none of the cars moved. Instead, they transformed into massive white blobs that began creeping along the sidewalks and up the telephone poles and the sides of buildings.

I realized later that Machida Squirrel Park had somehow found its way into my dreams.

JUNE 18

Rain followed by rain followed by still more rain. The morning glory vines are growing longer by the day.

Thinking back on the night of the fireworks, it suddenly hit me—I hadn't been bitten by a single mosquito. While others were slapping at their arms and legs and gouging their swollen skin, I was completely untouched. It has always been that way. Perhaps I emit some unpleasant odor. Or maybe my blood tastes bad.

—That's because you're a mosquito yourself.

Huh?

—I said you are something of a mosquito. Members of the same family don't suck each other's blood.

I see what you mean. That explains a lot.

—Got it?

Got it.

JUNE 20

I try reading aloud what I have translated, to see how it sounds. The moment I start reading the part about the little brother growing from the narrator's hip, I can feel the jellylike blob of air in the corner of the room begin to quiver violently. Is it afraid or happy? I can't tell.

JUNE 21

More translation.

I want to become fat, as plump and round as a butterball. Perfectly, bulbously obese. And so I devise a plan. I find a job, use the money to build beautiful floor-to-ceiling shelves in my room, and pack those shelves with cakes of all description. Round cakes, rectangular cakes, white, yellow, and brown cakes, all in boxes. Now my preparations are complete. The rest is simple. I just have to consume that wall of cake. I long to admire my beautiful round body in the mirror. But when I'm all set to dig in, I notice something

outside my window. A huge dog and cat are standing shoulder to shoulder in front of my house, staring in my direction. Their heads are enormous and round. They throw me off—I can't start eating. So I leave for work, but when I come home they are still there, staring at me through the window. I can't wait to begin devouring all that cake, to eat for days on end. I want to admire my beautiful round body forever, but it's awfully hard to get started with someone staring at me. Shall I go out there and give them a piece of my mind? They're simply too big to be ignored. In any case, I had better move quickly or the cakes will get stale or even rot. But I have screwed up the timing. I should have launched the attack the moment I saw them—now it is too late. Time passes and I grow used to the situation. I spend more time imagining my beautiful fat self and less time thinking about how to beat them up. I stand in the middle of my room and study the wall of cake. None of the boxes has been opened, but the cakes should be okay, neither stale nor rotten. I look out the window. The enormous dog and cat are snuggling against each other, their eyes still fixed in my direction. I shed my work clothes in disgust and slide under the covers. I feel like crap.

JUNE 25

The name Heihachirō Ōshio is scribbled in my datebook for today. But I have no recollection of when I wrote it and no idea what to do. Thinking of his name (*shio* means salt) I pop a salted caramel in my mouth. In case it's his birthday, just to be safe, I sing "Happy Birthday, Dear Heihachirō" in my mind as I suck on the caramel.

JUNE 30

Late at night, a violent rain—fifty millimeters fall in one hour. Pure ecstasy for rain lovers like me. At times like this I like to open the windows, close my eyes, and listen to the roar. This can be a hallucinatory experience if you do it right. I call it the poor man's LSD.

JULY 3

After the rain. Morning glories beginning to bloom. I tidy up my magazines.

When I see three Chinese characters in a row I tend to assume it's someone's name, but this time, looking at the characters again a while later, I realized they mean "urinary incontinence."

The jellylike blob of air is shaking in the corner. Could it be laughing?

JULY 7

Cloudy skies. The smell of the sea. Strange, the ocean is far from here. So where the heck is the smell coming from?

I spend the whole day in fear that H. will call about the translation, but my premonition proves incorrect—he doesn't call, nor does anybody else. In fact, I've received no calls, no faxes, and no letters for some time. No one bothers to reply to my e-mails either.

I wake in the middle of the night to find myself back in that six-mat room.

It's pitch-dark—I can't see anything. There's just the odor of dusty curtains and the feel of moldy old tatami mats. I summon the courage to sit up. I can sense someone squatting in the corner. No, not just sense, I can hear their faint breathing. It's clearly a child.

The moment I move in that direction, I hear footsteps pounding up the metal stairway outside. Now they have reached the corridor and are heading in this direction. To this room? To another? As I stand there in the dark holding my breath and listening to the beating of my heart, I begin to lose consciousness.

JULY 8

Rain since morning. Translation going nowhere.

Somehow, the outline of the jellylike blob is a little bit sharper now. And there is definitely something squatting in the corner. A child?

JULY 9

Weak sunlight. In the afternoon, I case out the building that may or may not be the Cancel-Out Apartments. It seems to be a lot more run-down than the last time I was here, which wasn't all that long ago, with scattered puddles and tall grass all over the grounds. After making sure that no one is around, I steal around to the side of the building to check the mailboxes. The piece of paper reading "Nagai" is no longer stuck on the box in the middle of the top row, while the "Nagai" or "Nakai" that had been penned on the metal at the far left of the bottom row is now so rusted it's totally illegible. Does this mean the two occupants canceled each other out? I see some sheets of paper in the boxes but they are probably just flyers of some kind.

I go back to the front of the building and look up at the second floor. Recalling the footsteps pounding up the metal steps that I heard in my head the other day, I imagine climbing the outside staircase up to the top and then count one step, two steps, three

steps. Would it be the second door? Or the one in the middle?

I suddenly feel ridiculous, and take off.

JULY 15

A phone call from M-yama the designer. She's on crutches now, she says. When I ask why, she tells me that she was riding her bike near her house when the idea struck her: What a blast it would be to pedal with my eyes closed, so she tried and discovered it really was great fun, whereupon she flew down the street at breakneck speed, laughing all the way, until she slammed into the back of a parked car, cracking her knee so badly that now her leg was swollen to the size of a half gallon bottle of sake. Once a scatterbrain always a scatterbrain, I guess. When shall we go to Machida Squirrel Park? she asked. Are you sure you're in shape to go? I asked back. Sure, no sweat, she answered, though that seemed doubtful. Hey, what about the photographs of the Arakawa Alpaca Gardens you were going to e-mail me? I asked. What are you talking about? Of course you got them, she replied. You even wrote back to tell me how excited you were about going! I hung up feeling totally bewildered.

JULY 18

Got an invitation for a class reunion for P. Academy, the school I attended for six years from junior high through high school. Since no one in our class possessed the slightest bit of school spirit, this would be our first get-together in about twenty years. I didn't recognize the organizer's name. Maybe she had gotten married. I had been thinking quite a lot about my school days, so I was happy to be invited. Would anyone else remember the graffiti on the door of the secret toilet above the auditorium? Would O., the girl who kept hearing that strange voice, show up?

Checked "Will Attend" on the invitation and stuck it in the mail.

JULY 20

Humankind's greatest calamity, that once-every-four-years curse, has rolled around again. When I think that we will have to suffer anew through weeks of gold, silver, bronze, winners, losers, winners, losers, from morning till night, I want to die. No, kill is more like it. I begged the gods and Buddhas to get rid of it this time around, but they ignored my prayers.

—Okay, abolishing it would be preferable, but since that's not going to happen, let's think of the next best thing, reducing its appeal.

But how?

—Holding it every year. Or, if you like, every week.

That would certainly take the glow off. But I would just be digging my own grave.

—Fair enough. So then how about following the lead of the Paralympics and creating new categories. Like the Butt-Naked Olympics. Or the Transvestite Olympics, where all male competitors would dress like women.

Transvestite Olympics, huh? Hubba-hubba! Then why not have a Doping Olympics, where athletes could take all the performance-enhancing drugs they wanted. Records would fall one after another. Imagine a seven-second one-hundred-meter dash! Competitors would be disqualified if tests showed their drug levels had fallen below the required standard.

—The ultimate? The Nihilist Olympics. No competition. No winners and losers. No athletes. No ribboned medals. Viewership of 0 percent. Events twenty-four hours a day.

Great idea. Hm-hm.

—Yeah, it'd work. Tee-hee.

JULY 25

The height of summer, ninety degrees and humid. Sweat pours down my body—the smell of summer vacation back when I was in elementary school.

Summer vacation—these days, no sooner do I hear those words than up pops Yōsui Inoue, the old folkie from the seventies, singing, "Su-mmm-er vacaaa-tion, winter vacation," in his silken tones. Then he takes off.

I might have blocked his path, but he ended his song so abruptly, and ran so much faster than I had expected.

JULY 31

Here I am again—I must have dropped off to sleep. It could be day or night, but the room is dark as always.

When I hold my breath and concentrate, I can tell something is nearby. A child's smell, a child's breathing. The child wants me to call it by name—I can tell.

But I don't know its name.

—Yes, you do.

Huh?

In that brief instant I realize that, yes, I do know.

AUGUST
TAKASHI

AUGUST 1

At dawn, I dream of standing before a shop selling roasted chestnuts. Among the countless chestnuts swirling in the roasting pan is one ancient chestnut who has managed to avoid the scoop for hundreds of years—when he is taken, the world will come to an end, a fact of which only I am aware. I try to tell this to the man doing the roasting but my voice fails and I end up standing there for what seems like forever, sputtering, until he scowls and snaps, "Well, are you going to buy some or not?"

AUGUST 3

Get up at seven, hang the laundry out to dry, prepare the box lunch (leftover fried chicken, boiled broccoli and carrots, cherry tomatoes for color, an apple with the skin cut and raised to look like rabbit ears, and steamed rice with a layer of seaweed in the middle and egg seasoning sprinkled on top). I wake Takashi at seven-thirty, get him dressed, fix breakfast (toast, scrambled eggs, apple, milk), convince him that he's not too sleepy to eat while humoring his complaints, manage to make him eat half his breakfast. Steer my standard-issue "mommy-bike" with the basket in front and the child's seat in back to the kindergarten, thank my lucky stars it's so near my apartment. Return home, do a quick cleaning, work on my translation. Pickup time arrives before I know it, so back on the bike. Return home, make him wash his hands, give him a snack (wheat-germ biscuit and milk), hear about his day at kindergarten (their dance practice for School Day, how he and Rumika were playing in the sandbox when Ryūta came and kicked sand all over and got some in his eye but he didn't cry, his drawing of a rocket that was praised by Ōmachi-sensei, and so on and so forth). Get him to demonstrate the dance they practiced and play a game pretending to be Go-Ongers until dinnertime, rush to the supermarket, come back, make dinner, watch a little TV, put him in the bath then to bed, tidy up, and then, finally, take a break. It is already eleven, and though I want to go back to work, exhaustion overwhelms me and I collapse on the bed beside him. Yet when I look at his sleeping face my fatigue vanishes like dust in the wind.

AUGUST 5

Get up at seven, it's raining out so I hang the laundry in the bath to dry, prepare the box lunch (frozen dumplings—convenient since they don't need to be microwaved, spinach

with ground sesame seeds, boiled egg, cherry tomatoes, rice identical to yesterday's with a sprinkling of grilled cod roe—decide to buy the kind of seaweed that I can stick on a rice ball to make it look like a soccer ball). Wake him up, dress him, and feed him breakfast (no time today so it's just a banana and some milk). It's still raining so we walk instead of bike to the kindergarten, he's in great spirits since he can wear his new Sergeant Keroro boots. Return home, work on my translation, am puzzling over a difficult line when, oh my gosh, it's time to pick him up, though my body feels like only thirty minutes have passed. The rain has stopped so I bike it, bring him home, make him wash his hands, and feed him a snack (a wheat-germ biscuit and Milo). He starts whining the minute we get home. I try to divert him with *Toy Story* so I can get back to work but he clings to my legs and won't let go. Funny, that DVD usually keeps him quiet. Before I know it, I'm screaming at him, so I say, "Mommy's sorry, Mommy's sorry," and give him a big hug. To make amends I cook hamburger, his favorite, for dinner. And cut the carrots for the soup into star shapes. I join him in the bath, then we go to bed together and I read him *Winnie the Pooh* until both of us are fast asleep.

AUGUST 7

Get up at seven, feel very sleepy but manage to make his box lunch (leftover hamburger from last night, frozen french fries, frozen broccoli, cherry tomatoes, ground and salted sesame seeds sprinkled on the rice, a small red pickled plum in the center). Wake him up, get him dressed, fix his breakfast (cornflakes and milk), bike to the kindergarten. He gripes that he wants to wear his boots again today, so I let him. Race home, put the futons out to air, set to work. The novel I'm translating is a big best seller spanning five continents and six generations of women, an epic romance of love, war, death and rebirth, a brother sprouting from his sister's bum, and a liver-colored horse with baggy skin. Word is that Dreamworks is going to turn it into a movie next year. In the afternoon, bike to pick Takashi up, come home, make him change his clothes, give him a snack (strawberry yogurt), he somehow seems down in the dumps so I ask him why and find out everybody made fun of his boots. I feel sorry for him but can't help finding it funny. We shop for dinner, I fix it, we eat it, bath time. Realize I forgot to bring in the futons, dumb cluck, but luckily they aren't wet. I have a bit of free time this evening so I organize Takashi's photos on my computer. Takashi at the Shichi-Go-San children's festival, on his first day of kindergarten, at Disneyland, and he's just so cute in every one I could die. In fact, it would be criminal not to share them, so I send them on to my old coworker F-san as an e-mail attachment. Well, actually she and I only talked once or

twice, since we worked in different departments on different floors, but I can't think of anyone else to whom I haven't circulated these photos, and I feel certain that they will soothe her soul, so I go to bed feeling happy that I've done something good for the world.

AUGUST 8

Get up at seven-thirty, it's a half day at kindergarten so no box lunch. I have an even harder time than usual waking him up, he's really cross, so when he starts whining that he doesn't want to go to school I whack him without thinking. I regret it instantly, saying, "Mommy's sorry, Mommy's sorry," and give him a big hug. He doesn't cry, just stiffens up like an unfriendly cat. Bike to school, come back, do some laundry, then kind of space out until I realize it's already time to pick him up. Back home again, Takashi makes a real racket (maybe he wanted to play more at kindergarten), jumping up and down on the sofa then leaping with a crash onto the floor while shouting the Go-Onger song at the top of his lungs. It's too noisy to work—I can feel my anger mounting. At times like this, I wish I'd had a little girl instead.

AUGUST 10

Get up at seven, toss the wet laundry into the garbage chute, make a box lunch (frozen gyoza dumplings, Chinese preserved egg, Korean kimchi, cherry tomatoes, sake lees, rice with a layer of seaweed and topped with finely chopped coriander). Wake him, dress him, feed him, bike him to kindergarten...

AUGUST 13

To exterminate the nasty slugs that have been eating the morning glories on the veranda I place a yogurt container with about an inch of beer in it next to the pot and, sure enough, when I go back later to take a look there are three or four twisting slowly in the brew. It heartens me to think they are writhing in pain ("serves you right!" I chuckle), but then it dawns on me that they may actually be dancing a happy drunken dance, and my mood is ruined.

AUGUST 16

Get up at nine, eat breakfast, spend the whole day translating, my lack of progress is frustrating but I am grateful to little Takako, who plays quietly with her dolls or reads. We eat dinner and bathe together, then I prepare her box lunch (a bag of peanuts and crackers, fermented squid, pickled cabbage, a cream roll), bike to the kindergarten at

10:00 p.m. This is our district "midnight kindergarten," run by an insomniac principal. Their school song goes like this:

Good children know the beauty of the night,
The smell of the air, the feel of the wind,
The sound of mushrooms releasing their spores.
Good evening teacher, good evening classmates,
We raise our joyous voices to the night.

AUGUST 17

Cloudy. The sky is yellow on the horizon.

Passed the school grounds for the first time in a while and noticed that the clump of bleached-out hair sprouting from the wall had been neatly trimmed to the length of two inches. Summer's really here.

AUGUST 18

I find Takako has grown, six years old already, so I give her a knapsack and pack her off to school. She comes home by herself in the evening without any problem and shows me her test in arithmetic—55 percent. Seems she's no great shakes as a student.

AUGUST 20

Swan Lake was on TV. After a few minutes, it struck me that something was terribly wrong with the dancers; the more I looked the more I saw that their costumes, the way they twirled about on one leg, their grave expressions, were all totally screwy, which set me laughing so hard that I ended up thrashing about on the floor.

AUGUST 23

Went with M-yama to the Arakawa Alpaca Gardens. We got off the Arakawa Metropolitan streetcar line one stop before the terminus at Alpaca Station, passed through a long shopping arcade that had seen much better days, and there we were. The entrance fee was twenty yen for adults, five yen for children. It was just a big unfenced field, with no living creatures to be seen anywhere. M. went to the concession stand and came back with a bag of what looked like deer food and two rental headdresses, one in the shape of a camel, the other a chicken. Once we had donned these—M. took the camel, I the chicken—what had seemed like clumps of dried grass in the field stood up and

moved in our direction until, before we knew it, we were surrounded by about thirty animals. Alpacas, it seems, are extremely wary, so they hide themselves by blending in with their surroundings when people are around. They were very cute, with their thick, furry wool and long necks, nuzzling us to beg for food. We didn't want them to guess we were humans, though, so every so often we mimicked the calls of the animals we were pretending to be: I clucked like a chicken while M., who had no idea what a camel sounded like, rasped "Ca-mel? Ca-mel?" with a couple of "Humps" woven in.

There was also an alpaca ride to allow visitors to "physically experience" the animals. No sooner had we mounted our rides than they trotted off as the fancy took them, M.'s heading in one direction, mine the opposite way. They were a lot quicker than they looked, and before long M. was out of sight. My alpaca never seemed to hurry, but his steady pace took us through the field, across a green ravine, through the midst of a raging blizzard, and past a landscape that resembled the surface of the moon, so that by the time we got back the sun had already set. M. had returned before me, but she looked totally out of it and was unable to tell me anything about where she had been taken. Whatever you say, though, it was a bargain at twenty yen.

AUGUST 25

Takako has entered junior high. Now she's a real pain. "Buy me a cell phone, Mom," she wheedles. "C'mon, buy me one," and keeps it up all day long. She started painting her nails at some point, and now is dipping into my lip gloss. "Look at this little sexpot," I needle her in the voice of an old woman with mustard plasters on her temple. "Just out of diapers and already out to catch a man. May the gods protect us!" "Go to hell!" she shouts back and flies off in a huff to heaven knows where.

AUGUST 27

Poured all day. So heavy I could hear the raindrops rubbing against each other.

From morning on there was this huge "thing"—I don't know whether to call it Takashi or Takako—with a face about six feet square that gradually spread across the ceiling and stared down at me as I worked. It made me nervous. The thing changed from Takako to Takashi, from child to adult, sprouted four arms and four legs like an Asura statue, all the while giving me these beseeching looks. I tried to ignore it, but that just caused it to swell up until, finally, it filled the room and squashed me against the wall.

AUGUST 28

Blue skies. The cicadas are going crazy.

I take a rare stroll through the neighborhood, ending up in front of the two-story wooden building I suspect to be the Cancel-Out Apartments. On a day like today, when everything burns white in the heat and the glare coming off the gravel makes your eyes smart, the place looks like a virtual ruin. There are still umbrellas hanging from the railings of the outside stairs and tricycles and sandbox sets sitting in front of the doors, but everything is dusted with rustlike particles, a coating so evenly distributed it seems to have fallen from the sky. I walk to the side of the building to check the mailboxes. The rust has progressed since the last time I looked. Still, I am relieved to see that five of the ten boxes have names attached, which means it is still a functioning apartment building. Yet why such relief? I walk back to take a closer look at the front.

—Hey, look at that.

It's a tricycle.

—There's a name written on it.

Takashi.

—That's right.

That's right.

—Really? That's okay?

Sure, I'll just put him back where I found him. I didn't give birth to him, after all. I just called his name. That's where my responsibility ends.

—Are you sure?

Get lost.

AUGUST 29

What I learned today: "destroying angel" translates as "death-cap mushroom" in Japanese.

AUGUST 30

Blue skies. Cicadas. Thunderclouds.

Get up at seven. Make box lunches for two (salted salmon, potato salad, small sausages cut up to look like octopi, cherry tomatoes, soccer-ball rice balls, a water bottle filled with tea). Takashi has been excited since I told him we're going on a picnic. I let him put on his Keroro boots and we walk down the street hand in hand singing the Pokémon song. When we reach the apartment building, we climb the outside stairs and I quietly open the door of the middle apartment—empty, as I suspected. "Where are we,

Mommy? Is this where we're going to eat lunch? Who lives here, anyway?" "Yes, dear," I reply. "This is where we're going to have our picnic. Mommy forgot something, though, so you wait here until she comes back, okay? Be a good boy." Leaving him with those instructions, I walk out the door and return home.

AUGUST 31

Glorious blue skies. Exhilarated, I hang out the futons to air.

I go for a haircut, the first in a while. It was down to my ankles, so it feels great to have it all chopped off. The assistant who used to stand beside me and spread funny gossip about the entertainment world isn't there today. They tell me he's quit and gone back to his home in the country. Feeling somewhat disappointed, I glance down at the floor and notice with a start that mixed among the masses of black, brown, and yellow hair are matted clumps of bleached-out bristles that appear to have come from some kind of beast, not a human being. Alarmed, I lean down to take a closer look, when a mop appears and, whoosh, all the hair is whisked away down a black hole.

translated by M. Cody Poulton

BLACK SPACE, THE SOUND OF RAIN COMES IN A BOX

And as they went up the hill to the city, they found young maidens going out to draw water, and said unto them, Is the seer here? And they answered them, and said, He is; behold, he is before you: make haste now, for he came today to the city [...]. As soon as ye be come into the city, ye shall straightway find him.

I Samuel 9:11–13

A drop of sweat fell from Dead Box's forehead as he finished punching the sandbag in his room at the church, leaving an ashen stain on the black plastic floor. He shut his eyes tightly as if listening to some far-off sound. Outside the lone window of his dark chamber the rain continued to fall, making a strange noise on the garden ground. It had been falling for three days and nights without respite. It fell just like sand slowly slipping through one's fingers. In the black room, as he listened with his eyes closed to the rain's dim echo, Dead Box recalled a cold, quiet rain that had fallen—when had it been? Some years before, he couldn't remember for sure, the time an abortion had taken place in some room somewhere. While the abortion was being carried out, he had been sitting in a black plastic chair, as he was now, listening intently to the rain. And the sound of the rain then had been, as he put it, like "a small shadow of dead words," a softness that could almost be touched if one reached out for it.

Eyes shut, he thinks: What I call "dead words" could have been "a wind that winds itself around a sacred branch," or "a monastery from a day long past that burns grayly in my memory."

—And "someone." And "then"...

Dead Box opened his eyes and slowly walked over to the window where countless drops of rain were running down the pane. His footsteps echoed flatly against the

hard black plastic then slipped away into the sound of the rain outside. It was as if that sound was gathering up and taking away all sounds to some unknown place. His breathing, the cries of birds, the branches swaying in the wind, the slightest sounds inside this room—all manner of sound disappeared, borne away by the sound of that endless rain outside to a place no human memory could ever reach. Even the tolling of the black church bell would doubtless be carried away in the echo of that distant rain to some unseen place where no one would hear it, lost to the ears, leaving but the slightest reverberation behind.... Hand pressed against the clouded windowpane, Dead Box gazed down at the rain falling onto the garden, still mulling over (perhaps for a minute or two) those various sounds that rose for a moment, only to be sucked away. Then he turned his eyes toward the city.

Outside the window, in the spacious garden of the black church, stood a single tree. It was an aged oak, with a chaotic mass of crooked branches almost as big as the church itself. It had been there, so far as he could tell, close to two hundred years. He could see through the leafy branches to far beyond, across the city, now bereft of people. A city bereft of people... one that no longer even had a name. And yet it was as if there still remained, albeit faintly, in those black wooden houses traces of those who had lived there not so long ago, their speech, the warmth of their skin, the weight of their bodies. Had Dead Box seen through the streaming rain a wreath of gray smoke rising from the chimney of one of those houses he wouldn't have been surprised. That the city was empty didn't seem real to him; he could swear that those black houses still sheltered souls with beating hearts and breathing lungs. Yet just as the traces of their voices, their prayers, the weight of their bodies remaining inside those black wooden houses were losing their substance and, like mist, turning into faint and murky memories, so those houses would surely give up their warmth, their pulse of life, in the end leaving behind only a devastated waste. Then, sooner or later, the shadow of death, like a silent black flame, would fall over the entire city as it lay under this constant rain. Perhaps there was a little time left, or perhaps it would occur at any moment, once Dead Box had closed his eyes. Just like the dream of a happy day would clean vanish when he opened his eyes.

Dead Box made the sign of the cross and, mumbling a prayer like a sigh, gazed once more out the window, then turned away. He took the boxing gloves he'd been wearing and laid them side by side on the black plastic desk, inlaid with silver, in the corner of the room. On the same desk was an old Victor stereo record player. Dead Box had found it some years ago in a storeroom in the church—it had no doubt belonged to someone who had once lived there. Along with the record player there had been

various LPs in the storeroom, Blind Willie McTell, for instance, and Autechre's *Confield*. Whenever Dead Box punched his sandbag, the ancient speakers filled the room with the sound of Blind Lemon Jefferson's "All I Want Is That Pure Religion," recorded sometime back in the 1920s.

Dead Box put the old record back into its jacket and took down Radiohead's *In Rainbows* from the black shelf nearby. Dead Box treasured this LP, which he had played countless times over the years. It could have been his favorite album. He took the record from its jacket and carefully held it up to the faint light that entered through the wet branches to check for any dust or scratches. Considering the record's age, there was little damage and its surface still gleamed. He lowered the needle on the song "All I Need" and slowly sank into the black armchair in front of his desk. He had barely closed his eyes when the song's first note, soft and low, reached him, like a shattered beam of light from the distant reaches of his memory, filling the black room that echoed with the gentle sound of rainfall.

The first time Dead Box had heard this record he'd lived, alone, in a very different world. For some reason he could no longer remember, one day he'd left that world far behind and, guided only by his own free will, come to this city. (This had been some ten years ago, when he was around twenty-six.) The world he'd lived in then and the one he lived in now seemed somehow a little different, not just removed in time or space, but even in the sense of the air and the sound of things, the shades of light and the dark, even the dreams one dreamed in the depth of night. In the city where he now lived things were more delicate, like the current of a brook, and richer in variety. There were moments here when all things seemed radiant, bathed in a soft glow. For instance, just after dawn, just before the matins bell rang—the silver spoon on the black tabletop, the old sun-bleached Bible, the ceramic vase, the wooden image of Christ were all illuminated for a brief moment by a beam like the glimmer of a star, as if incandescent. The faint warmth of that light left whomever gazed at it with a deep feeling of peace. In this way, this city was somehow extraordinary, more beautifully contrived than anywhere else. But by the same token, the nights were cold and so much longer. And sometimes a sad, dark, devastated night would linger for as many as two days. (In times past, when such nights were upon them, the people of the city would lock themselves indoors and by the light of candles absorb themselves in their Bible stories.) And so, as is the way of the world, the city strayed from the ordinary and somehow became more vulnerable. It seemed as if everything here had been born out of something fragile and would collapse at any moment, without making a sound. Like

a long-ago light through the window, or the way a drop of water feels as it runs down the tip of one's finger—something subtle, like that sensation on the skin, which the eye cannot see. Here *something* was in the process of being lost. Even as he sat here alone at his desk, things around Dead Box were imperceptibly being destroyed each and every second. Like the wind in a beam of sunshine, they vanished without a trace, soundlessly, into this black plastic space. He could not recall what they looked like, nor had he words to tell anyone around him what shape they took. All he could say was that the night cold that had fallen upon this town had silently stolen language from the mouths of the people. —That's the kind of world it was. Dead Box had been living here for some ten years now, but perhaps something had already been missing when he arrived. Something precious, something absolutely essential to life.

The LP came to an end, the needle skipped over silence. Dead Box turned off the stereo and reached for the plastic bottle of mineral water on his desk. He carefully examined its label, illustrated in computer graphics, which seemed to refer to some religious war like the one against the Huguenots. VARIOUS BREATHS Ltd., the company's name, was inscribed in the corner. A weird name that carried a whiff of foreboding. Dead Box had a sense he'd heard of this company before, had once known what kind of company it was, but he could no longer remember. If he tried, all he could conjure up was vague and shapeless, like white drops of water falling into impenetrable darkness. Yet his inability to remember what VARIOUS BREATHS Ltd. was probably didn't make any difference anymore. The company had no doubt long since ceased to exist.

The priest downed half the bottle in a single swig and set it back on the black table. From its silvery drawer he took out a gray diary engraved with the design of a bird. Dead Box had kept this journal, with its torn and ragged cover, for some ten years prior to coming to this church. In it he had recorded the stories of people he'd met, events of the day, simple memos to himself. He always kept it close by; wherever he went, awake or even in his dreams, it seemed never to leave his hand. For example, a year before, when he had dreamed that this black church was engulfed in two-dimensional gray flames (it burned absolutely silently, to his eyes a most beautiful sight); or when he dreamed of a chestnut horse writhing in terror and pain as it sank into the depths of a lake amid a drifting mist (in the horse's pupils were reflected in miniature someone's hands clasped in prayer)—in such dreams, too, he clutched his diary all the more tightly.

Dead Box carefully recorded the number of push-ups and sit-ups in his diary, how many times he'd punched his sandbag, scattered thoughts like: *It has rained for three days nonstop*, or *Perhaps this rain will never end*. He had never stopped writing about

this deserted city. This time, though, he quit in midsentence (something had stayed his hand) and, quoting the words of the Bible, *Let your light so shine before men*, he closed his gray diary. Then, draining the last drop of mineral water from his VARIOUS BREATHS Ltd. bottle and muttering *Thy will be done*, Dead Box slowly rose from his black armchair.

He proceeded toward the room where the young girl lay sleeping in her sickbed.

The room adjoining the one where Dead Box pummeled his punching bag—his study—was a small bedroom similarly made of black plastic, and in the middle of that room was an old bed on which lay the ill girl. She was around eight years old, exceedingly beautiful, with white skin. Dead Box opened the door to the sickroom and entered.

The space was filled with the soft sound of rain. It felt unnaturally quiet, even dreary. Like a black monster lying dead, its neck broken. Taking care not to make any noise, Dead Box shut the door behind him. The bedroom felt quite a bit colder than the study. In the black plastic fireplace in the corner burned the wood fire he'd made earlier: it emitted only the slightest of sounds, the logs blanketed in gray flames. It would still take some time to heat the room. Was it because the room was so cold? The flames reflecting grayly off the black plastic walls and floor burned straighter than usual; they were sharp edged to Dead Box's eyes, like shards of light in some medieval drawing. For a while he gazed pensively at the ashen scene around him, then turned and walked through the cold air toward the bed. The shadows of falling raindrops were reflected on the girl's face. She had been afflicted by a series of paroxysms over the course of the past few days, but since that morning she seemed much more tranquil and her breathing was regular. He had heard her cough but rarely in the past hour or so, and now she appeared to have slipped into a long and deep sleep. Yet the fever had clearly not left her: her lips were parched, and her face had a morbid blush that would have appealed to Dostoyevsky. Her arms, thrust out of the sun-bleached sheet, looked frail, their flesh, no doubt because of her convulsions, wasted. (The girl had eaten just a little bread and milk at breakfast, and had hardly touched the fish soup he'd served for lunch.) Dead Box looked down at her emaciated face for a long time, then reached out and carefully brushed away a lock of hair that had fallen over her forehead. Her hair was exceedingly soft and somehow felt gentle, endearing; he recalled the time he'd dipped his hand in a flowing brook. Or perhaps this was a distant memory of something the girl had experienced in a past that had long since faded away.

Lest a longer touch might harm her, Dead Box lifted his hand from her fragile forehead. The tips of his fingers sensed something as delicate as mist gradually evaporate

into the air as he slowly straightened up from his crouch over her sleeping body. Far above, the black church bell began to toll, marking a new hour. Listening to the faint ring of the bell, Dead Box laid his hand on the back of the nearby sofa and sat down. Next to the bed there was a wooden night table, black like the chair, its paint peeling off in places. On the table were several items: a pitcher of water and a glass, a silver bell, an image of the Virgin Mary, an iPod, an old book by Aleksandr Sergeyevich Pushkin, a candlestick, a dust-encrusted crucifix, a silver washbasin. The night table's bottom drawer contained several old sun-bleached cotton towels. Dead Box bent over and removed one of the worn towels and dipped it into the water (over which a film of ice had formed) in the washbasin. Then he wrung out the towel and laid it on the girl's forehead. At that moment, the girl's eyes opened a crack and gazed up at him dully. "Father," she said in a husky voice, peering up at him vacantly.

"Did I wake you?" Dead Box whispered in her ear. Yet no matter how long he waited there was no reply, and when he straightened up once more and looked at her face, the girl's eyes were closed. She had slipped away again.

Dead Box gazed at her for some time, then sat down on the sofa.

Ten minutes later Dead Box took up the old book by Pushkin and began to read by the girl's bedside. He read that old nineteenth-century novel for a couple of hours. It was a short novel in verse form, a book with the ring of silence to it, like someone whispering in your ear. As Dead Box read, he occasionally dipped a cotton cloth into the water to moisten the girl's parched lips. For some reason, that brought back the memory of the feathers of dead birds that the girl had been collecting. Why now? Hadn't he almost forgotten about them? The girl had told him that whenever she found a fallen bird—in the open, hidden in the shade, wherever—she removed a feather, wrapped it in a piece of lace, and put it in the bar-coded box she always carried with her. "It's a secret, Father," the girl confided the first day she'd met the priest, faintly smiling. "Don't tell anybody." Then she opened the box and showed him the feathers she'd collected. This had been just a few months back, but to Dead Box it seemed as if it had happened long ago. Or perhaps it wasn't his memory at all, but someone else's.

Although spring was on the verge of coming to the city the day the girl showed him the feathers, a blackish hail had blanketed almost everything. Most of the church was shrouded in the dark light, and even the feathers from the fallen birds that the girl had shown him resembled nothing so much as the burned remnants of an old map.... Be that as it may, they were of course still beautiful.

"Don't they look like that to you?" Dead Box had murmured there in the doorway of the church, dark in shadow.

"They surely do," the girl had replied, looking at the feathers she had laid on the priest's open palm. She was smiling, and the priest too couldn't help but smile tenderly.

"But why are you collecting these feathers?" the priest asked her a little later. His voice was low, a little husky. "Perhaps you mean to adorn your collar with them?"

The girl looked down thoughtfully. Perhaps she was asking herself whether she should tell him the truth.

In her breast pocket was a black iPod. As he waited for her reply, his eyes fixed on the glimmer of light reflected off the iPod's edge.

"I hear their song," the girl finally said, almost in a whisper.

"Their song?" Dead Box asked quizzically.

"Yes, I hear their song. The feathers remember the songs the birds sang when they were alive. I can hear the songs in them. They're no more than a whisper, like voices from far away, but I can hear them clearly if I hold them up like this," she said, taking a feather out of the black box and raising it to her ear.

The girl closed her eyes, entranced, as if resuming a long dream. Aside from the slightest trembling of her eyelashes, her face was completely motionless. Even the wind seemed to have stopped.

"I think this bird died by the water, in a deep mist," the girl said finally. The wind seemed to revive once more—or so the priest imagined. "This bird sings in such a sad voice. Like it was offering up a mournful prayer for something. She died too soon. I'm sure she wanted to sing more. But her beautiful voice is preserved here in this feather, and so long as there are people in this world who can hear it, her song will last forever. Just like music, or books."

"I'm sure you're right," said the priest. The girl nodded gently, then took another feather out of the black box and, holding it to her ear, said: "This one has a voice that is very calm and bright. I see her singing atop a church steeple. A red sun is setting far away, over the town. An organ can be heard playing inside the church. I see the bird singing to that organ, a song that is beautiful but brief, like a sudden crack in a pane of glass. I can see the people of the city at their windows, listening to the holy voice. It's really pretty.

"And finally, this feather..." the girl said, taking from the box a feather tinged in gray. "It's funny, but it seems to have no sound at all. No birdsong. Sometimes I find feathers like this. Maybe they're from birds who were deaf, but from this feather I get a faint

image of a bird flying in a rainy night sky. There is just the one bird. Ahead of him, I can only see rolling hills, and where the last hill meets the sky is a light like a single star. I don't know what it is (I don't think the bird does either), but he's flying straight toward that light as if someone was guiding him. Maybe Lord Jesus is waiting for him there."

Smiling at her words, the priest held to his ear the feather which was like a ruined map. But of course he was unable to hear even the slightest sound. He had just the faintest intimation of the sound of frozen air, like a vacuum. Was this the sound made by the dead bird's feather? the priest wondered aloud, half-jokingly.

But in the slanting shadows cast by the church, the girl only laughed, as if amused by what he'd said.

As Dead Box dabbed her lips with the moist cloth, fondly recalling that feather (a very light feather it was, bluish gray in color), the feeling struck him that he'd known someone else long ago who had, like her, collected the feathers of dead birds. Yes, he had surely known such a person. Or perhaps he had only dreamed of her. But for a dream this memory had too much detail, too much substance—this someone had sat next to him and said, as if whispering, "Is there anything in the world more lovely, more holy than the feather of a fallen bird? One who died unnoticed somewhere in a corner, in the rain, with no one to say a prayer over his dead body?" The sunlight shone down with just the faintest blackish tinge through the thick leaves on the old tree; a breeze soundlessly ruffled that person's hair. In the light and wind of a time now past, that someone had gazed deep into his eyes as if into a basin of still water. Who on earth had it been?—Why could he not remember now? He could recall the sound of her voice, the wind on his skin, the smell of vegetation (it must have been the beginning of summer), and though he could sense some kind of connection between him and this stranger, he could no longer remember who she was. It was as if his memories were slowly slipping away, as if everything were gradually losing its shape in the corners of his mind, like shards of ice melting in black light on the palm of his hand. Maybe he would forget his own name, Dead Box, altogether. Were that to happen, then surely he'd lose everything, even his most important memories of those he'd known and the kind of life he'd led. Dead Box laid the moist cloth beside the silver washbasin and lightly touched his head, which had begun to ache from the effort of trying to trace his thoughts. Words rose to his mind: Before that happens, I must fill in my diary to the very last page. For by doing so, just maybe, I'll get to keep at least a bit of my memory.

With a sigh Dead Box muttered a prayer then sat back down on the sofa and took

up the book he'd laid beside him. The book was very cold to the touch and strangely light in his hand.

The girl woke just once while Dead Box was reading. He'd been wholly engrossed, mind and body, in his book (he had finished the Pushkin and was now reading a collection of poems by Lord Byron) when the girl's soft voice pulled him back to this world.

"Father," the girl called.

"So you finally woke up, did you? I so missed that bell-like little voice of yours. Is there something you'd like?" asked Dead Box, laying the book with its worn cloth cover on the night table beside the image of the Virgin.

"Can I have a little water?"

"Of course!"

He poured some water from the pitcher into the glass and gave small sips of it to the girl, who had sat up in bed. She drank eagerly.

"Taste good?"

"Yes, delicious," she said, wiping her lips with her lace sleeve.

"It's water I just drew from the town well, so it's as cold as ice and the taste is clean. Don't you think?"

"Yes, very!"

"I'm sure it's good for you," said Dead Box. The girl smiled. A small shadow coursed across her lips, no more than a flutter—Dead Box could have sworn that he heard it make a faint sound.

"Well, now, it's time to put something else in that mouth of yours. You've hardly eaten anything in the past few days," said the priest a little later. "Shall I warm up some of that fish soup?"

"Yes, but I'll wait a bit. I think I'll be able to eat more if I do."

"So, you promise you'll eat properly?" asked Dead Box tenderly.

"I swear."

"To the Blessed Virgin?"

"I swear to the Blessed Virgin. And to the feathers of those dead birds."

"Good girl," the priest said. Parting her hair, he gave her a peck on the forehead. "Ah, yes! I have something to give you," he added. "I found this a little earlier. It was lying on the chapel floor. You've been searching high and low for this, haven't you? It's a mystery to me how it ended up there." So saying, the priest took from the inside pocket of his black cassock a doll of one of the apostles, made of black rubber and missing an

arm. According to the girl, she'd picked this up in a faraway town about a year before, when she was crossing the square in a horse-drawn carriage with a grown-up. She put her new treasure away, like the dead bird feathers, in the little black box with the bar code. The girl said that when she picked up the little apostle with its missing arm, she felt something sacred course through her fingertips, as in a story from the Bible. "I'm sure the Blessed Virgin gave it to me," she said. "It was because I didn't have anyone to play with."

The girl took the doll from the priest. "How happy this makes me," she whispered, and closing her eyes, she offered up a prayer of thanks to God. "Father, thank you for finding it," she said to the priest, gently kissing his right hand.

"In the future, you'll have to be more careful not to lose it again. You looked so lonely without it. But I'm sure now with this you'll get better. And there's my fish soup too; it cures all ills. Why, I bet tomorrow you'll be able to climb the hill and find more feathers. Though it still may be raining. But I wonder, how long can it go on raining like this?"

The priest rose from the sofa, walked over to the window, and parted the lace curtain. The rain went on falling, making the same strange noise as before. It sounded like the rays of the morning sun, shining down from so far away, taking their time as they broke slowly against the windowpane. Or like the flat windowpane itself, made of shadow, shattering into a thousand particles, then vanishing. For a long time now, Dead Box had been vaguely aware of sounds like these in the falling rain.

When the priest turned from the window and looked back to the bed, the girl had again lain back with her eyes closed and the same soft smile on her face. Dead Box had turned to say something, but what he saw stopped him from speaking. He wanted to capture that scene forever: the image of her lying in the worn, wooden bed, lovelier than ever, awaiting her approaching death. In this space carved out of the black plastic, neither the rain nor the wind—nor even, surely, the passage of time itself—could inflict the slightest scar on her, not even so small as a grain of sand.

"Father," the girl said not long after.

"What is it?" said Dead Box, going over to sit at her bedside.

"The birds will be coming soon now. Can't you hear them, singing at the window?" The girl glanced toward the window, closed her eyes, and smiled again.

The priest listened attentively but could hear no sound but that of the falling rain. Nevertheless, he whispered, "Yes, I can hear them sing." After all, she could have been half-asleep and dreamed it. "But why did the birds come here?" he asked.

"They came to take Father away with them, away in the sand boat."

"The sand boat?"

"Yes, the sand boat. To take you across the sea. The birds built the boat for you, Father. Feasting on red berries and drops of clean water, the birds will take you far across the sea in their little boat made of sand."

"What you call the sea—is it the rain?"

Eyes still closed, head against the pillow, the girl nodded.

"So... the rain will never end. I thought it was no ordinary rain, the way it was falling. And the birds have built a new Noah's ark out of sand. But why won't you board it too?" Dead Box wondered aloud.

"Because I was sent to tell you this. That was my only mission. There, in my little box, you'll find a ticket to board the boat. Take it," the girl said. Her left arm emerged from the sheets and pointed to the night table. There, at its foot, was the little black box.

"A ticket? You mean one of the dead bird feathers, don't you? But that means there are plenty of other feathers. You can take one too, and together we can board the boat the birds have made, surely!" said Dead Box, clasping her hand. Its flesh had almost completely wasted away, leaving only bone and skin.

"The other feathers are for the dead knights. Take them with you to the other shore. They wear armor made of mist and bear the most splendid silver swords. They are all brave warriors who long ago shed their blood for Rome. The birds have summoned their spirits here. The valiant knights on horseback will protect you, Father. Evil spirits haunt the waves, and the rain is fierce. It is too dangerous for you to travel alone."

"I don't mind if the ghosts of dead knights take me, but I'll save the last feather for you," said Dead Box, still holding her hand. "And what is waiting there, on the far side of the sea?"

"The other side is where the birds come from. It's a beautiful place. There is neither night nor day, nor life nor death. It is a world without words or memories, bathed in moonlight, and in that light the Blessed Mary weaves her song. The birds rest in a castle made of sand, their ears tuned to that exquisite sound. A song that goes on without end, for hundreds and hundreds of years. Perhaps forever..." Still smiling, the girl abruptly stopped speaking.

Dead Box waited for more, but all he could hear was the sound of her shallow breathing. No doubt speaking had exhausted her, for once again she fell into a deep sleep. Her breath seemed to gently enfold his gaze; when she exhaled, he could see wavelets of shadows cross her breast.

Dead Box's laptop had stored in it the image of a very strange painting. Quite suddenly one evening a man who owned a number of businesses (a candy store, a coffin shop) arrived in a three-horse carriage at the church—which he had never visited, even on a Sunday—and presented the original to him. "Evening, Father, or should I say, Pleased to meet you!" he said. "This is something my dear, recently departed uncle left me, but I've no place to put it, you see. It's way too big for my liking." Dead Box fell in love with the painting at first sight and hung it on the wall over his staircase so that he could look at it every day. One morning, however, he woke to find that the painting had vanished without a trace. He heard later from people in the city that the man who sold candy and coffins had learned from a knowing acquaintance that it had been painted by a famous artist and that, were it sold to the right customer, it would fetch an astounding price, surely enough to buy him two more stores for candy and coffins, so he stole into the manse in the middle of the night and made off with it, saying "After all, I owned it in the first place, so God won't really hold this against me." The priest heard later that an eighty-eight-year-old crone living alone in a big house in the city heard of this and went in a black coach to the candy or coffin shop or wherever he was and, saying, "God's hand grants me this!" slapped him across the cheek "so hard it left a bruise." She bade him return the painting immediately, but he would never admit his guilt, folks in town told the priest afterward. "I'm sure he's already sold the picture. I knew from the day he showed up in town the man was trouble," said the granny.

Because he so loved that painting, the priest had taken a photograph of it and stored it on his computer. So it was that even after the painting was stolen, he would often open his black laptop and gaze lingeringly at the painting over a cup of tea. It was a portrait of an unknown wasteland, and its brushwork and subject matter suggested it was an attempt to copy Caspar David Friedrich, but done by someone without quite his skill. The setting was the dead of night. The sky was filled with blue stars laid out in a geometrical shape. Beside them a headless black bird with wings sharp as shards of glass cut diagonally across the night, flat as the canvas it was painted on. Where the sky had been cut open blood ran straight down to fall on a broken wall, all that was left of a ruined chapel. In front of the wall leaned a silvery tombstone, against which rested a skeleton in black monastic robes deftly strumming an acoustic guitar with his bony fingers. On the guitar was written in English the riddling words OIL LEAK. Behind the chapel wall stood an ancient prelate—not bones, but a man of flesh and blood—who glared angrily at the guitar-playing skeleton. The old prelate's right hand held a Bible, red with flames. His eyes were bloodshot with fury; no doubt he meant to set fire to

the skeleton with his burning Bible. In his other withered hand he clutched an archaic silver crucifix. There was something unaccountably sad about the crucifix's color; it gleamed like the forlorn eyes of an old cat.

"Could I have made time stand still to appreciate this painting, how lovely it would have been," Dead Box had once told the girl. "Maybe I should try to make my computer freeze!"

On that day, so long ago now, the girl had been wearing an airy white dress woven of skeins of wind. The children of this city all wore white garments of the same plain material. And when they grew up, they threw off their white robes and changed into dress of heavier, more substantial cloth. Of course, their adult garments were nowhere near as beautiful.

A smile had played across the girl's face as she listened to the priest's words, as it always did. Just being able to see her smile made him happy.

As Dead Box sat at the girl's bedside, he fondly remembered that day. The memory was still with him; if possible, he didn't want to lose it. He wanted to preserve it unchanged as best he could. If only one could lock away one's memories in a glass case, like the specimen of some moth.

When the girl's breathing underwent a sea change, careful not to awake her, Dead Box rose and left the bedroom, resonant only with the echo of the rain. He returned to his study and booted up the black laptop on his desk. The painting, preserved as wallpaper on his desktop, no longer held his attention as it once had. Had he lost the emotional tie that had connected him to it? When had that happened? The priest sighed, opened one of his document folders, and added an entry to the record he was keeping of the girl's condition (he had begun it the day she took to her bed). Then he turned off the computer.

His head ached a little. Usually this would last no longer than twenty or thirty minutes, but today it showed no sign of abating. Perhaps he was coming down with a cold. Come to think of it, his body felt somehow listless. He took an aspirin from his desk drawer and was about to swallow it when he stopped and crushed it into powder between his fingers. He gazed dully as the dust sprinkled over his black desk, falling from his fingers like the wreckage of vitrified time.

Sometime later the black church bell rang the hour of dusk. And as that weirdly flat, black sound began to fade again into the echo of the rain, Dead Box took up his boxing gloves and turned toward the sandbag. The silent black light flowing through

the window was a foretaste of the long, cold night that awaited. A night peculiar to this time of year, soft as mist yet as sharp as a transparent needle. He would continue punching his sandbag long after the advent of its dark light. From the moment he had remembered the rain that had fallen that day of the abortion, there was no other place he could be.

Alles nur nach Gottes willen, he muttered softly, then donned his black gloves.

CONTRIBUTORS

DAVID BOYD (b. 1981) received his master's degree in March 2012 from the Department of Contemporary Literary Studies at the University of Tokyo. He is currently translating, among others, *Takaoka Shin'nō Kōkaiki*, the only novel left by the late decadent author Tatsuhiko Shibusawa.

REBECCA BROWN (b. 1956) is known for her intense, spellbinding prose. Among her many books that have been translated into Japanese, *The Gifts of the Body* (Harper Perennial) is especially popular. She has visited Japan twice for talks and readings. "At the Delta" appears for the first time in this issue.

COMES IN A BOX (b. 1980) made his debut with "Black Space, the Sound of Rain" in the fifth issue of the Japanese *Monkey Business*, followed by "The Black Bell" in the eighth issue and "war in," inspired by Hemingway's 1924 *in our time*, in the fourteenth. He is currently working on his first novel.

JAMES DORSEY (b. 1961) teaches Japanese literature at Dartmouth College. His publications include *Critical Aesthetics: Kobayashi Hideo, Modernity, and Wartime Japan*, published in 2009 as a Harvard East Asian Monograph. He is also the coeditor of *Literary Mischief: Sakaguchi Ango, Culture, and the War* (Lexington Books).

STUART DYBEK (b. 1942), one of the best short story writers in America today, is also loved and respected in Japan. In 2008 he was invited to Japan by the Japan Foundation to give lectures and readings. The poem "Nowhere" appears for the first time in this issue.

MICHAEL EMMERICH (b. 1975) teaches Japanese literature at the University of California–Santa Barbara. An award-winning translator, he has translated books by Gen'ichirō Takahashi and Hiromi Kawakami, among others. He is the editor of *Read Real Japanese Fiction* (Kodansha) and *Short Stories in Japanese: New Penguin Parallel Text*.

TOH ENJOE (b. 1972) is known for his highly metafictional, self-referential, and allusive fiction, which he characterizes as straightforward realism and which his readers love anyway. He won the highly prestigious Akutagawa Prize in February 2012. "Meditations on Green" appeared in the twelfth issue of *Monkey Business*.

HIDEO FURUKAWA (b. 1966) is one of the most active writers in Japan today, giving numerous public readings and frequently collaborating with artists and dancers. He is also a regular contributor to *Monkey Business*. "Breathing Through Gills," which appeared in the fourth issue, is one of the linked stories in his *TYO Gothic*, published by VillageBooks in 2011.

KEITA GENJI (1912–1985) is the pen name of Tomio Tanaka, a prolific novelist who wrote more than a hundred books of fiction about the Japanese salaryman. For more than two decades before and after World War II, Genji was himself a salaryman at Sumitomo, one of the major megacompanies in Japan.

TED GOOSSEN (b. 1948) teaches Japanese literature and film at York University in Toronto. He is the general editor of *The Oxford Book of Japanese Short Stories* and has published translations of stories and essays by Hiromi Kawakami, Haruki Murakami, Yōko Ogawa, Sachiko Kishimoto, and Naoya Shiga, among others.

YŌKO HAYASUKE (b. 1982) made her debut with "John," which appeared in the twelfth issue of *Monkey Business*. "Eri-chan's Physics" appeared in the fourteenth. Among the writers who inspired her is Grace Paley, translated into Japanese by Haruki Murakami.

LAFCADIO HEARN (1850–1904) served as the West's window on Japan at the turn of the twentieth century. His versions of Japanese legends and ghost stories are still much beloved, especially in Japan, where he is known as Koizumi Yakumo.

NAOYUKI II (b. 1953) is the author of sixteen books of fiction and one of nonfiction, and has won numerous awards as well as general readers' admiration. In his second book of nonfiction, due to appear in April 2012, he discusses Japanese salaryman fiction, Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" and Kafka's "Metamorphosis."

MINA ISHIKAWA (b. 1980) is one of the new voices in tanka poetry. "Tales in Tanka" appeared in the seventh issue of *Monkey Business*, but a privately printed one-hundred-copy edition of the work consisting of cards in a box (each tanka printed on a different card) was issued in 2006. Visit her website at www.yaginoki.com.

KEITA JIN (b. 1981) is a psychiatrist living in Hokkaido. "The Bridge," his first published

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FRANZ KAFKA (1883–1924) was a German-language Jewish writer who lived in Prague. He is recognized as one of the most, if not the most, important writers of the twentieth century. His work has been widely adapted by artists of various media, including the comic artist R. Crumb, the filmmaker Valeri Fokin, and the animator Kōji Yamamura.

HIROMI KAWAKAMI (b. 1958) is one of the leading Japanese novelists today. Recipient of numerous literary prizes, including the Akutagawa Prize in 1996, she has been serving as a judge for that prize since 2007. Her novel *Manazuru* was translated by Michael Emmerich in 2010 (Counterpoint). The vignettes "People from My Neighborhood" in this issue were originally published in the eleventh to fifteenth issues of the Japanese *Monkey Business*.

MIEKO KAWAKAMI (b. 1976) is a novelist, poet, singer, and actress. Her awards include the Akutagawa Prize in 2008 and the Nakahara Chūya Poetry Prize in 2009. "A Once-Perfect Day for Bananafish" was written for the third-and-a-half issue of *Monkey Business*, which featured works inspired by J. D. Salinger's *Nine Stories*.

SACHIKO KISHIMOTO (b. 1960) is known for her translations of slightly—or greatly—wacky authors such as Nicholson Baker, Lydia Davis, Thom Jones, and Miranda July. Her essays are highly popular as well: her second collection, *Reasons to Hold a Grudge*, won the Kodansha Essay Award in 2007.

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HARUKI MURAKAMI (b. 1949) is one of the world's best known and best loved novelists. All his major novels, including *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, and *Kafka on the Shore*, have been translated into dozens of languages. "The Great Cycle of Storytelling" was originally written in 2005 as a preface to a book of photography, *Seelenwärmer: Installation in der Stiftsbibliothek St. Gallen*, by Gerda Steiner and Jörg Lenzlinger.

THE BROTHER AND SISTER NISHIOKA have attracted a cult following with their literary manga. They created a manga version of Kafka's stories for the Japanese *Monkey Business*, resulting in *Kafka: Classics in Comics*, published by VillageBooks in 2010. Their other books include *Hell* and *Dream of a Dead Man*.

MIMEI OGAWA (1882–1961) is one of Japan's best-known children's writers, sometimes called the "Japanese Hans Christian Andersen." "Sleepy Town" was first published in 1914, in a journal called *The Japanese Boy*.

MASATSUGU ONO (b. 1970) launched his career by writing about a mythical fishing village in southern Japan, and since then his scope has widened considerably. In his serialization in the Japanese *Monkey Business*, he has returned to the mythical village: "I Chase the Monkey and the Monkey Flees from Me, the Monkey Chases Me and I Flee from the Monkey" appeared in the ninth issue.

MINORU OZAWA (b. 1956) is a leading haiku poet in Japan and heads the haiku poet coterie Sawa. He also edits the highly regarded haiku journal of the same name. He won the Yomiuri Prize for Literature with his 2005 collection *The Moment*. The ghost haiku which appear in this issue were originally written for the eleventh ("Ghost") issue of the Japanese *Monkey Business*.

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TOMOKA SHIBASAKI (b. 1973) is known for her novels and stories that capture the sensibilities of young women living in cities. Her books include *Viridian*, *Dreamers*, and *Awake or Asleep*. "The Seaside Road" was written for the eighth ("Sound") issue, in response to the request that she write a story with sound as a theme.

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SEIICHI SUZUKI (b. 1962) has designed every issue of the Japanese *Monkey Business*. The logo is also his creation. He is the most sought-after book designer in Japan, and has designed more than eight thousand books so far. His tardiness is legendary, but he always manages to come through in the clutch.

FUMIKO TAKANO (b. 1957) is a manga artist of almost legendary reputation. Her highly literary manga creations include *Absolutely Safe Razor*, *A Yellow Book*, and *There Is a Bar*. "The Futon of Tottori," which appeared in the thirteenth issue of *Monkey Business*, is an imaginative adaptation of one of the classic Japanese folktales collected by Lafcadio Hearn at the turn of the twentieth century.

TAKORA Kimiyoshi Futori (b. 1972) is a visual artist, and the trademark cover art of *Monkey Business* is his creation. He has designed numerous posters, clothes, and even cash cards. To see more of his art, visit www.graphictakora.com.

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