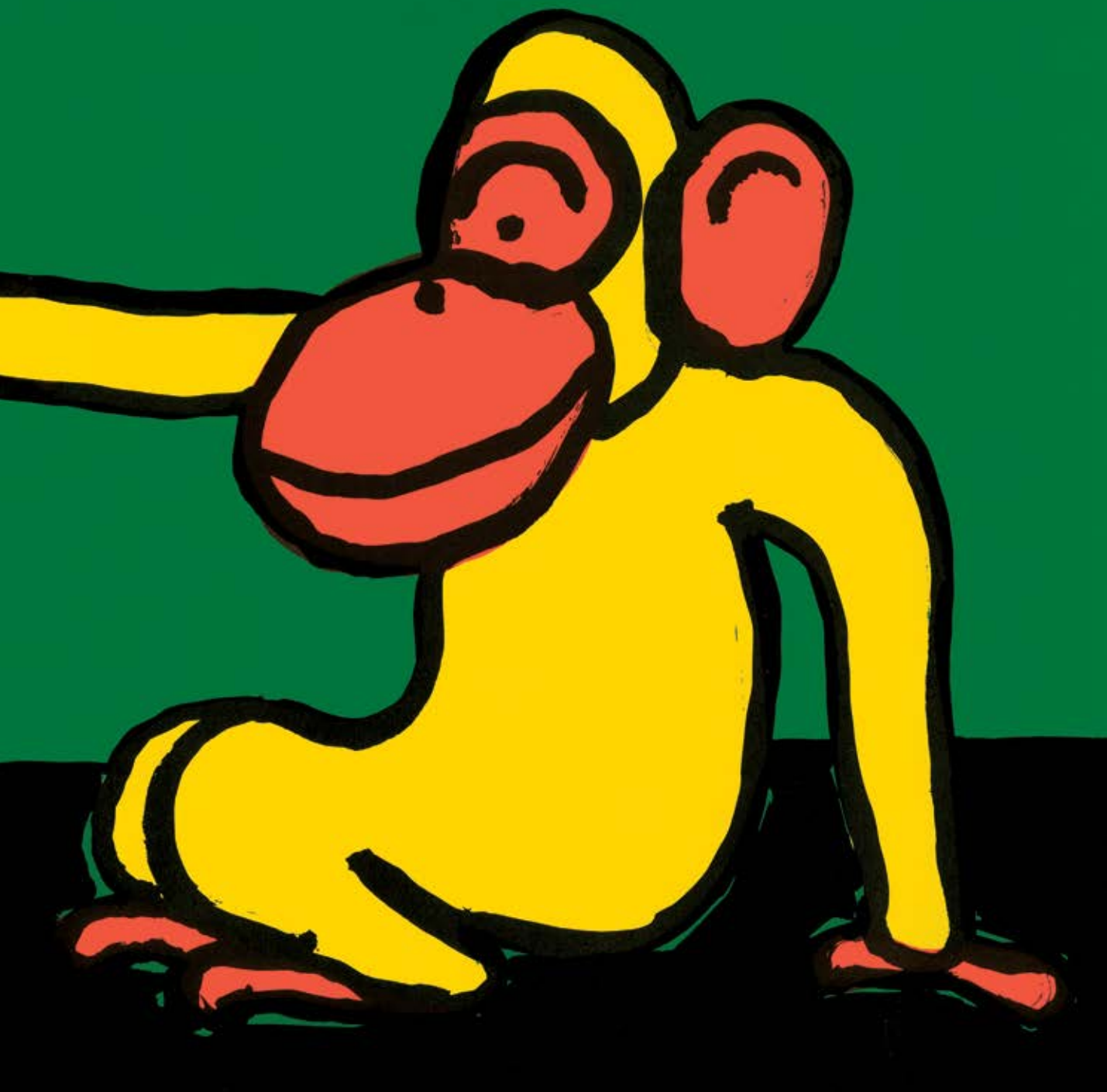
VOLUME 1 | 2020

MONKEY

NEW WRITING FROM JAPAN



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THE MONKEY SPEAKS

The monkeys are back in town!

After a two-year pilgrimage seeking the elixir of life, *Monkey Business,* the literary journal that ran from 2011 to 2017, has been reborn as *MONKEY.* This rebirth is thanks to the extraordinary generosity of Tadashi Yanai. And also thanks to guidance from the intrepid Toshinori Arai and the creative team at Switch Publishing, home of the Japanese literary journal *MONKEY,* which has been promoting innovative writing from Japan and beyond since 2013.

Working closely with the Japanese *MONKEY,* we have selected from the very best of what's going on in Japanese literature today, had it translated by some of the finest translators, and illustrated by exciting visual artists and photographers—from Japan, Canada, and the U.S. We have also added a few modern classics from Japan and invited in unique voices such as the American writer Steven Millhauser and the Canadian graphic artist Jon Klassen. If you put your ear to the cover, you can hear our monkeys chattering noisily to each other across time and language.

We are proud to showcase the work of many of the best translators of Japanese literature, from seasoned veterans who have worked with us since 2011 to members of the next generation. Polly Barton, Andrew Campana, Sam Malissa, Lucy North, and Jordan A.Y. Smith join our troop of monkey translators for the first time in this volume.

In tune with the pandemic times in which we find ourselves, with everyone planting vegetable gardens and baking bread, this first issue of *MONKEY New Writing from Japan* celebrates food in "A Monkey's Dozen."

Please join us in our monkey games!

Ted Goossen
Motoyuki Shibata
Meg Taylor

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MONKEY

Food: A Monkey's Dozen

Hiromi Itō

The Peach Itō Threw Rots, and She Becomes a Beast Once Again

translated by Jeffrey Angles

ON FEBRUARY 24, I went back to Japan. This time I was alone. Just before I left, I bit my husband. Yes, you read that right. I *bit* him. A big bite too. It sort of scared me that I'd lost the ability to act like a normal human being. He freaked out when I left for Japan, and now I wasn't sure I'd ever see him again.

I left Aiko behind. If worse came to worst, I could go to the bank and shift money between our accounts, send my most important books to my older daughter who lived elsewhere, and I could leave the rest behind—yes, I could leave it all behind, bringing only a flash drive for my computer. I could kidnap Aiko in front of her school, put her on a plane, and take her with me. These thoughts passed through my mind over and over as I planned how to get her back.

When my husband and I weren't face-to-face but talking on the phone, we'd sometimes settle down, but it wouldn't be long before we'd start arguing about God knows what. I hated, absolutely hated the way he'd fire off arguments, one after another like he was trying to win a debate, and I couldn't take it. When I asked him why he was speaking to me so aggressively, he repeated the word *aggressive.* Even though I couldn't see him on the other end of the line, I could tell he was rolling his eyes and letting out a contemptuous sigh. *You're* the aggressive one. If you don't think what you did to me the other day was aggressive, then I don't know what is, I'm still having trouble walking.

He said, my thigh's black and blue, it's so swollen it's like it's got a peach stuck in it, and the peach has started to rot.

That's too bad, I said—a simple, straightforward answer without any ulterior motive. To be honest, that was the only way I knew to express what I was thinking in English, but I must have sounded nonchalant, perhaps even non-repentant. When I suggested he go to the doctor, he responded in a very, very low voice—so low it was hard to hear.

Just what am I going to tell him? That my wife did this? Just try telling that to the authorities in this country. You ought to thank your lucky stars I'm keeping my mouth shut.

WHY WERE WE FIGHTING? I don't really know. I'd already forgotten. That's how it is when couples fight. That's how things always begin, and when they split up, there's never any resolution. When I split up with my first husband, my second husband, and my third and fourth too, it was always like that. Fights start over dumb things but still end relationships. When a Japanese couple reaches some sort of compromise, even if the compromise is only lukewarm like a kettle that has been left too long after it boils, the couple clams up and sticks it out. But my current husband was entirely different. He was British, Jewish, and had been raised in an intellectual environment. For him, debates were the stuff of everyday life. He'd made his way through the world, passing through the unsheathed blades of language for twice as long as I'd been alive. My English, by contrast, is faltering at best. During our fights, he'd pick me apart word by word. It was like he was picking up my poor English with chopsticks and dropping it into a sizzling hot vat of tempura oil.

He'd deep fry and sizzle me.

I'd curl up like a shrimp.

In reality, our footing probably wasn't all that uneven. I'd made up my mind to master his style of aggressiveness, and even though I could still barely read and write English, I'd made such progress over the last ten years in my English fighting abilities that even I was impressed. Still, I come from a culture where one either slashes at one's opponent without saying anything or commits hara-kiri. *Slash at the opponent, or commit hara-kiri, how jolly.* That's probably what my husband would say if he'd heard me. *Jolly.* The word usually means "pleasant," but in my husband's vocabulary, it meant something else. He used it sarcastically to mean "shameful" or "incorrigible." When he said it, I felt like he was lifting himself up onto a higher plane than everyone else. No, I couldn't hold my own through words alone.

Deep fried and sizzling. Scooped up by my feet. Knocked down hard. Driven into a corner. Caught in a hail of bullets, I take my last breath.

I say this all metaphorically, of course. The peach is a metaphor, the thorns are metaphors, my husband and mother and father are metaphors, the summer heat and winter cold are metaphors, everything is a metaphor, the only thing that isn't a metaphor is me living as myself, and that's all I had to hold onto.

So I fired back.

He's a big man, twice as tall as me and probably three times heavier, but fortunately for me, he was getting old and his movements slow. I was also lucky he wasn't the kind of guy who'd inflict bodily harm. I'm the one that lashed out at him. My ability to catch rats barehanded served me well. He was about to grab my hand and stop me but didn't intend to hurt me. I took the chance to start throwing hard, unripe peaches without even taking the time to aim, but I had trouble hitting him even though he was right in front of me. (All of this is a metaphor, of course.) The peaches rolled about on the floor, running into each other as if they had electric motors. Most missed, but one hit squarely and lodged in his thigh.

I was being unfair. I shouldn't have resorted to projectiles to get back at him.

But did I regret it? Not really. I wanted to hurt him. People shouldn't hit other people—that's just common sense. So I bit him. It didn't matter how, but for a moment I couldn't resist the urge to attack and hurt him. When I saw the red bite marks swelling up on his arm, I knew he must feel how angry I was. At the same time, I recognized I'd done myself in.

American culture abhors physical violence above all else. You can't even lay a finger on a person—actually, that's a huge lie. In America, you can take a gun and kill as many people as you want. People think it's okay to own a gun and shoot, but you mustn't inflict violence—never, ever, ever. It's all or nothing. You should never kill, but if you do, do it completely.

NO ONE DARED REMOVE the peach lodged in his flesh, so it remained there as a visible reminder of his injury.

I supported you, I supported your children, I supported your work, I supported you while you took care of your parents, but what am I to you? Just a monster you want to slay, or someone who supported you, cared for you, and deserves your love?

My husband sent that to me in an email. (Trying to talk on the phone was so unproductive that we had given up on it altogether.)

I supported you, I supported your children, I supported your work, I supported you while you took care of your parents, but you still don't believe in me, do you? That's what he wrote. Thinking it over calmly, I realized he was right. I didn't believe in him. These ten years, I hadn't believed in anything.

You're right, I replied. Like you said, I don't believe in you, in a sense, I haven't believed in you this whole time.

I was being honest, but I could hear him groaning all the way through the internet when he opened the email, and the rotting peach sank even further into his flesh.

Our family's happiness had been shattered to smithereens.

My wife is ferocious, faithless, shameless, unfeeling, she doesn't believe in me—her own husband. She doesn't love me, she's a beast.

He was beating on the keyboard. He beat on it and beat on it. And as he did, he spelled out his abuse.

When he's mad, he uses lofty words like Jane Austen and speaks with that special form of circuitous sarcasm unique to Britain. Sometimes, those things slip out even when he's speaking normally. People often get ticked off at him, and he turns away sighing that Americans just don't get British humor. Honestly, I can't say we Japanese get it either. Everything he writes just comes at me like a great big aggressive jumble of words—after all, I live in an English-speaking country but am practically illiterate. It took me hours just to digest his email.

He wrote, I supported you, I supported your children, I supported your work, I supported you while you took care of your parents, let me repeat, I supported you, I supported your children, I supported your work, I supported you while you took care of your parents—my freedom came second, and it's caused me all sorts of emotional stress and loneliness. The peach is still buried in my thigh, and it still hurts.

I wrote back, I understand. But you're so aggressive, so negative, you make everything impossible, you're always 100% right, I'm 100% wrong. There's a Japanese proverb, the cornered mouse bites the cat. That's what happened. And let me tell you, it's not fair to bring up money during a domestic dispute.

He responded, Read this, and read this carefully, I'm NOT talking about money.

I could tell. The injury to my husband's leg smarted as much as it did the moment I inflicted it.

I supported you, I supported your children, I supported your work, I supported you while you took care of your parents, let me say it again! I supported you, I . . . He kept beating angrily on the keyboard.

You talk about compromises, but a compromise involves both parties giving something up. What are you giving up? Do you intend to give anything up?

You say I'm being negative. Negative? In my work, I've accomplished things no one has ever done before, do you think that's negative? How can you say that?

You feel guilty about leaving the house.

You feel guilty about your work.

You feel guilty when you leave me for so long.

EVERYTHING MAKES YOU FEEL GUILTY, I'M SICK AND TIRED OF YOU FEELING SO GODDAMN GUILTY ABOUT EVERYTHING.

The last part was all in capital letters. He was screaming at me through the internet.

HE'D BLOWN HIS LID, but I thought about what he said.

His view of me was way off base. Is that how he really saw me? Do I feel guilty about leaving home? Do I feel guilty about doing my work? Heavens no. Not me.

That's when I remembered why we'd started fighting. The reason behind it all.

We were having o-nabe for dinner. For those of you who aren't familiar with Japanese cooking, o-nabe is a hot pot full of vegetables and meat cooked in broth. Usually people make it over a portable burner on the table so everyone can sit around, cook, and eat together. I'd recently bought a brand-new electric burner, and we were having o-nabe every night. That meant that we were eating hakusai every night, since it is one of the most common ingredients. Now, hakusai is for sale everywhere—it's called "nappa cabbage" or simply "nappa" in America—and there are piles of it in every grocery store. "Nappa" makes you think of Napa wine, so it didn't sound right to me. Nonetheless, I kept buying it day after day. One evening as I was putting some in the o-nabe, I used the word *hakusai* instead of the English word. My husband didn't understand, so I had to explain. That evening, I'd already had to say "enoki mushroom" instead of just "enoki," "shiitake mushroom" instead of just "shiitake," and "bean noodle" instead of "harusame." I had to use the absurdly general word "sauce" to mean something specific like citrus-flavored ponzu. I always have to rephrase myself for him. So by the time we got to the *hakusai*, I was already in despair. We'd been living together for ten years, but during all that time, he couldn't even learn a simple Japanese word like *hakusai*? He was always saying, "I love Japanese food" and "I love o-nabe," but could he prove it? To make matters worse, he was trying out the Atkins diet. That meant he was eating lots of high-fat, high-protein, low-carb food. That meant he wouldn't touch rice with a ten-foot pole. How could he possibly claim to understand his wife's culture if he didn't even eat rice?

I shouted at him, and he shouted back.

I wondered what would happen if, somewhere down the line, Aiko asked us why we got divorced. *Because of nappa cabbage.* How could I possibly say that with a straight face?

Several days later, I saw our parakeets kiss.

Originally, we just had a cockatiel. One day I tossed some of its old food into the yard, and that attracted a green parakeet. I caught it, and the two birds started to live together. When the cockatiel was perched on my hand and the parakeet was near, it got excited. When the cockatiel was free in the house, it spent the whole day flying back and forth over the parakeet's cage, showing off. It talked non-stop. *You're a bird. Look! I'm a bird too! You're a bird. Look! I'm a bird too! You're a bird. Look! I'm a bird too! You're a bird. Look! I'm a bird too!* The cockatiel stopped roosting on our shoulders and coming to the dinner table. Now it was a plain old bird who didn't interact with us. My older daughter decided to take it to her apartment, but that made the parakeet lonely. Far away in Japan, Dad was home alone with Mom in the hospital. I hated to think about bringing more tedium and loneliness into the world, so I went to buy another bird.

Aiko went with me. She pointed at a white bird and said, that one. It was a pure white parakeet with none of the usual yellow, blue, or green on its back. We tried putting it in the same cage as the other parakeet, but the cage was too small so we bought a new one—a cage for newlyweds. We also bought a birdhouse so they could raise babies. As the birds flapped around wildly, trying to get away from each other, feathers puffed out and dancing, I managed to catch the wriggling green parakeet and held it in my hand. It bit me hard. The white one was no problem. I let the birds go in their new home. The white parakeet was still and sat on a branch while the green one approached it as if to say, how handsome you are!

After that, they couldn't stop kissing. Lucky them, they had chemistry. Their kisses got deeper, and although I knew they were birds, I imagined them like people, tonguing one another, and I watched them with excited interest, wondering what would come next. They kissed shamelessly in front of my husband and me.

Seeing this, he snarled, those birds are the only ones in the goddamn house on good terms. We don't have that kind of intimacy any more. I could tell from his tone and expression just how foul his mood was.

And it was true. We weren't close anymore. But if we showed each other affection like that, there was a one-in-three chance it'd lead to sex. We had reconciled ourselves to not having sex anymore, but we felt guilty about it too—about being too old to do it—and that was hard for us to admit . . . I wanted to avoid that kind of conflict. I didn't just want that, I probably told him so outright.

Oh, damn it. You've done it now.

I shouldn't have brought projectiles to a fight, but now I'd gone and used them. As we argued, I threw peaches at my husband. One buried itself in his skin, grew inflamed, and started to swell. It looked exactly like a bite mark.

I'm getting old.

I don't have time.

My body won't move.

His insecurities had mounted, but now he had the perfect excuse—his own wife had bitten him. His rage boiled over. I was wrong, no matter how I looked at it. I'd hurt him. My own spouse. Violently. I had crossed the line. He was justified, so he exploded.

I'm getting old. I don't have the time.

My work isn't getting the attention it deserves. I don't have the time. I don't have the time to wait. My health is going downhill. My body doesn't move like I want it to. Surgery isn't helping. I don't have the time to wait. I'm old. I'm a sexual failure. I've failed over and over. Over and over. I don't have time for this. I'm old, I've never been in this situation before, and I don't know how to handle it. I don't have the time to wait. I don't have the time to come up with new ideas. I'm not satisfied. Things aren't getting better. I don't have the time anymore.

His anger was unrelenting. He had no time for me. He vented his anger at me. At himself. At me. But more at himself. At his limp cock. At his eyes. At his ears. At his heart. At his knees. At his shoulders. At his lower back. At his elderly, failing body. At his old, decrepit self. Yes, at himself.

THE DAYS WENT BY, the weather cooled down for a bit and then warmed up again.

I was on the way to Mom's hospital when I noticed a grassy spot in the sun. There were clumps of a particular plant in it. I was thinking how lavish it looked when I realized it must be henbit. Little reddish-purple flowers stuck out like tongues, and right before my eyes they seemed to puff out and individual stalks began to grow. As they grew, I noticed another flower, something like a white shepherd's purse, scattered among them. It seemed too close to the ground for shepherd's purse. I was thinking that it must be some relative when it too began to grow. As it grew, it made a quiet rustling sound. There was mugwort too—impudent clumps had died and were giving birth to a new generation—and vetch, which had grown vines like a baby sticking out its hand. I saw something twinkling in the grass. The more I looked, the more I saw. Speedwell flowers warmed by the spring sun. Their twinkle made my eyes hurt. Next to them soft stitchwort plants were blooming quietly, revealing neatly arranged white petals. Scattered around this were clumps of dried-up weeds. Those lay dead and dry, not budging an inch.

MOM WAS LYING IN BED.

She couldn't move, but she was conscious.

Could she answer questions? No. Was she out of her mind? Not at the moment. As the waves of her dementia crashed and retreated, the numbness in her body

had spread. Her right hand was gnarled. It couldn't move—it had died. It was now a hand that was no longer a hand. A hand that had neither the shape nor color of a hand. Like those dim sum chicken feet. Like it had been cooked. She had also lost movement in her legs, which had grown thin and frail. They wouldn't have supported her even if she could have stood. She couldn't urinate, so the hospital had catheterized her. When she'd had a catheter before, she'd raised a fuss, but this time, she didn't let out a peep. She was still taking a diuretic for high blood pressure, but she didn't seem to be having problems with that. Still, she was so weak that it was all she could do to press the call button for the nurse with the pinky of her left hand. She couldn't even turn the pages of a book or use a TV remote. She had been like this for a long time, unable to do anything, unable to move. Meanwhile at home, Dad and the parakeet were experiencing everlasting tedium and loneliness.

When I sat by her bedside, she asked me, Will you scratch me a little? I'm so itchy I can't stand it.

I rolled up my sleeves, pushed her hospital gown aside, and scratched her all over—on her back, her arms, her thighs, her belly.

Higher, harder, use your nails.

Her arms were slack and wrinkled. The skin on her belly was dry and worn. There was nothing left of her on the backs of her thighs. She was as thin as a bat. As thin as a dried-up fish.

She moaned, Oh, right there, right there, more, more. Don't be namby-pamby, do it harder, use your nails. Harder.

As I was scratching her, I felt a tiny bump. Just a teeny-tiny one. A rough, dry spot. Rather than hurt her by trying to scratch it off, I used the tip of my fingernail to press into it. Mom moaned, Right there, right there, there, there.

I know how terrible it is to itch. Her suffering was contagious—as I scratched her, I felt myself grow itchy all over. Moving the ring finger and pinky of her shriveled left hand, which no longer obeyed, she had kept trying in vain to scratch herself, but all she ended up doing was stroking her own skin. She repeated, I'm itchy but I can't scratch myself, I'm itchy . . . She didn't seem to be suffering from overt anxiety or depression, but she was living each day at a time, never fully present for any of it.

A long time ago, I saw a nature program on TV that showed a lion on a savanna eating a gazelle. The lion grasped it at the base of the neck, and the gazelle shook and twitched, but then it went limp, eyes open wide. I thought it was dead, but no, it was still alive. The lion sat down and began to eat. Was it dead yet? No, still alive. The animal was being eaten, and its eyes were open wide in a catatonic state. The voice-over explained that some chemical substance was being secreted inside the gazelle's brain. The gazelle didn't feel suffering or fear, even as it was being consumed. I wondered if Mom's brain was secreting the same chemical. Was that why she lay there all day in a distracted state with so little suffering? Was that why she wasn't afraid of death or worried about her growing paralysis?

Across the room, there was an Alzheimer's patient about Mom's age. She did all sorts of things—shouted in a loud voice, walked out of the room, came back in, then repeated these things all over again. In the bed next to Mom was another woman close to Mom's age, but she lay quietly without moving. She didn't even eat. Once when I was moving a metal chair, I accidentally knocked it hard against her bed, letting out a loud clang that shook her bed. She opened her eyes wide, but even so, she didn't move a muscle.

Mom said, It's probably easier when you get like that. (Mom wasn't looking at the TV, wasn't reading, she just stared at some fixed point.) The lady on my left sometimes talks to me, but I don't have a clue what she's saying. It'd be a lot less trouble for me if she just lay there on her own like the other one.

As night fell, Mom and the other old folks changed personalities and began to remember things. The wanderers began to wander, the emotional patients laid their emotions bare, and some of the patients started to rant and weep. A visitor coming in from outside would pass the receptionist of the dark hospital and go up to the patient rooms on the fourth floor to find a world without night. The lights shone as bright as day, and at the nurses' station, the nurses jotted down notes as if all of this was normal. Artificial anemones and artificial lilies stood on their desks.

A world without night.

A world of nothing but night.

I heard a wild howl. A deep, male voice. Ohhhh, ohhhh, ohhhh. The man's voice reverberated, filling the entire floor.

The lights shone for all they were worth.

As sleek as a clump of growing grass, the nurse jotted down some notes. As if nothing was the matter.

Ohhhh, ohhhh, ohhhh, ohhhh, ohhhh.

Ohhhh, ohhhh, ohhhh, ohhhh, ohhhh.

Someone was angry.

At old age. At their aging self. At the world. At the night. At their aging wife.

I WAS WALKING HOME from the hospital at night when I smelled it—a violently fragrant aroma that clutched at my head and spun me around. That scent—a memory of desire—penetrated my brain, but for a second I couldn't remember the plant's name. I hadn't smelled it for the longest time, but I thought, I know you, I definitely know you, I've missed you, I've missed you, I've been wanting, wanting, wanting to see something nice like you again—and that's when I remembered. Sigh.

A daphne.

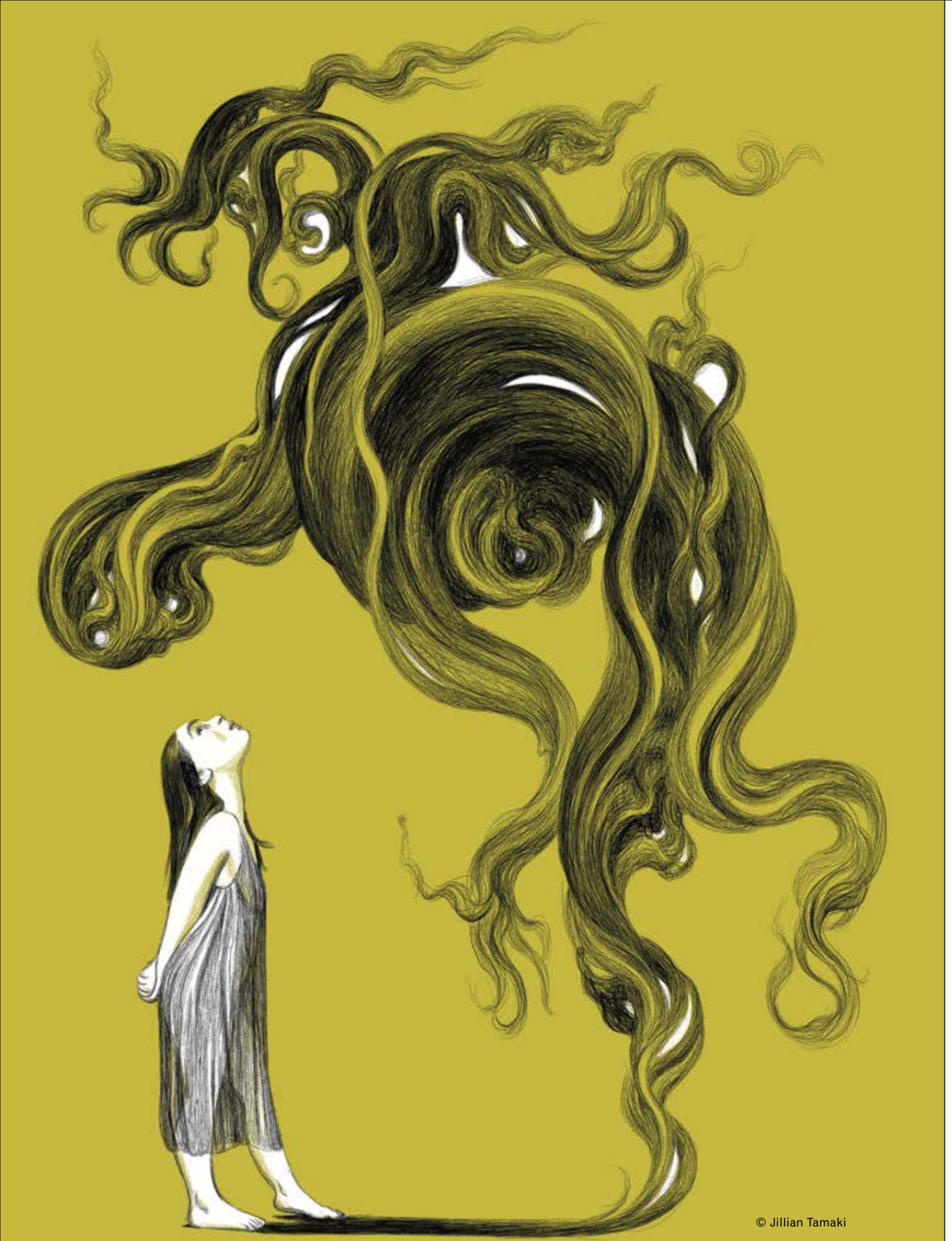
It was hiding in the shade of a wall about two meters away.

A gecko darted right in front of me, and with lightning speed, I reached out and grabbed it. Catching a gecko in the early spring is nothing compared to catching a rat. I put the gecko in my pocket for a while. The way it squirmed inside my palm struck me as incredibly cute, and I wished I could keep it. I wanted to live with it, I wanted it to be part of my family, but I realized that was absurd. A gecko is a gecko. I let it scamper away into the darkness of night.

Even at times like this, you're daydreaming about making a family? As this thought crossed my mind, I let out a sad chuckle, hollow and alone.

Note from the author: This is Chapter 4 from *The Thorn-Puller: New Tales of the Sugamo Jizō*. Throughout this chapter, I have borrowed voices from Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis,* Kenji Miyazawa's story "The Acorn and the Mountain Cat," and the ancient chronicle *Kojiki* (*An Account of Ancient Matters*).

Note from the translator: The English translation borrows passages from David Wyllie's translation of Kafka.



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Haruki Murakami in conversation
with Mieko Kawakami

Good Stories Originate in the Caves of Antiquity

translated by Ted Goossen

MIEKO KAWAKAMI: We're reaching the end of our series of interviews. [Translator's note: This section closes the 345-page book *The Horned Owl Flies at Dusk* (2017).] Let's return to one of the first topics we covered—the presence of evil in your works. We agreed that, while it could be said that pure evil does not exist, you have been tackling what seems to embody evil in your literature, and the way you do that has gone through a number of changes.

When you are dealing with something that seems to be evil, do you ever consider just how evil it actually is? Do you differentiate between the form of evil you are describing at the moment and those forms you have created in the past? Do you ever say to yourself, "I don't think anyone has ever done evil this way before"?

Generations of writers around the world have tackled the subject of evil. I think there is even a basic literary principle that evil in literature is always striving to reach its purest form. This is what makes evil so much more attractive than good. It's fascinating that, to my way of thinking, good has no such impulse. I think that beauty somehow does, but leaving that aside, when it comes to evil, we do aspire to imagine and describe an evil so terrible that no one has ever witnessed it, an evil that has never even existed. I believe this aspiration is connected to our innermost selves: our hidden desires, our inner violence. In your case, when you're describing something approaching evil, and you feel that it has hit home, are you at all conscious how close to pure evil it is? Do you feel as if you've achieved a new level in literature, or in your own writing?

HARUKI MURAKAMI: I've never written about evil in that pure sense, nor have I really tried to, so I've never given much serious thought to what it might be. If you ask me where the greatest evil is to be found, though, I'd have to say in systems.

MIEKO: Your image of evil is connected to systems?

HARUKI: To be more precise, I see the breeding ground of evil as being located in systems like nations, societies, and institutions. I don't mean all systems are innately evil, or that everything they produce is bad. They do a lot of good too. But just as everything casts

a shadow, so too is every nation and every society haunted by the spectre of evil. It lurks in our educational systems, and in our religions. It wounds so many of us, sometimes to the point of death. I am an extreme individualist, so I may be especially sensitive to the evils that systems create. I'd like to deal with this issue more fully in my writing, but my message would likely be politicized, and I'd like to avoid that as much as possible. It's not a political message I'm trying to get across.

MIEKO: In one of our earlier conversations, we talked about the media racket that occurs every year over whether you will finally win the Nobel Prize. It must be a real annoyance when things get so overheated. And then sometimes the argument is expanded to include all Japanese writers, and why we should be turning out more political works.

HARUKI: Really?

MIEKO: Critics say things like, "If Murakami wants to win the Nobel, he needs to write novels that are more overtly political." They say the nature of the Prize demands it. Even apart from the Nobel, some people think that even a non-political novelist should draw their material from pressing social issues and current events. They say it's unforgivably self-indulgent to focus on your personal feelings in the name of creativity, all the while sitting in a safe and secure place. Of course, you are hugely influential, so you draw a line between your work and the so-called political. You avoid a clear political message.

HARUKI: I think my work is pretty political.

MIEKO: Of course it can be read that way. But the political part of it is always couched in several layers of metaphor. One has to read it with that in mind. In your most recent novel, *Killing Commendatore,* for example, you write about Nazi Germany and the Nanjing Massacre. But what your critics mean by political is dealing with *current* events in a very direct way. For a Japanese writer, that would mean tackling things like 3/11, or the nuclear problem, or terrorism. Is it that you have no particular desire to incorporate major social events and issues in your fiction? Is that for the sake of your novels? Or that you simply don't want to?

HARUKI: I have no desire to deal directly with current events in my fiction, at least in their undigested form. I feel strongly that I have to achieve some perspective first, to look at things over time and from a distance, until I can see the here and now in a more mature way.

MIEKO: Even when you write about historical events, you always make sure to filter them through a story instead of presenting them as raw fact.

HARUKI: You're right. That is my basic stance as a writer of fiction.

MIEKO: Do you remember that in one of our earlier conversations you used the words "hard landing" and "soft landing"?

HARUKI: Yeah, I do recall saying something like that.

MIEKO: That the impact a novelist can have on "hard" realities like disasters and social problems is very limited. That the role of the novelist is to facilitate a "soft landing," something that can't be explained in concrete terms. As you put it, what's important is that instead of handling hard realities in hard ways, their outlines need to somehow be made visible, like putting a coat on the invisible man.

HARUKI: That's right. For a whole year, I researched the sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo subways before coming to the conclusion that nonfiction was the only way to handle that material.

MIEKO: So you had no desire to turn it into fiction?

HARUKI: No, none at all.

MIEKO: Why not?

HARUKI: I can't really put it into words. It was instinctive—I felt that fiction wasn't the route to take. That's why I just wrote down what the victims told me and put it into my book in raw, unedited form without inserting any comments of my own. By doing it that way, I thought I would be able to say everything I wanted to. That as a novelist, it was most meaningful to record their voices without taking it upon myself to add my own words. I felt that anything I might have said would somehow have been a falsehood. My novels may be made up, but I don't want them ever to be lies. I was severely criticized for omitting my personal response to the victims' statements—my book lacked "an independent standpoint," was the way they put it—but I think I did the right thing.

Nevertheless, a number of the things I learned in the process of doing that research found their way into my fiction. I slipped them in—in altered form or in double or triple layered metaphors—so I doubt anyone else was aware of it. In this way the victims' stories passed through me and then into my novels, their implications empowering my writing in a variety of ways.

MIEKO: Can you put that process into words?

HARUKI: To a point, yes.

MIEKO: But not completely.

HARUKI: That's true, and I don't want to even try. But I can give you a concrete example. There's a man in "Super-Frog Saves Tokyo" who works for a Tokyo bank, right? The man who is shot by the yakuza.

MIEKO: Katagiri.

HARUKI: Yes, him. I modeled him in part on one of the sarin gas victims I interviewed. That guy told me a lot about the attack, his work, his life. But when I showed him the transcribed interview, he refused to let me publish it. "I don't want any of this in your book," he said. "I don't like it at all." I tried to convince him otherwise, but in the end I failed. His story had to be left out. Sections of his testimony became material for "Super-Frog Saves Tokyo." Of course, they were fashioned to become part of a completely different story. I mean, the short story centers on Mr. Frog.

MIEKO: So for you, fiction and nonfiction resonate together in an essential way.

HARUKI: I can incorporate real events in my fiction as long as they have been processed into story form during their passage through me, but there's no way I can use my fiction to convey a direct message. Even if the cost is every literary prize in the world! [laughs]

MIEKO: I guess we could call that the literary ethics of Haruki Murakami.

HARUKI: I don't care what your motivation is, if you include the victims' experiences of an event in your fiction, you are exploiting them. I hate the idea of using people who are suffering in that way. I don't just mean big events, either—I feel the same way about the kind of suffering you find in everyday life.

MIEKO: Still, there are writers who are able to incorporate those "hard" events in their fiction. I don't want to lump them all together, of course—only they know what their ultimate aims are—but you see what they're doing as possible exploitation. Therefore you can't use things currently taking place around us—real events, with real victims who bleed and grieve and feel rage—in your stories.

HARUKI: If you want to address those issues, I think it's better to do it in a speech or public lecture. I like speaking directly to the people sitting in front of me, in my own voice. In that situation I *want* my opinions to be heard, to take full responsibility for what I say. It's better that way. When I received the Jerusalem Prize, and again when I got the International Catalunya Prize in Barcelona, and the Welt Literature Prize in Berlin, I went with the intention of delivering a contemporary, political message. Some weren't pleased with what I said, but others were really glad that I spoke up.

Nevertheless, speeches like that leave me with a sense of powerlessness. What I say doesn't make the world any better—instead, it seems to be steadily getting worse. My conclusion is that I should probably just stick to writing novels. When I make some kind of political statement, all it does is inspire those with differing opinions to fire back, on Twitter and the like. Rather than getting sucked into dead-end, boring arguments of that sort, I figure I should plow headfirst into my fiction, into the creation of stories. It's best to take a completely different tack than Twitter and Facebook.

MIEKO: So we novelists don't have the time to waste on those things.

HARUKI: It's just a drain on our energies.

MIEKO: We writers should write, period. Our message may not be the kind everyone can understand right off the bat, but then that's not how we fight to begin with. Still, I do feel it's a valid strategy. The only difference is in the way we fight.

HARUKI: That's true. Take the Nanjing Massacre, for example. Those who deny it ever took place have all their answers prepared in advance. If I say one thing, they'll counter with another. If I fire back, the same thing happens again. Their responses are automatic—the pattern is completely predictable. Our exchange becomes choreographed, like watching a fight in a kung fu movie. If I package the story of Nanjing in a work of fiction, however, I can escape that trap. Then they don't know how to respond. Since their prepared answers won't work, all they can do is bay at me from a distance, like a pack of wolves. In that sense, in times like ours stories take on a tenacious kind of power. Sort of like the power they had in premodern times. That's if they are truly good stories.

MIEKO: Premodern power. So, you believe stories can avoid the trap inherent in a debate over facts.

HARUKI: If a story doesn't steer clear—transcend might be another way of putting it—of that trap, then there's no sense telling it.

MIEKO: You've given birth to so many stories that function in the positive way we're talking about, and they have been read by so many people. It may not be that "the elephant has returned to the veldt" [a phrase from *Hear the Wind Sing,* Murakami's first novel], but taken together they constitute a united force that opposes various forms of wickedness and evil. We could even say that reality is the accumulation of those stories we bring to the world—or that it takes shape through the ongoing battle to take hold of the collective unconscious.

HARUKI: A perfect example of an evil story would be that of Shoko Asahara, who masterminded the subway sarin attacks.

MIEKO: Yes.

HARUKI: He lured his followers into a hermetically sealed space, thoroughly brainwashed them, and then sent them out to commit indiscriminate murder. His was an evil story that operated as a closed circuit, a wicked story in the worst way. We writers need to counter that by creating open stories that serve to liberate our readers. Instead of building walls to entrap and exploit, we must offer the world the kind of vision that makes it possible for us to accept each other and be generous to one another. I felt this strongly when I was doing the research for *Underground.* Felt it in my bones. What I heard was just too horrible.

MIEKO: Stories that reach out.

HARUKI: It's the weight of history that provides the basis for these "good stories." For tens of thousands of years, people shared stories and myths in caves, and those continue to live within us. They are the basis of "good stories," their foundation, and their cumulative weight is what sustains us. We need to rely on and place our faith in them. Their weight and strength have endured over great lengths of time—stretching back to those caves of antiquity.

MIEKO: Do you really believe that things like myths and the weight of history are still valid today, Murakami-san? Hasn't the goodness that was once guaranteed by those things been lost?

HARUKI: Not at all.

MIEKO: Or do you feel the return of goodness is only a matter of time?

HARUKI: I would say the link has never been broken. Stories form a constant, unbroken thread in human history, right down to the present day. As far as I know, there are no exceptions. Look at François Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451*—the film based on the Ray Bradbury novel. You can try every means—burn all the books you want, bury writers alive, throw every last reader in jail, destroy the educational system to make children illiterate—but people will still gather in the forest and go on telling their stories. As long as they are good stories.

MIEKO: So the good stories survive, even if there's no paper.

HARUKI: Yes, even if there's no paper. Facebook and Twitter have been around for only a short time.

MIEKO: That's right. We don't know how long they'll last, or what form they'll take in the future.

HARUKI: Compared to them, stories have been around for forty or fifty thousand years. There's an immense stockpile of them. So there's nothing to fear. Stories aren't that easy to bump off.

MIEKO: So you are a staunch believer in the power of "good stories," aren't you. And good stories are definitely out there.

HARUKI: Yes, I intend to keep telling my stories as loudly as I can. Come visit me in my cave if you like. The fire will be blazing, and there'll be plenty of roasted rats to eat. [laughs]

MIEKO: Well, I guess it's time to wrap up this interview. We met three times . . . no, four really, including the interview we did for *Monkey,* and I had plenty of opportunity to ask you about your life and work, but all the preparation I'd made, you know—I used almost none of it! [laughs] I put together my fairly common-sense readings of your works and was all set to bounce them off you in a kind of "That means this, and this means that, right?" kind of way, but once we started talking about your fiction, all that went by the wayside. Look at all these notes . . . here's a timeline I drew up connecting your works with current events. I even sketched the painting you described in *Killing Commendatore*. . . . And even as I was doing these things I knew that there was a chance they might prove pretty useless, but I honestly didn't believe it would turn out to be *this* useless! [laughs]

Still, my initial approach was to invite you to go down into the well with me, and that never changed: I saw things I never would have seen were it not for our conversation, and I achieved my own well experience, so to speak. If there was a moment or two when you felt that, "Ah, this is something I hadn't thought of," then . . .

HARUKI: I feel like I just landed in a radio program. [laughs]

MIEKO: [laughs] . . . I would feel truly vindicated. When you stop to think of it, though, interviews are strange things. When the person being interviewed responds to the questions, everyone thinks he or she is telling the truth. You are expected to answer honestly, and people believe that is what is actually happening. Our basic assumption is that no fabrication is involved. Yet no one is there to vouch for what is being said, which means there's really nothing to stop anyone from lying as much as they want.

HARUKI: I don't lie. There may be some unconscious fabrication taking place, but that's it.

MIEKO: Of course I'm not calling you a liar [laughs], but still I have a sense that there must be many people who could take something different from your answers, something more profound. So I don't want to see the end of this interview as the closing of a door—rather, I hope it can be a passageway leading to insights into your future work.

HARUKI: But you know, when I flip back to glance at my old interviews, it strikes me that what I am saying now is identical to what I was saying then. And that was thirty years ago!

MIEKO: Really?

HARUKI: Of course it depends on what I am being asked, so there are minor shifts as the questions change, but all in all I think I'm trying to get the same points across. I don't know if that's good or bad but, hey, I am who I am. This has been one heck of an interview—I won't have to open my mouth for the next two years!

MIEKO: So let's make a date for two years from now.

Recorded on February 2, 2016,
at Haruki Murakami's home.

Naoya Shiga

The Razor

translated by Ted Goossen

IT WAS A RARE EVENT indeed when Yoshisaburō of the Tatsudoko Barbershop in the Azabu district of Roppongi took to his bed with the flu. The Shūki Kōreisai Festival to mark the autumn equinox was about to start, which meant the barbershop would be especially busy looking after the soldiers stationed in the barracks nearby. Now he regretted sacking Genkō and Jitakō the previous month.

The three of them had worked as apprentices under the former owner. He had given the shop and his only daughter to Yoshisaburō, the one whose skill with the razor he most admired, and then promptly retired. Yoshisaburō was a year or two older than his fellow apprentices.

Genkō had been secretly in love with the daughter, so he left the business not long afterwards, while the easygoing Jitakō simply replaced "Yoshi-san" with "Boss" and carried on as before. The old boss died half a year after his retirement, his wife six months after that.

Yoshisaburō was a true master of the razor. But he was also short-tempered and fastidious to a fault: when a chin he had shaved was the slightest bit rough to the touch, he would go over it hair by hair, pressing and cutting until it was perfectly smooth. Never did he leave the skin inflamed. His customers claimed that, when Yoshisaburō shaved you, it took an extra day for you to need another shave. Yoshisaburō himself was especially proud of the fact that he had never so much as nicked a customer in his ten years as a barber.

Acting as though nothing had happened, an apologetic Genkō came back to the shop two years later. Given their previous friendship as fellow apprentices, Yoshisaburō felt he had no choice but to rehire him. Yet those two years had changed Genkō for the worse. He had grown lazy. Moreover, he dragged Jitakō along on his nightly outings to meet women of dubious character who cavorted with the soldiers in Kasumichō. In the end, Genkō enticed the gullible Jitakō to steal money from the shop. At first, Yoshisaburō let Jitakō off with stern warnings, for he felt sorry for his employee. When it came to embezzlement, though, he had no choice but to give both him and Genkō their marching orders. This had happened a mere month earlier.

Now Yoshisaburō had only two assistants left: Kanejirō, a pale, listless young man of about twenty; and Kinkō, a boy of twelve or thirteen whose head stuck out oddly in back. Neither of them would be of much use now that the pre-festival rush was beginning in earnest. Yoshisaburō could only lie there in his sickbed and fret.

Customers began appearing shortly before noon. The rattle of the glass door as it opened and shut, the dry clapping of Kinkō's broken wooden clogs against the floor—everything grated on his sharpened nerves.

The glass door opened again.

"It's for Yamada from the Ryūdo," a woman's voice rang out. "My master is leaving on a trip tomorrow night and needs this sharpened by this evening. I'll come back later to pick it up."

"We're a bit busy today," he heard Kanejirō say. "Couldn't it wait until tomorrow morning?"

"Well, first thing in the morning then," she said reluctantly.

He heard the rattle of the door as it closed. Then it opened once more.

"I'm sorry to be so troublesome, but could you please ask your boss to do the job himself," she said.

"Well," Kanejirō hesitated. "Right now, you see, he's . . ."

"I'll take care of it, Kane," Yoshisaburō shouted from his bed. His voice still had an edge to it but was growing hoarse.

"As you wish, then," Kanejirō said to the woman. The glass door rattled shut once more.

"Damn!" Yoshisaburō muttered to himself. He raised his arm, stained a faint blue here and there by his sweaty nightclothes, and stared at it for a while. Weakened by fever, his body felt as heavy as a wooden statue. His gaze drifted up to the sooty papier-mâché dog hanging from the ceiling. The talisman was covered with flies.

He could hear people talking in the shop. Two or three soldiers were discussing the small restaurants in the neighborhood; then they went on to complain about the lousy food in their barracks, but how it somehow tasted better now that the weather had cooled off. Listening to their conversation improved his mood somewhat. He rolled over with a sigh.

He could see his wife, Oume, in the pale light coming through the kitchen door beyond the small room, preparing their evening meal with the baby on her back. In his light-headed state, he found the scene comforting.

I might as well get it done now, he thought, dragging his tired body up off the bed, but dizziness made him flop face down on the pillow. He remained like that for a while.

Oume stepped in from the kitchen, her wet hands dangling in front of her apron. "Toilet?" she asked tenderly.

Yoshisaburō tried to tell her no, but nothing came out.

Oume bustled about, loosening his kimono and setting the small spittoon and medicine bottle to one side.

Once again, he tried to stop her, but his voice had become so hoarse she couldn't hear him. His spirits had been improving, but now he could feel his frustration mounting again.

"Shall I give you a boost?" Oume moved behind him as if to hoist him up.

"Bring me the strop and Yamada-san's razor," he croaked. She fell silent.

"You're going to sharpen it now?" she asked after a pause.

"Just bring them—now."

". . . If you're getting up, you should at least put on a padded jacket."

"Bring the damned tools when you're told!" His voice was lowered, but his temper was flaring. Ignoring him, Oume took out a padded jacket, moved behind where he sat cross-legged on the floor, and draped it over his shoulders. With one hand, Yoshisaburō grabbed it by the collar and flung it away.

Oume didn't react but slid open the shoji, stepped down to the dirt-floored space in back of the shop, grabbed the strop and razor, and brought them to him. There was no place to hang the strop, so she hammered a nail into the pillar beside the bed.

Yoshisaburō always found it hard to sharpen when in a bad mood, but the fact that his hands were shaking with fever made it even worse. Oume could see that he was struggling.

"Why not ask Kanejirō to do it?" she asked repeatedly, but he refused to reply. Finally, after fifteen minutes, he had reached the limits of his endurance. Spent in body and spirit, he fell back on the bed. Moments later he was fast asleep.

On the way back from her errand, around the time the evening lamps were being lit, Yamada's maid stopped by and was able to pick up the sharpened razor.

Oume had prepared a pot of rice gruel. She wanted to feed it to the exhausted Yoshisaburō before it cooled but refrained—he was fast asleep and might well fly into a rage if roused. Around eight o'clock, though, she shook him awake to take his medicine. He didn't protest but sat up to eat his dinner. When he had finished, he lay down and went right back to sleep.

Shortly before ten, she woke him for another dose of medicine. He was too groggy to think. But he was bothered by the way his feverish breath, trapped by the collar of his nightclothes, felt against his face. The shop was quiet. He looked around the room with bleary eyes. The black strop hung quietly from the pillar. In the corner, the glimmering lamp cast a strange reddish-yellow light on Oume's back as she suckled the baby. It seemed to him as if the whole room had become infected.

"Boss! . . . Boss! . . ." Kinkō was calling timidly from the threshold.

"What?" Yoshisaburō croaked beneath the covers.

"Boss! . . ." Kinkō said again, unable to catch the muffled voice.

"What is it?" Yoshisaburō answered, this time more sharply.

"Yamada-san sent the razor back."

"Another razor?"

"No, the same one. He tried shaving with it, but it was still dull, so he asked you to sharpen it again and try it on yourself before sending it back. He said by tomorrow noon would be fine."

"Is his maid still here?"

"No, she left."

"Let me see." Yoshisaburō stuck his arm out from under the quilt, and Kinkō crawled over and handed him the razor, still in its case.

"Wouldn't it be better to ask Yoshikawa-san in Kasumichō to do it?" Oume put in. "Your hands are still shaking." Pulling the top of her kimono together, she got up and came over to where he lay.

Yoshisaburō didn't answer but raised the wick on his bedside lamp, took the razor from its case, and tested it by passing the blade back and forth against his skin. Oume sat down beside him and placed her hand against his brow. With his free hand, Yoshisaburō swatted it away like a pesky fly.

"Kinkō!"

"Yes!" came the answer from the foot of his bed.

"Bring the whetstone!"

"Yes sir!"

When the whetstone was ready, Yoshisaburō sat up, raised himself on one knee, and began grinding the razor. The clock slowly chimed ten.

Oume sat there watching him. She knew that nothing she could say would make any difference.

When the grinding was done, Yoshisaburō moved to the strop. The whistle of belt against blade seemed to restore some movement to the dead air in the room. Fighting the trembling in his hands, he settled into a regular rhythm, yet it still didn't feel right. All of a sudden, the nail Oume had hammered into the pillar popped out. The strop flew up and wrapped itself around the razor.

"Watch out!" Oume cried. She cast a fearful glance at her husband. His eyebrows were quivering with rage.

Yoshisaburō unwrapped the strop from the razor, tossed it aside, and, razor in hand, stood up clad only in a light cotton sleeping kimono.

"You mustn't," Oume pleaded. Ignoring her, he stepped down to the storage space. She followed.

The shop beyond was empty of customers. Kinkō was sitting in the chair in front of the mirror.

"Where is Kanejirō?" Oume asked him.

"He went to keep an eye on Tokiko," Kinkō answered seriously.

"Really? Is that what he said?" Oume laughed. Yoshisaburō just glowered.

Tokiko was the odd young woman from the shop five or six doors up the block that had an Army Supplies sign out front. It was rumored that she had attended a fancy girls' school. Because of her presence, there were always one or two young men sitting

inside—soldiers, students, or young men from the neighborhood.

"Tell him to come back," Oume ordered Kinkō. "We need to close up now."

"It's still early," Yoshisaburō contradicted her for no good reason. Oume held her tongue, resigned.

Yoshisaburō went back to his sharpening. Standing made the job a lot easier.

Oume brought a cotton padded jacket and, as if dealing with a small child, coaxed him into it. When at last she had finished, feeling satisfied, she went over to sit in the doorway and watch her husband hard at work. Kinkō was still sitting in the chair beside the window. His arms were folded around his raised knees, and he was running a razor up and down his hairless shins.

Just then the door rattled open and a squat young man in his early twenties burst in. He was clad in a brand-new lined and double-stitched kimono, fastened with a short belt. The thongs on his wooden clogs looked much too tight.

"I'm in a rush, so quicker is better," he said, going to the mirror and thrusting out his jaw. Biting down on his lower lip, he stroked his chin with his fingertips. He was trying hard to sound cool, but you could tell he was a country bumpkin. The knobby knuckles and black creases on his face testified that he was a laborer.

Oume turned to face Kinkō. "Go get Kanejirō!" she said, her eyes fixed on his.

"*I'll* take care of it," snapped Yoshisaburō.

"But your hands . . ." she stammered.

"I'll do it," he cut her off.

"Are you sure you're all right?" she whispered.

"Bring me my smock!"

"Fine, but leave that on. You're just shaving the gentleman, so you won't get any hair on it." Oume was concerned lest he take off the padded jacket.

Puzzled, the young man looked back and forth between the two of them.

"Are you sick, Boss?" he asked. The young man's beady, deep-set eyes crinkled in an obsequious smile.

"Yes, I've got a slight cold . . ."

"They say a nasty one's going around, so you should take care of yourself."

"Thanks," Yoshisaburō said in a flat voice.

"Remember, quicker is better," the young man said again as the white towel was being wrapped around his neck. "I'm in a bit of a rush," he added with a smirk. Yoshisaburō didn't respond but tested the newly sharpened blade against the inside of his arm.

"You'll have it done within an hour, by eleven thirty, right?" the young man said, angling for an answer.

Images of where this squat, crude young man would likely go next whirled around in Yoshisaburō's feverish brain. A squalid whorehouse with sluttish whores who talked like men. Picturing the acts they would perform turned his stomach, yet he could not drive the thoughts away. He plunged the soap into the tepid water and began furiously lathering, from the neck to the cheek. Even then the young man kept trying to catch a glance of himself in the mirror. Yoshisaburō wanted to give him a tongue lashing.

The razor whistled against the strop a few more times, then Yoshisaburō began to shave, starting with the neck and working up. It didn't go well. His hands were shaking. And his nose was dripping too. Though it hadn't bothered him lying down, when he was bending over a customer like this it became a constant nuisance. He would break off shaving to wipe away the mucus, but soon his nose would start tickling again as the next drop gathered on its tip.

Oume left to look after their baby, who had started to cry in the next room.

The blade was still far from perfect, but the young man didn't react. A little pain was nothing, he seemed to be saying. Yoshisaburō found his indifference infuriating. There were other, sharper razors at hand, including the very good one that was his favorite, but he refused to make the switch. He no longer cared how it would go. Even so, unconsciously, his focus grew more intense. It bothered him if the skin was the slightest bit rough to the touch. The more perfect he tried to make it, the more his anger mounted. His strength was fading. His spirit was as well. The fever seemed to have risen.

The young man had tried to chat him up at first, but Yoshisaburō's ominous silence had stilled his tongue. By the time Yoshisaburō was working on his forehead, he was nodding off, tired from his hard day of manual labor. Kinkō was dozing in the chair by the window. In the next room, Oume's crooning had stopped. Silence reigned outside as well. The only sound was that of the razor.

Yoshisaburō no longer felt angry. Instead, physical and mental exhaustion had driven him to the point of despair. His eyes were flooding with tears from the fever.

He had worked his way up from the neck to the cheeks, and from there to the jaw and the forehead, but the soft flesh at the throat still felt rough. Yoshisaburō was at his wit's end. He felt like ripping it off. Just looking at the rough skin, each pore an oily pool, made this feeling stronger. Now the young man was fast asleep. His head lolled back and his mouth hung open, exposing a jagged row of filthy teeth.

Fatigue was pushing Yoshisaburō to the breaking point. Every one of his joints seemed to be filling with poison. Again and again he felt like abandoning the whole thing and lying down there on the spot. *No more!* screamed his body. Yet, as ever, his obsession drove him on.

At that moment he felt the blade catch on something. The young man's neck twitched. A current whipped through Yoshisaburō, from the top of his head to the tip of his toes. In that split second, all weariness and fatigue disappeared.

The cut was less than half an inch long. He stood there, unable to take his eye off it. It was the color of milk at first, then it turned a pale red, and then the blood began to swell. He watched transfixed. Dark beads formed. When they reached their peak, the beads broke, and a thin trickle of blood slid down the young man's neck. He felt a violent surge of emotion.

Perhaps because Yoshisaburō had never cut anyone before, the feeling was overwhelming. His breathing grew more and more rapid. It seemed as if all of him—all his body, all his spirit—was being sucked into the wound. He was powerless to resist . . . Suddenly, he gripped the razor in his fist and plunged it deep into the neck. So deep the blade could no longer be seen. The young man did not even flinch.

The gush of blood began a moment later. As he watched, the young man's face took on the color of dirt.

Yoshisaburō collapsed into his chair as though unconscious. In the very moment the tension had departed, his exhaustion had returned. Utterly drained, slumped in his seat, he looked dead. The night too was as still as death. Movement had stopped. All things were sound asleep. Only the mirrors on the three walls gazed coldly at the scene before them.

THE FILM DIRECTOR HIROKAZU KOREEDA ON NAOYA SHIGA'S "THE RAZOR"

Hirokazu Koreeda in Paris during the filming of *La Vérité* in 2018; © Laurent Champoussin

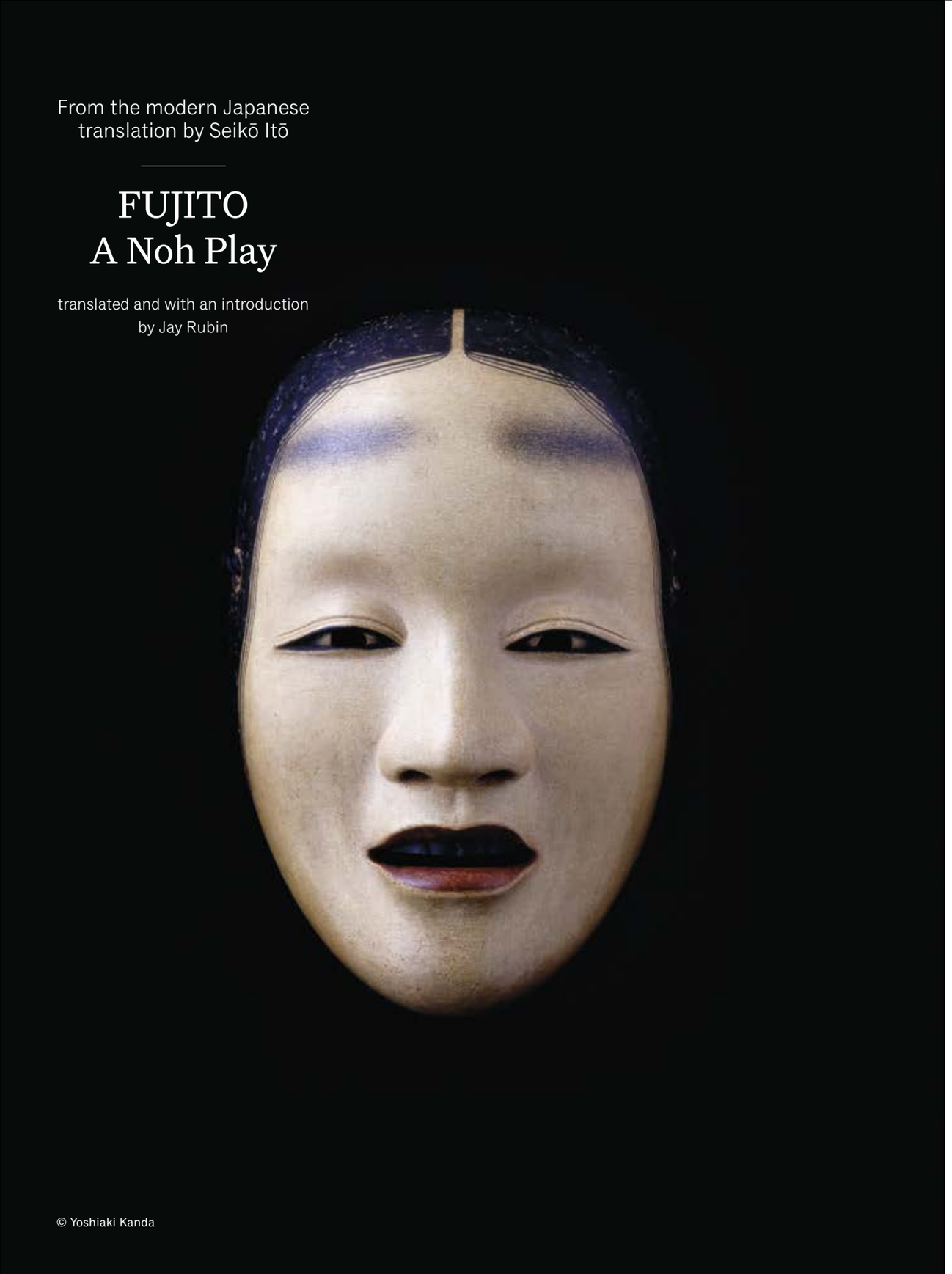
I was in high school the first time I read this story. I thought it was brilliant, not a word wasted. I shuddered when I got to the end of the story. I pictured the razor wielded by the barber I went to at the time, and could hear the sound it made against the leather strop. I remember thinking, I want to write a story like that!

I guess I like works that describe those moments in everyday life when violence and malice show themselves. Rereading "The Razor" reminds me of Raymond Carver's work in that respect. The final image of the mirrors is very cinematic.

From the modern Japanese
translation by Seikō Itō

FUJITO
A Noh Play

translated and with an introduction
by Jay Rubin



VICTIMS OF WAR: AN INTRODUCTION

IF THE FIRST WORLD WAR marked the end of war as a romantic notion, the wars fought in Vietnam, El Salvador, Uganda, Iraq, Bosnia, Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan—to name only a few—have made it clear who pays the price of war above all others: not so much the combatants themselves as the innocent civilians whose cities and villages the warriors turn into battlefields. The site of one such skirmish in twelfth-century Japan was named Fujito, but a fifteenth-century Noh playwright was the first to see what the real tragedy of that battle had been, and in doing so he created a stark and chilling work of theater art that speaks with awful directness to our modern age of butchery.

What follows here is an English translation of the novelist Seikō Itō's translation into modern Japanese of the fifteenth-century original. It may not look like a dramatic text, lacking as it is in stage directions, dramatis personae, designations of speakers, the naming of dances, or other paraphernalia conventionally used in translations of drama, but it nevertheless hews very closely to the original. It most emphatically is not a prose paraphrase but an accurate translation of the text as found in *utaibon* practice books available to anyone who wants to know what is going on in a Noh play. Itō's modern Japanese translation also preserves many of the *kakekotoba* (pivot words) and other verbal acrobatics of the original, but unfortunately few of those have survived transfer into English.

Actors in Noh do not impersonate characters but instead participate at certain musically determined points in what amounts to the public recitation of a narrative. They drift in and out of the textual flow, which is largely driven by the chanting of the chorus. Actors sometimes speak in the first person, but occasionally they describe their own actions in the third person and sometimes they dance silently while the chorus takes over their first-person speech. Quotation marks are used here to designate speech where the characters do speak (or sing) to each other in passages that most closely approach dialogue (and also at one point to mark a citation of earlier poetry), but no attempt is made to distinguish between lines delivered by the chorus and those delivered by the actors.

This translation first appeared in the April 2020 issue of the magazine *Shinchō,* where it benefitted greatly from the attention of Maho Adachi and other members of the editorial staff.

THE ACTION BEGINS on a beautiful spring day in 1185 when the commander Sasaki Saburō Moritsuna arrives to claim the island of Kojima that had been granted to him after a brilliant victory there the year before.

FUJITO

AND NOW WE ARRIVE AT THE HARBOR where spring ends. But where will this spring fade away as it leaves us? Perhaps at the Fujito Crossing, where flowers of the *fuji*—wisteria—remind us that spring is in its final days?

I who stand before you now am Sasaki Saburō Moritsuna. In the Genpei War, I was honored to lead the vanguard at the victorious battle of Fujito, destroying the camp of the Heike enemy, for which exploits I have been granted this Isle of Kojima in Bizen. I have chosen this auspicious day to set foot in my new domain for the very first time.

Our land is as peaceful as a hovering dragonfly. Calm waves surround my island as we circle it. Gentle breezes caress the pines, and suited to the season is the spreading light of dawn. My ship glides on through the tranquil day, and now, so quickly, we have arrived—have we not?—in Fujito. Yes, here we are in Fujito.

"Is someone present?"

"I am here before you, my lord."

"I have chosen this auspicious day to take up residence on this island. Tell the people that if anyone wishes to make an appeal to me as the new lord of this domain, they should come forward and do so."

"Yes, my lord. —Now listen, everyone. The new master of this shoreland, Lord Sasaki Moritsuna, is honoring you with his presence. If anyone has an appeal to make to him, let that person come forward now."

Whereupon an old woman appears.

"Aged by the waves of time, I have lived this long, shedding endless tears here in Fujito. Oh, bring me back to the spring of yesteryear."

"What a strange old woman. Why are you looking at me and shedding tears as though you have some grievance?"

"My Fault is what they call the tiny creature that lives in the seaweed gathered by the fisherfolk. My fault indeed: I may cry but will not blame others for my misery. The punishment that you, a powerful warrior, visited upon a simple fisherman was, I know, like a turn of the karmic wheel in retribution for his daily sin of taking life, but how cruel that it should have happened to my son! You punished an innocent young man by plunging him beneath the waves. Disrespectful though it may be for me to say this to you, my lord, I have come before you to make my appeal."

"Angry with me for having plunged your innocent son beneath the waves? I don't know what you're talking about."

"But you did it. You plunged my son beneath the waves."

"Not so loud. What are you saying?"

"Oh, so you think no one knows? Instead of trying to hide it, why don't you confess the truth and hold a memorial service for my son? Or at least if you were to come to me with words of comfort, you might release me somewhat from the rancor with which I live on after him."

How long can one keep such a secret (not even the hill called "Secret Mountain" can be concealed)? To hide it is pointless, for in this pointless world the story's seeds have begun to sprout: why even try to cover them?

"This world in which I have piled up so many years is but a momentary lodging," the old woman continues. "The bond of parent and child, they say, is like a fleeting phantom, but once it is severed, the sorrow binds me in agony. The least you can do is pray for the soul of my son, whom you dragged into the ocean."

"Thus accused, I can no longer hide the truth. Now let me tell you everything that happened at that time. Come closer, woman, and listen."

And thus does Sasaki Moritsuna begin his tale.

"It happened last year on the night of the twenty-fifth day of the third month. I summoned a man who lived on the nearby shore and asked him if he knew of a place where the ocean could be crossed on horseback. 'Yes,' he said, 'a shallow area forms to the east at the beginning of the month and to the west near the end of the month.' And so, in strictest confidence even from my own retainers, I went in secret with this man, the two of us examining every part of the shallows. On our way back, I thought to myself, *This man is of the lower orders and, devoid of loyalty, he might divulge to others what we have learned today.* As sorry as I was to do it, I grabbed hold of him, pulled him to me, stabbed him twice, and let him sink into the ocean before I returned to camp. So, he was your son, was he? I ask you to resign yourself: all things are determined by our sins in a former life. I will hold a service for his spirit and see to it that his wife and children are taken care of. Please let go of your rancor."

"So it was true after all. Where did you submerge my son in the ocean?"

"See that boulder on the sandbar that looks as if it's floating on the water's surface? I sank his body in the depths just this side of it."

"Exactly as people have been saying. I had heard it happened there."

"It happened as evening turned to night. I thought no one would know."

"Oh, people know, people know right away."

"I was so sure I had kept it well hidden."

"Good deeds never exit one's gate, they say . . ."

. . . while evil deeds become known a thousand leagues distant. Though a thousand leagues may separate them, a parent can never forget her child, but for what could the death of that child be punishment? Truly, this is what is meant by the poem: "A parent's heart is not the dark of night, but too much love for a child can make you lose your way." I see now, too, how transient are the things of this world. Death does not visit us in order, from old to young. This old woman has been left behind by her young son. The twenty years and more I spent with him now feel like the dream of an old crane forced to live on after losing her beloved child. I would long to see his face when we were parted only briefly, the woman mourns, but now how long will it be until we meet again in the next life?

Living in this present world, our sorrows never end. They reach us one after another, like bamboo sections floating down a river. My son, the fisherman, was my only staff, my pillar in this world he left behind, and now upon what grass or trees can I lodge this fleeting dewdrop of my life? In agony, I have nothing left to live for: kill me now as you killed my son, she cries, writhing on the ground, unashamed before the eyes of onlookers. Give my son back to me! she commands, her wits now shattered, a sight too grievous to behold.

Moritsuna calls to his men: "Is someone present?"

"I am here before you, my lord."

"Take this woman to her home."

"Yes, my lord, I shall do so."

Soon many voices chanting the sutras can be heard, and the words of the Buddha ring out everywhere. Day and night tones of grief resound on the shoreline where Moritsuna and his men sleep by the waves. The *Greater Sutra of the Perfection of Transcendent Wisdom,* the very ship of salvation, sounds its message of release from the rope-like bonds that tie us to this world of suffering, calming the hearts of all who are in agony: *ISSAI-UJŌ, SETSUGAI SANGAI FUDA-AKUSHU, Though one kill every living creature in the world, one will not fall into Hell or the realm of hungry ghosts or the realm of beasts or the warrior's afterworld of endless strife.*

A ghostly figure soon appears before them and speaks: "What misery! Trying not to recall what happened, trying to forget is far more painful than living with the memory. True, the fleeting world of men is as uncertain as the fickle crashing of waves upon the shore. I could have accepted heavy punishment had the waters of my heart been clouded with sin, but they were as clear as water for the gods. I see now that by rashly showing you the way across the sea, I was preparing myself to cross the River of Three Crossings, the entryway to Hell."

How strange! As dawn breaks, upon the water appears one who could not be alive. Might it be the dead fisherman? Moritsuna wonders, amazed.

"Your prayers are welcome enough, but I am here to give voice to my unending rancor," the man says.

"'To tell of your rancor, you say?" Moritsuna replies. "Is that why you have come here beneath the evening moon?"

"'Show me the Fujito Crossing,' you said, laying upon me that command as heavy as the boulders upon which the waves were crashing, and amid them all the shallow way across."

"You showed me, and I followed your guidance across,"

"Not only to added military glory,"
"But never in history had anyone"
"Crossed the ocean on horseback"
"To be granted this island,"
"Your joy thanks to me."
"For which any reward, however great,"
"I should have been given—"

But instead you took my life—a deed rarer even than crossing the ocean on horseback. I can never forget what you did that night. You took me to the boulder on the sandbar, drew your sword with its freezing cold blade and ran it through my chest again and again, and just as my life and my spirit were fading, you pushed me down into the ocean, where I sank beneath the waves to the bottom of the sea.

Just then the current changed and I was swept away, sinking and floating, buried beneath the sand, lodged between the rocks, until I became the sinister dragon god of Fujito, ready to vent my rage from the bottom of the sea until—

All unforeseen, your prayers reached me and now I have been saved by the ship of Buddha's Law. Yes, I have boarded the vessel of the Universal Vow that carries all sentient beings to the far shore, that moves ahead thanks to His sure and steady poling, across the sea beyond life and death, easily arriving at the Pure Land paradise for which I prayed, freed from all illusion, transformed into this Buddha you see before you now.

ZEAMI MOTOKIYO (1363–1443) was the great creative genius of the Noh theater. There is no positive proof that Zeami wrote *Fujito,* though most sources credit him with it. I find it hard to imagine that another playwright could have used the material for *Fujito* with such insight and intensity and remained unknown. The fourteenth-century source for the play, *The Tale of the Heike,* never mentions the fisherman again once he has been dispensed with, and when the conquering warrior is granted the island of Kojima in the *Tale,* the tone is one of celebration. The commanding figure of the mother—how many wailing mothers have we seen on the news in recent years?—is the playwright's creation.

If anything, Moritsuna's crime is more grotesque in the original tale of fighting between the Taira and the Minamoto: He "ran the fisherman through, cut off his head, and tossed it away," thinking, "Who knows who this fellow really is or where his loyalty lies? Someone else might get the same information out of him just as easily as I did. No, nobody else must know." (Translation by Royall Tyler, *The Tale of the Heike,* page 575.) That the two had just swum naked in the ocean together before the killing—a detail the playwright missed—seems to make the lack of human sympathy all the more damning, of both Moritsuna and the early tale's creators. The author of *Fujito* had a far more inclusive view of humanity, "lower classes" and all.

Graphic narrative by Jon Klassen
Text by Yōko Ogawa

The Visitor

translated by Lucy North

Oh my. That's unusual. Could it be . . . a visitor?

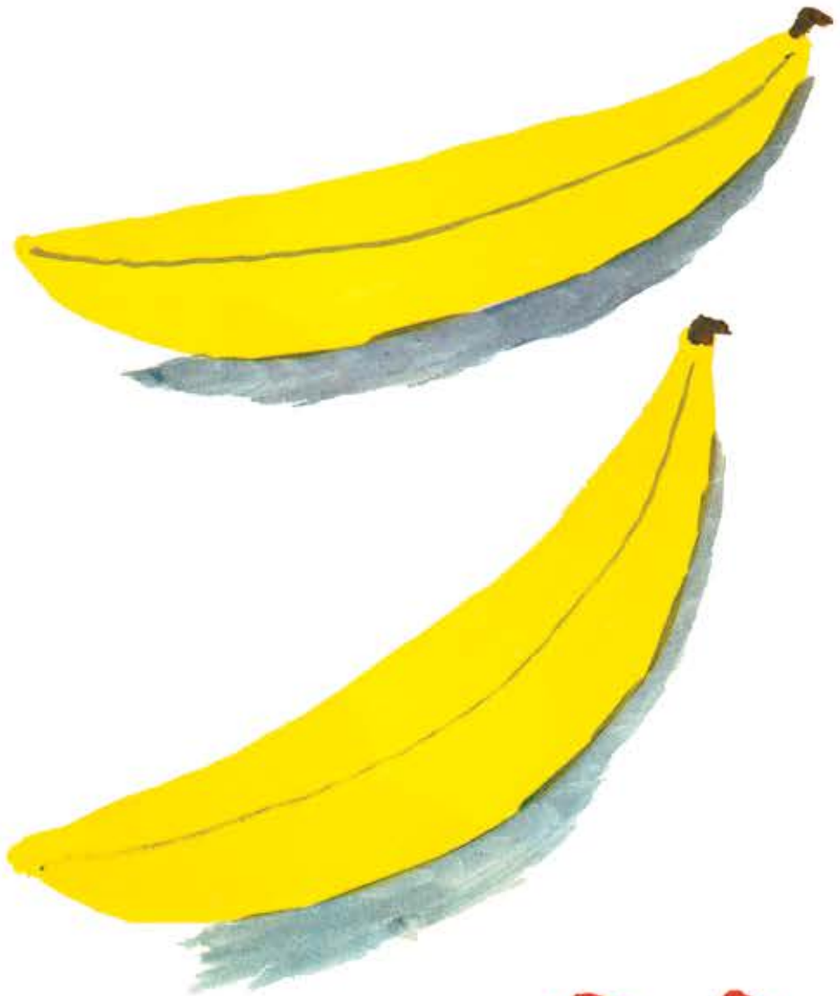
I would guess that this visitor must be quite small and unassuming.

No one has ever set eyes on the owner of this house.
There's no front door, and the darkness has painted every window black.

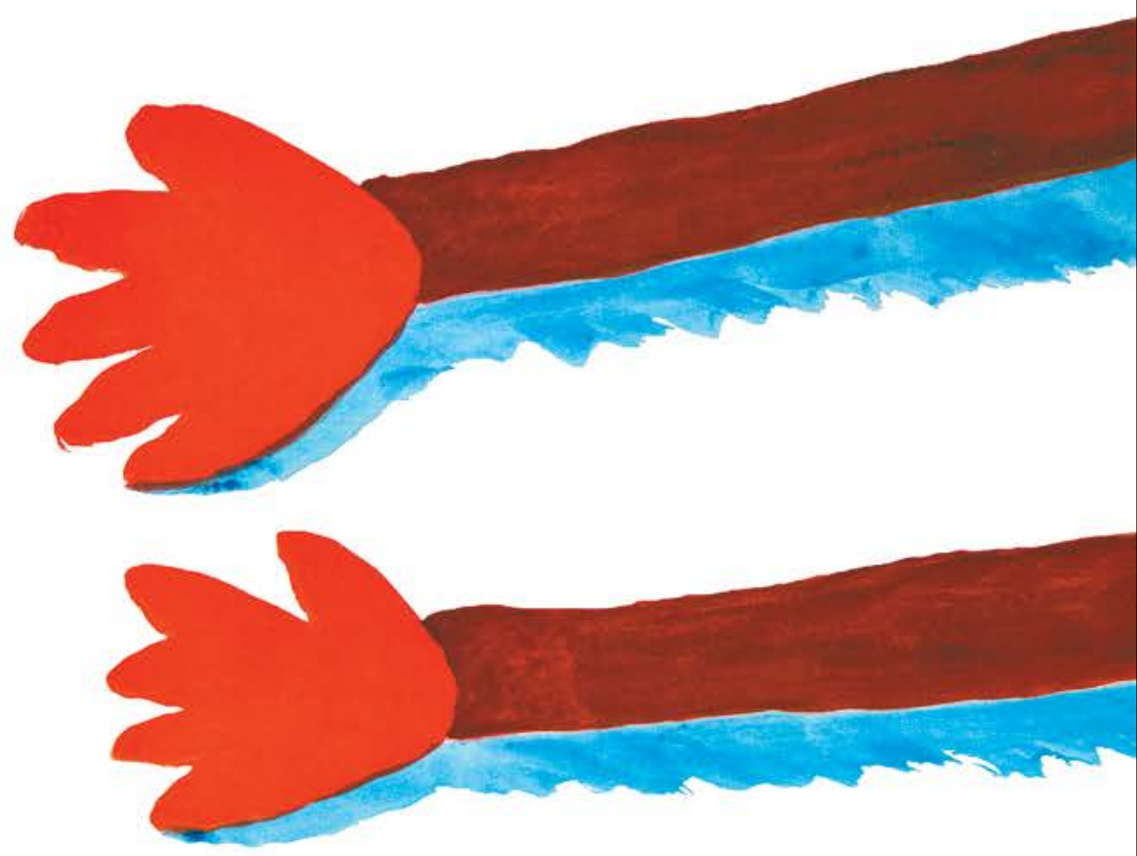
Why would you expect otherwise?
The shyest man in all the world built this house, and it hangs in the space of the night sky.

It’s so quiet—too quiet.
Even the leaves have withered and fallen from the trees.

The only visitors allowed are little birds.
They leave tracks in the snow to show that the owner is not alone, then fly away.



FOOD
A Monkey's Dozen



Unlike a baker's dozen (one extra!), a monkey's dozen is one short, since monkeys are always up to something and on the lookout for delicious treats. They'll nibble from a bag of pastries meant for someone else. Hence you will find here eleven stories, essays, and a selection of poems about food—the special focus of this issue.

Hiroko Oyamada

Something Sweet

translated by David Boyd

IT WAS A SATURDAY AFTERNOON and elementary school had let out after morning classes. Mom and I went to visit Grandma. She fell at home a while ago. An ambulance came and took her to the hospital, where she's been ever since. Sumitani Hospital is closer, and that's where we go when I get sick, but they took Grandma to a bigger hospital—one we'd never been to before—about a fifteen-minute drive down the new road. A week or so after Grandma fell, she was able to stand up and go to the toilet on her own. She was eating like normal, too. She looked perfectly healthy to me. Every time we visited, I couldn't help but wonder why she hadn't come home yet.

"Well, look who it is! It's the Sakais!" As we walked into the hospital, we ran into an older couple from our neighborhood. They were carrying large paper bags, and were apparently about to go home. "Hi, how have you been?" Mom bowed. I did the same. The woman was looking at my mother through weirdly large glasses, bringing her worried face even closer as she asked, "Oh, how's your mother-in-law? She doing okay?" Her husband was staring off into space. When I turned to follow his gaze, I saw a tiny TV set up in the corner of the lobby. High school baseball. "Much better, thanks. What about Shoei-kun?" "He's gonna be okay." There were orchids by the entrance—a lot of them. Most were moth orchids, some white and some pink, but there were other kinds, too. All the orchids were in full bloom. It was like they were fake. Not one was dead or withering. "I'm so glad to hear it." "But he's a real bonehead. He's going to have a huge bolt in his leg for the rest of his life." Looking closer at one of the plants, I noticed it was bulging near the bottom. I could see my own reflection in its smooth, swollen surface. As I tilted my head, my reflection tilted with me. "Sorry to hear that." "Same here. Well, just between us, I saw what happened to his motorbike, and it wasn't pretty. It's a miracle he didn't end up way worse. Maybe now he can put that death trap and his stupid friends behind him." Clear nectar was dripping down the stem of the pale yellow flower. I ran a finger up from the bottom, scooping it up. Mom and the woman were facing each other, absorbed in conversation, and the woman's husband was still watching the game with the same vacant look in his eyes. I licked my finger. It smelled flowery and dusty—the taste was a little sweet. "Maa-chan's a real darling, isn't she?" I jerked my head up. The woman leaned forward and flashed a grin at me. I could see the black of her gums. "You came to visit your grandmother?" I nodded. "How sweet. There's really no better medicine than getting to see your granddaughter's pretty face." "Come on," her husband spoke for the first time. "We're holding them up. Let's get going." "Oh no, looks like I'm in trouble!" The woman stuck out her red tongue, then headed toward the exit, saying, "Tell your mother we'll stop by next time we come, okay?" Mom bowed again as we watched them go. When the automatic doors slid open, a blast of muggy air rushed in, then they shut again. We got in the elevator to go to Grandma's room on the third floor. When the door opened, we were facing the nurses' station, where a nurse was biting into a rice ball as big as a baby's head, writing something down with her free hand. As soon as we stepped out, Mom turned to me. "Mariko, can you spend a few minutes in the common room? I need a little time to talk to Grandma alone." Right by the nurses' station is the common room—a place for patients and visitors to get together and talk or share some snacks. It has a TV, a couple of shelves lined with paperbacks, magazines, and old manga, a vending machine, a couch, and a few small round tables with chairs around them. "Give me ten minutes, okay? Maybe fifteen. How about you find a comic to read, then come to Grandma's room?" I was shocked. Mom had always been so strict about the comics I read. She had so many rules: I could never borrow manga from my friends' older sisters or read the ones meant for boys. Now she was telling me I could read something here without even seeing what they had? "Really?" "Really. Just don't read any of the weird ones, okay?" The weird ones—the ones that had women wearing underwear or nothing at all, the ones full of death and violence, the ones that make your nose bleed or keep you from going to the bathroom at night on your own. Maybe it was the nectar, but I had a sour taste in my mouth. I looked over at the common room. One of the tables was taken, but the couch was open. I didn't see anyone by the manga, either. "Okay. What do you need to talk to Grandma about?" "Nothing serious." Her face was blank. She didn't look angry or worried or anything. "Fifteen minutes. Got it?" Then she hurried off to Grandma's room. I went into the common room. The couch wasn't free after all—there were two people on it: a teenager with short-cropped hair and his arm in a cast, and a woman with long hair. They were leaning against each other, sinking deep into the peeling leather. She had to be a lot older than him. They had their eyes closed, but they couldn't have been sleeping. I could see their eyes twitching behind their eyelids. I looked over at the table. A boy was sitting there, eating alone. He was probably around my age. He was wearing jeans, so he couldn't have been a patient. His lunch looked store-bought—slices of light brown meat over white rice. He was hunched over the table, devouring his meal. All of a sudden, he looked up at me and stared, his legs spread unnaturally wide. When I gasped, he started tapping his foot, his eyes still fixed on me. He was shaking as he bit into the slice of meat he had between his chopsticks. I got scared and left, heading straight for the stairs.

What mattered was killing time. It didn't matter where I waited, and I was pretty sure I'd seen a magazine rack in the lobby on the first floor. As I ran down the stairs, my shorts billowed, brushing against my legs. When I got to the lobby, it was empty. The lights were off and so was the TV. A sign at the reception window read OUTPATIENT CLINIC CLOSED FOR THE AFTERNOON. In the dark, I could see the moth orchids by the wall, heads raised as if ready to strike. I went outside. Across the street from the hospital parking lot was a rice paddy so overgrown that I couldn't see the water. On the other side of the paddy was a house: a new-looking two-story. Next to the lawn, the deeper green of the rice plants was vibrant. Maybe the grass was fake. At our house, Grandma tended the garden every day, and it had grown thick in her absence. There were weeds everywhere: some looked like upside-down sparklers and others had roots connecting underground—neither would come free with a little tug. The Chinese trumpet vines were out of control, stretching in every direction, their orange flowers falling off in clumps. When summer break starts next week, I told myself, Mom's probably going to make me get up, weed the garden, and clean up around the house. Will Grandma come home before then? A heron was standing in the paddy, bending its long neck, inspecting the ground below.

Right behind the hospital was a pond full of murky water with some kind of wooded area on the other side. Beyond the rusty fence surrounding the green pond were weeds that ran right up to the edge. The foamy white tips of the weeds looked like sticky fur. I walked up to the fence. I could see all these things floating on the pond but couldn't tell if they were some sort of plant or algae-covered trash. Whatever they were, there were clusters of bubbles around them, and I could hear them popping from where I was standing. A ring spread out from the center of the pond, then vanished as if someone had tossed a rock in. In the water, I could see something round and gray. I squinted until I could make out what it was: a tadpole, with a tail and everything. It was big—too big. This tadpole was easily several times bigger than the ones I was used to seeing in paddies. Its head looked bigger than a ping-pong ball. I even saw two eyes popping out and a hole for a mouth. I thought it was strange how I could see it so clearly when the water was this muddy, but there was a layer of clear water near the surface. The tadpole had to be swimming where the layers met. Occasionally, it lifted its mouth up out of the water, probably to get air, sending ripples across the pond that would vanish seconds later. Pointing down, the tadpole's tail kicked the green layer up from below, mixing it with the clear water for a moment. When the tadpole approached the surface, I could see its shining silver belly. Wow, it's big . . . Maybe it's a bullfrog tadpole. We don't have any bullfrogs where I live, but I know there are some living in a river not very far away—and I've heard that they attack people on bicycles when they ride by at night. If you get too close to the river with your bike light on, the croaks suddenly stop and the next thing you know some icky lump latches onto your face. One big ball of slime knocks you down, bike and all, then more and more of them creep out of the river to lick your face clean off. The best defense is supposed to be a helmet that covers your

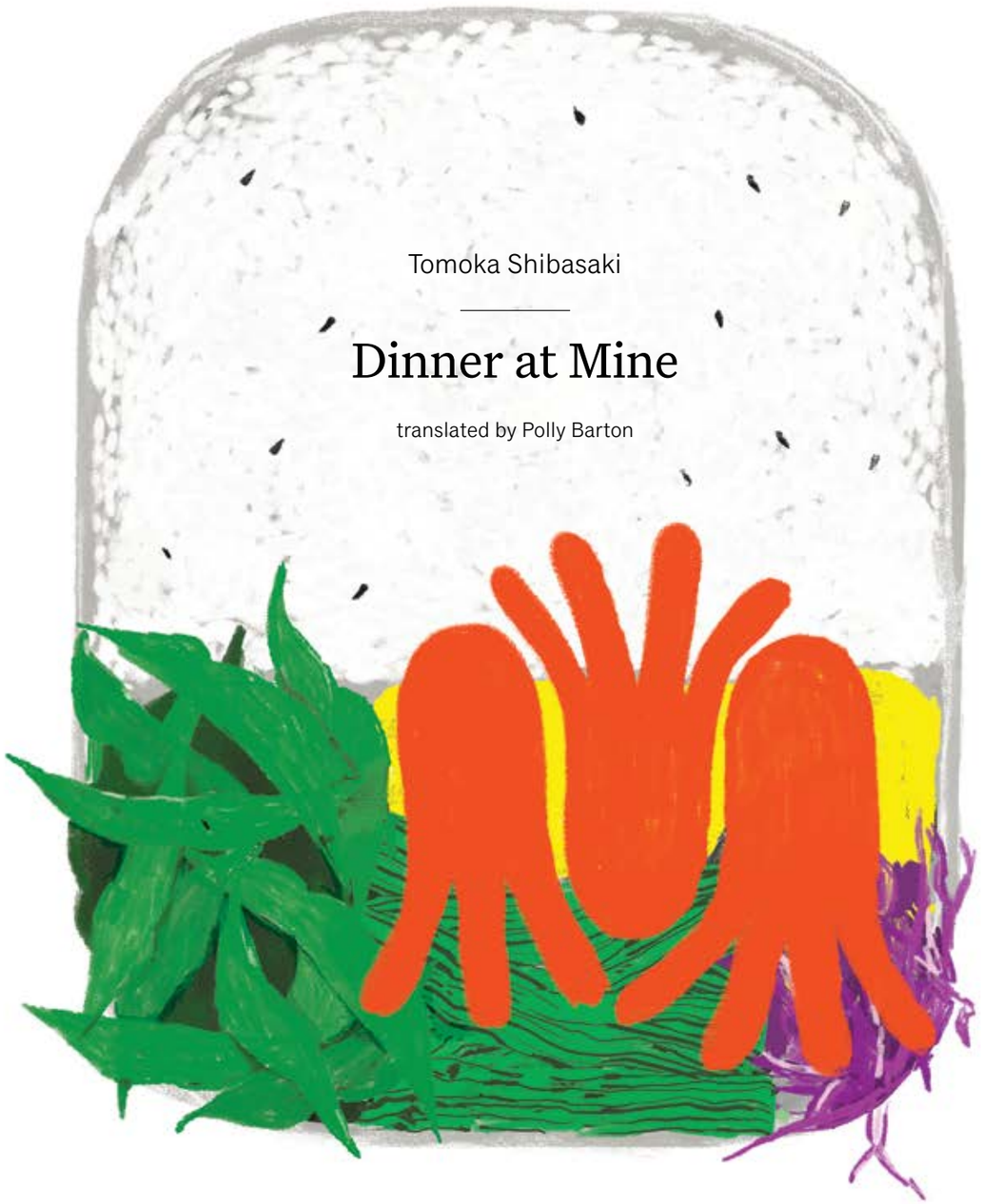
face—but look at the size of the thing, and this is just a tadpole! If a frog that large flew up at you, it would topple your bike like it was nothing. It could probably bring a motorcycle down. A blast of wind came from the woods, cutting across the water, making waves and splitting the pond in two. The sticky weeds brushed against my knees through the fence. Plop. Rings spread across the water. Plop, plop, plop, plop. More rings, rippling out, running into each other and disappearing. They're all . . . a chill ran through me. Are all these tadpoles going to become bullfrogs? Where are the adult frogs? In the pond? I looked around the grass, but I didn't see anything moving. All I could see were the dead bodies of white caterpillars. But when I looked harder, I could see they were just crooked cigarette butts. Maybe the frogs were underwater, somewhere out of sight. Maybe they didn't come out until it was dark. Just to the right of where I was looking, at the edge of the pond, there was a little splash, then another. Wondering what it was, I got as close as I could. I saw tadpoles hopping up, writhing around in a pile. They were so worked up that they were leaping clear out of the water. I crouched down, grabbed the fence and stuck my nose through the chain link. I could smell rust. I heard a voice coming from a speaker on the street that runs by the side of the hospital. Hey, careful, it isn't safe . . . Maybe it was a police car talking to a kid on a bike. The gentle voice—careful, it isn't safe, careful—dissolved into distortion and hummed against my cheek. Sweat was dripping down my forehead. It was probably time for me to go. It might have been more than fifteen minutes. Mom had to be done talking with Grandma. I didn't have a watch on. Mom said I'd lose the one I got for my last birthday, so she'd held onto it for me. The tadpoles from before were gone, but something else was in their place . . . something bigger. It has to be a . . . "Bullfrog!" I shouted out loud. The frog was as big as my palm, but something was wrong with it. Its fat legs were stretched out, but it wasn't swimming or anything. Slowly, the frog flipped over, revealing a giant black hole in its white belly. I thought I could see something moving around inside of it—when a tadpole slipped out. I could see bones poking out from the frog's body. They looked thin and sharp. Nothing else was left of the frog now, nothing but skin and bones.

A few people were sitting in the lobby. The baseball game was on the TV. I ran up the stairs. On the wall by the landing between the first and second floors were some strips of red tape in the shape of a torii. When I passed the common room, it was empty. The boy was gone, and so was the couple. The muted TV was showing the same game that was on downstairs. Suntanned boys in white uniforms slapped each other on the shoulder, smiling as they jumped into the air.

When I got to Grandma's room, she was in bed by the window, watching TV alone. Her face was glowing green in the light of the screen. It was a four-person room, and the curtains around the other three beds were drawn. "Maa-chan!" As soon as she saw me, Grandma broke into a smile and turned off the TV. The slot beneath the screen spat out a card with a mechanical whir. A photo of a kitten was printed on the front. You have to buy one of these cards if you want to watch TV in the hospital. "Your mom went to help with the laundry." "Did you finish talking?" "Uh-huh, all done. Thanks for waiting, sweetie." Grandma heaved a long sigh. Her breath had been smelling worse ever since she came to the hospital. "How are you doing, Grandma?" She's in the hospital, so she can't be doing that well, but I didn't know what else to say. "Doing great," she said, draping a gauze handkerchief over the feeding cup on the rectangular tray in front of her. There was more on the tray: a balled-up tissue, the TV remote, and a folded piece of paper with some small print on it. She picked up the tissue and put it in the wastebasket. It was stained with something that looked like blood but pinker. "When's vacation start?" "Next week." "You gonna go to the pool?" "Her breaststroke apparently needs some work," Mom said as she came into the room. She had a white plastic bag in her hand. "They said she doesn't go anywhere. She's not too bad at the crawl, and her backstroke's actually above average. But her breaststroke . . ." "My my my," Grandma said with a chuckle. "So what if her breaststroke needs work? As long as she can doggy paddle . . ." "I know, that's my thought exactly," Mom said as she opened a cabinet beside the bed to put something away. Watching from behind as she bent forward, I could see the lace of her underwear between her shirt and skirt. The second I handed Mom the teacher's note about summer swim lessons, she put some cushions down on the tatami and told me to get down on my chest and show her what I could do. When I did, she sighed, shook her head, and said, "Everything you're doing with your arms is working against what you're trying to do with your legs." "Learn from the frogs," Grandma said. "They're masters of the breaststroke." Frogs. "Hey, I just saw . . ." I started to talk, but held back. I had to wonder if she'd be mad if I told her I went to the pond when she'd told me to stay in the common room. "Yeah?" "They were showing high school baseball on TV . . . the championship game." Mom was looking out the window for some reason. The curtains were shut, but light was creeping in through the cracks. "It's too early for the championships. It had to be the regional finals. Who won?" "The ones in white." "Like I know who that is. But what a day for a game." "It's hot out?" "Muggy. It's like a sauna out there. And it's supposed to start raining tonight." "Oh yeah? The garden's going to be overrun with weeds," Grandma said, her thin eyebrows raised worriedly. "With the heat, and the rain." "Don't worry, it'll be fine," Mom said with authority. "Go-san is doing a lot to help." "Glad to hear it. Still, you shouldn't have to deal with that. Really, if Grandpa were still around . . . Mariko, you keep an eye on things, too." "Huh?" "You know, around the house, and with the garden. You're gonna have to pitch in." "Mom, when's Grandma coming home?" I asked. "Soon, Mariko, soon." "Hey, Sakai-san," a voice came from the next bed over. "It's cold in here, isn't it?" "I'm not cold. Why? You cold?" Grandma shot back. "Well, I thought I was feeling cold, but . . ." The voice came through the eggshell-white curtain, but I couldn't see her. I'd met the old woman from that bed before. When I visited another time, she had her curtain back and was talking with Grandma. She had pale skin and thin wrists, but her face was rounder than Grandma's. She was really nice to me. When I said hello, she said "You're a real cutie, aren't you?" She looked at my face, then Grandma's. "Sakai-san, she looks more like you than her own mother." "No way, that isn't true," Grandma waved a hand in front of her face and laughed nervously. She looked truly overjoyed. Mom wasn't in the room at the time. "She's a real good kid, I can tell." "Sometimes I worry about her, with nothing but women around. Her grandfather died too soon, and her father's always busy." "It's cold, it's cold . . ." Today her curtain was shut. "Put something warm on if you're cold. Ask for another futon. It's central heating so we can't make it any warmer or colder anyway." "That right?" There was something a little sad in the old woman's voice. "You mean it's up to me to put something on?" "Seems fair to me. We're all getting the same temperature, right? I mean, I'm not cold. I think it's nice in here." "Should I go talk to the nurse?" Mom said briskly. "I'll get her an extra blanket." "Great idea." "No, I'm fine!" The woman's voice was shrill, a little loud. "I'm fine, it's fine. The covers are heavy enough with the ones I've got. If I'm the only one who's cold, I'll just deal with it." "What's a stiff upper lip gonna get you? You gotta let them take care of you. This is a hospital, you know." "Yeah, I know, but it's okay, really. Thank you. Thanks, honey. Your daughter's with you today, isn't she?" Mom looked at me like she wanted me to speak up, so I said, "I'm here!" in a loud voice. "Well then . . ." I could hear her digging through her things, then her wrinkly, white arm stretched out from the gap in the curtain. There was something light green in the palm of her hand. "Something sweet, for you . . ." I looked at Mom. I could see hesitation in her eyes, but she managed a slight nod. I ran over to the curtain to grab it. The old woman's hand was warmer and softer than I had imagined. When I pinched the green cube, I felt it squish. There were loose sugar crystals in the palm of her hand, glinting in the light. Through the gap in the curtain, I could see her mouth and eyes. I quickly looked away. Mom said "Thank you" in a sharp voice. Backing away from the curtain, I thanked the old woman, too. She pulled her hand back. "Go on, eat up!" I looked at the gelatinous shape in my hand. At first I thought it was light green, but where the sugar had fallen off I could see dark green underneath. I opened my mouth to take a bite, but Mom frowned and shook her head as if to tell me

no. Mom didn't want me having any candy that looks artificially colored. I looked at Grandma. She glanced at Mom, then said with a wry smile, "Well, isn't that nice, Maa-chan. It's so pretty." No expression on her face, Mom grabbed a couple of tissues from Grandma's tray and held them out for me. I wrapped the sweet up, then slid it into my pocket. "What a treat, what a treat," Grandma said slowly, looking right at me. The whites of her eyes were really white. My heart was pounding. "How nice, Maa-chan. Give her a proper thanks. Don't you like it?" "Uh . . ." I thought I heard the old woman moving around. Thinking she might pull the curtain back at any second, I started pretending I was chewing and said, "Thank you, it's delicious." "And pretty, right?" the old woman asked. "It's pretty, right?" "It's pretty, it's so pretty!" Grandma exclaimed as if she could barely contain herself. I gulped as if I'd just swallowed the last bite, then said, "That was so good. Thank you." "You're welcome! Any sweet would be happy to be eaten by a cutie like you, Maa-chan." I looked to Mom for help. She just shrugged. "You sure you don't want another blanket?" Grandma asked in a soft voice. "My daughter-in-law can go and . . ." "Sure, I'd be happy to." "No, it's fine, really, I'm not even feeling cold anymore. Who knows, it was probably all in my head." "But if it's too much for you, we should call the nurse." "If I feel that way, I will." Then everybody stopped talking. Behind the curtain, I heard heavy breathing—practically snoring. A few nurses hurried past the door, down the hallway. I walked over to the window, pulled the curtain back and looked down. It was the pond. The smooth surface was white with light from the sun. I couldn't even tell if the water was green or not. From the window, I couldn't see any tadpoles, but it almost looked like the entire pond was alive. I reached up to unlatch the window. "It won't open, sweetie," Grandma said. "That window doesn't open. You see the pond there?" "Uh-huh." "It's full of food frogs." "Food frogs? Are those bullfrogs?" "Yup, bullfrogs. For eating. You skin the legs and cook 'em, they taste just like chicken. But you should hear them at night. They'll drive you crazy. Don't get me wrong, a normal frog's just fine, but a food frog sounds like a rusty screw. There's no way to sleep when they're making all that noise out there. Sometimes, out of nowhere, they'll get going in the daytime, too. They're unbelievably loud, even with the windows shut. I bet it's worse downstairs. At least they're quiet today. Kazumi-san, you remember how it was the other day?" "I think so, I'm not sure," Mom said. "Mariko, the light's too much. Can you shut the curtains?" "Hey Mom, do you know what bullfrog tadpoles eat?" She cocked her head and thought about it. "Waterweeds?" "They eat frogs." "Frogs?" Mom said, scrunching her face. "That right?" Grandma asked, looking right at me. "You mean they eat their parents?" "Yeah." "No way!" "So what if they do? Polliwogs gotta eat, don't they?" Grandma said, still looking at me. "Disgusting . . . so they're cannibals?" "Not even close. Frogs and polliwogs are different creatures, different inside and out, organs and all. Think a polliwog looks at a frog and sees its mom? Same goes for the frog. You think it looks at one of those little guys and sees its baby?" "You mean you don't?" "Hey Grandma, have you ever seen one of the bullfrogs alive? Are they big?" Grandma opened her eyes wide and held her hands maybe a foot apart. "This big." "That big?" "They have to be. Otherwise we wouldn't deign to eat them, right?" Mom snorted. When I got into the car, I could feel the bulge of tissue in my pocket against my leg. As soon as we got home, I ran up to my room, took the green sweet out of my pocket, broke off a chunk and put it in my mouth. I was sure it was going to taste green somehow, maybe like melon or green apple, but it didn't really have any flavor at all. It was just sweet. The sugary outside was crunchy, but it was soft and airy inside. I looked at the part I'd torn open. It was wet and translucent green inside, almost like a jewel held up to the light. I ripped off another chunk and ate it. The agar that broke apart on the tip of my tongue was so soft and sweet I couldn't bring myself to swallow it. I kept licking until it was reduced to nothing in my mouth. Mom was calling me downstairs. I was worried my tongue had turned green, so I grabbed my hand mirror to check. It looked normal enough. I put the rest of the green cube back in the tissue and hid it in my desk drawer.

The next time we went to the hospital, the woman in the bed next to Grandma's was middle-aged, with glasses and a pointed chin. She kept rattling things off at Grandma and laughing. Grandma laughed along, but she looked paler than before—a good deal smaller, too. As soon as we got home, I went to my desk drawer. When I unwrapped the green sweet, the tissue was stuck to the place where I'd torn part off. I couldn't tear the paper loose, so I put the whole thing in my mouth, tissue and all, sucking and biting on the gritty granules of sugar until they were all gone. The sun was starting to set outside my window. Mom was in the garden, sprinkling something over the plants. I spat out a crinkled, stringy tangle of pale green.



Tomoka Shibasaki

Dinner at Mine

translated by Polly Barton

AS A CHILD, whenever I saw television shows or commercials for household products that featured a mother in an apron, standing there cooking in the kitchen as she greeted her husband and kids with "Welcome home!" and "What would you like for dinner tonight?," I would find myself wondering if homes like that really existed. Very possibly, they didn't just exist but were in fact the norm, and yet for me they always seemed far away, like something out of a fairy tale.

In other words, the home in which I grew up did not look like that. In my home, my dad made the dinner. My mum was a hairdresser, and after my younger brother and I started at the daycare center, she returned to work, eventually setting up her own salon when I was six. It was from that point on that my dad started cooking the dinner. These days, you occasionally hear talk of stay-at-home husbands, but my dad wasn't one of them. He worked at a company like any other dad. Every day, though, he would get home before seven to make us dinner. When we moved up to middle school, he packed our lunches too.

The kind of food he rustled up for us was what you might call bachelor cuisine: yakisoba, stir-fried vegetables, things like that. Nestling alongside the rice in our bento boxes would be grilled chicken, edamame, frankfurters—basically all the things that people ate when they were out drinking. At the time I remember resenting his cooking, and would occasionally voice my complaints. But if my mother happened to be home in time to eat with us, my father wouldn't even let her make us tea after dinner—that was the kind of man he was. From time to time, he'd tell me that if I ever got married I'd better not take it for granted that all men would do as much around the house as he did.

As it happens, to this day I'm still not married. But when I look around at my friends who are, it surprises me to note that there are still very few men who do as much as my dad did. When my mum had to work weekends, it was my dad who took us out to Osaka Castle Park or the botanical gardens.

Now that I'm about the same age as my dad was back then, it strikes me as amazing that he made us dinner every day, and I also find myself wondering what on earth his life must have been like. Coming home on time day in, day out—did his colleagues not go out drinking after work? And what about the days he was expected to work overtime? I remember how from time to time, when both my mum and my dad were home late, my brother and I would go rifling through the fridge, making plain rice sprinkled with salt or powdered sushi vinegar (however sad these culinary choices may sound, I think it was less a case of that being all there was, and more that that was what we liked), but aside from set events like end-of-year parties and so on, I don't remember my dad ever coming home late after drinking.

By now, I've finally got to a point where I feel I'd like to ask my dad how he managed it, and what his feelings were on the whole thing, but he passed away three years ago, and now it's too late.

Not long ago, my mum spoke to me about her younger years, which for her is something of a rarity. Thus I found out for the first time that, back before she opened her own place, when my brother and I were still small, she had worked at a hairdressing salon that was in a prime location in Osaka and quite well known at the time. The owner took to my mother and was kind to her, but tended to land her with the unpopular shifts, on the weekends and in the early mornings, because she knew that my dad would step in to take care of her kids.

Listening to my mum talk, I felt as if I were listening to a friend. A friend worrying about whether she'd be able to keep her job if she took time off to look after her kids. A friend wanting to try and save up the money to open her own place. Up until then I'd always viewed my parents as a child would, and this felt different.

My brother has recently had a baby, but I still feel as though my hands are full enough dealing with my own stuff.

As a child, seeing those aproned mothers on TV welcoming their children home from school, I'd wonder if my family situation was weird in some way, but now I think that maybe there isn't such a thing as a perfectly normal family situation. All we ever really know is how things are in our own homes. There are only homes, homes, and more homes, with everyone inside them desperately trying to create some resemblance of a family.

Kanoko Okamoto

Sushi

translated by David Boyd

THERE'S A PLACE IN TOKYO that can be described as a kind of boundary, an area full of cliffs and hills that divides the wealthy and working-class neighborhoods.

As soon as you veer off the main street, it's as though you've entered a new world.

And that is why, when people have had enough of the city and its excitement, they sometimes wander down these backstreets for a change of pace, to get away from it all.

AT THE FOOT OF ONE OF THESE CLIFFS was a small sushi shop called Fuku. While the storefront had been redone with copper only three or four years ago, the back of the two-story structure was—with the exception of the repaired supports against the cliff wall—the old residence it had always been.

Fuku had been a neighborhood establishment for years, but when business was poor, the former owner stepped down and handed over his shop to Tomoyo's parents, name and all. With time, the new owners turned the business around.

Tomoyo's father had learned his craft under Tokyo's best, so he had no trouble understanding what sort of neighborhood this was, or what kind of sushi would appeal to his new customers. While his predecessor had relied almost entirely on delivery, once Tomoyo's father took over, most customers ate in, sitting either at the counter or at the low tables. At first, Tomoyo and her parents ran the business on their own, but they soon had no choice but to take on another chef, a boy, and a maid to help out.

Fuku's customers were all different, but they had one thing in common: they were barely getting by. And when they came in for sushi, they came for more than a meal. They wanted a momentary respite from harsh reality.

At Fuku, customers could have what they wanted: some modest luxury. They could act as they pleased, no matter how foolish. They could expose as much of themselves as they wanted; they could even become someone else, if they so desired. Fuku was a place where people could do or say anything at all without fear of retribution or judgment. Generally, the customers regarded one another with warmth as they ate and drank. They shared an intimacy as if they were playing a game, helping one another hide from the outside world. But some customers acted more like stones than human beings: they would simply come in, eat in utter silence, then hurry home without even glancing at their fellow diners.

Sushi creates an atmosphere of efficiency and practicality that can never be disturbed, no matter how the customers behave. Thus everything at Fuku passed with a certain ease and nonchalance.

Fuku's regulars hailed from all walks of life. There was a man who had once owned a shop that sold hunting rifles, a sales manager for a department store, a dentist, the son of a tatami shop owner, a telephone broker, a plaster modeler, a toy salesman, a man who sold rabbit meat, a retired businessman who used to run a securities firm, and an entertainer who lived in the area. The entertainer must have had a side job when not much was happening at the theater, since he would occasionally show up in the stained silk kimono he wore for work, deftly eat his sushi with pale fingers, then leave.

There were the regulars who lived in the neighborhood and would drop by after a visit to the barber. Others lived farther away and would come to Fuku when they had errands to run nearby. While the busiest hours varied with the time of year, when the days were longer, the sushi shop was usually crowded from about four in the afternoon until the lanterns began to light up the streets.

Each customer would sit in their favorite seat and eat in their own way. Some began with a cup of sake and something light to eat—sashimi or maybe some vinegared dish as an appetizer—but others would start ordering sushi right away.

SOMETIMES TOMOYO'S FATHER would step out from behind the bar with a plate of dark-colored fish and set it on the table among the regulars.

"Well, well . . . what's this?"

On all sides, customers would look quizzically at the fish.

"Oh, just a little something I like to have with my nightcap," said Tomoyo's father, who always spoke to his customers as if they were close friends. "Go on, give it a try."

One of the customers took a piece and ate it. "Hmm. Too rich to be *kohada*."

Another customer followed suit. "Maybe it's *aji*?"

Tomoyo's mother, who was sitting by a pillar on the raised tatami with her legs to one side, started laughing so hard her plump body shook. "Oh boy, same as always . . . hook, line and sinker."

The fish in question was only salted *sanma,* kept in *okara* until it had shed its oil and the saltiness was just right.

"Hey, what're you trying to pull on us? Have you been holding out?"

"Wait, this is *sanma*? I never would have guessed."

Conversation swelled among the customers.

"We can't afford any better," Tomoyo's father said. "This is the cheap stuff."

"Hey, why don't you put this on the menu?" One of the customers asked.

"You've got to be kidding," he replied. "If we ever put something like this on the menu, that'd be the end of the good stuff. Nobody'd buy it. Besides, this is *sanma* we're talking about. I can't charge enough to make any kind of profit."

"Well, he sure knows his business!" another customer said.

On other occasions, Tomoyo's father served his faithful customers a variety of masterful concoctions made from less desirable items: leftover bits of *katsuo, awabi* intestines, white fish roe. But such rare treats were reserved for Fuku's regulars. Whenever Tomoyo saw these dishes, she would wrinkle her nose and say, "Enough of this junk! It's disgusting." Sometimes the regulars would request these culinary oddities, but Tomoyo's father was never inclined to oblige. He had a habit of springing such dishes on his customers only when they least expected it. Fuku's regulars knew better than to push Tomoyo's father too hard. They all knew how stubborn he could be about this particular matter.

When the regulars simply had to have one of Fuku's "specials," they would quietly ask Tomoyo and, reluctantly, she would go to the kitchen to find it.

Since childhood, Tomoyo was used to being around the sort of men who stopped by the shop. Observing them, she came to feel as if the world were something almost childish, nothing to be taken too seriously.

When Tomoyo was old enough to attend the local girls' school, she was somewhat embarrassed by what her parents did for a living. She always made sure that her friends never saw her go in or come out of the sushi shop. That may have been why she often felt alone in the world—or maybe it had more to do with the way that her parents were at home. Her parents never fought, but there was an emotional distance between them. They looked after each other out of an alliance rooted more in instinct than business, out of a simple need for survival. They did this so naturally that others saw Tomoyo's parents as a reasonably well-matched couple, if one of few words. Her father had his heart set on opening a second shop in a high-rise in a busy neighborhood, and he also enjoyed keeping small birds. Tomoyo's mother had no interest in luxuries such as taking trips for pleasure or buying clothes. Month after month, she took what she could from the shop's profits and tucked it away in her personal savings.

On one matter alone did the two see eye to eye: Tomoyo. They believed that their daughter ought to have the best education. With the rage for culture and refinement all around them, Tomoyo's parents agreed that their daughter should not fall behind the times.

"Sushi is all we've ever had, but Tomoyo should have more."

But they had no idea what "more" might actually be.

Tomoyo had been raised in innocence, with only a superficial awareness of worldly matters. She was happy enough, if never without a shadow of loneliness. She had no enemies, and no one disliked her. However, when it came to men, Tomoyo tended to be rather direct, conducting herself with none of the inhibition or affectation seen in other girls her age. On one occasion, Tomoyo's forwardness became a cause of concern at school, but the matter was promptly put to rest when the teachers realized that Tomoyo worked at her parents' sushi shop and this was just the sort of girl that she was.

One day in early spring, Tomoyo went on a class trip to the Tama River. At the river's edge, she looked into

the stagnant water, where carp drifted by in great numbers. The fish would swim over with their tail fins catching light in the tea-green water, nibble at the moss growing on the wooden pilings, then swim away. They came and went, came and went—but the constant flow of carp was too quick for the human eye. In Tomoyo's mind, it may as well have been the same group of fish, joined now and then by an idle catfish.

There was something about the movement of the fish in the spring river that reminded Tomoyo of Fuku's customers. (The shop had its regulars, to be sure, but someone was always coming or going.) Tomoyo felt as though, at Fuku, she was the green moss. The diners drew close to her, found the comfort they sought, then returned home. Tomoyo never considered the work she did at Fuku to be a duty or burden. Dressed in a cashmere school uniform that did nothing to emphasize the outline of her breasts and hips, she would bring cups of tea to the customers, shuffling around in whatever boy's geta were there. When the men tried to flirt with Tomoyo, she would pout her lips, lift a shoulder and reply, "What an idea! What can I say to that?"

There was of course a slight hint of coquetry in Tomoyo's voice when she said this, igniting a quiet flame inside the men and putting a smile on their faces. In this sense, Tomoyo was certainly something of a draw for Fuku's customers.

ONE OF FUKU'S CUSTOMERS was a gentleman by the name of Minato, who was just over fifty years old. Beneath his heavy brow, a shadow of melancholy fell across his face. There were times when he looked older, and times when he appeared full of passion, like a man in his prime. While he typically wore a grim expression, Minato's intelligence granted him an air of detachment that served to soften his otherwise hard appearance.

Minato had a French mustache and thickly curled hair that he parted neatly enough. He sometimes came to eat sushi dressed in homespun with a pair of red shoes covered in dust. Other times he would come casually dressed in an old silk kimono. While Minato was undeniably a bachelor, no one knew what he did for a living. At Fuku, they came to call him "the Professor." One could tell from how he ate sushi that he was a true connoisseur, even if he never made a show of it.

Minato would tap the floor with the tip of his cane as he entered, then sit at the bar. Once seated, he would angle himself over the counter to listlessly inspect the arrangement of fish behind the glass.

"It seems as though you have plenty to choose from today," Minato said, receiving the cup of tea that Tomoyo had brought him.

"The *kanpachi* is nice and fatty," Tomoyo's father said. "And the *hamaguri* is fresh, too."

At some point, Tomoyo's father realized how fastidious Minato was. Though perhaps he wasn't conscious of it, he would pick up a cloth and start wiping down the countertop and cutting board whenever this customer sat down.

"Well, let's start with those."

"Yes, sir."

Tomoyo's father talked to Minato differently than the others. Without so much as asking, he knew the course Minato's meal would follow. First, he would have the *chūtoro,* then boiled fish with sweet sauce. Next, he would move on to the light flavor of blue-scaled fish, then finish with egg and nori rolls. He would have the day's specials added to his meal at the chef's discretion.

When he wasn't drinking tea or eating sushi, Minato would prop his cheek up with one hand, or simply drop his chin onto the back of his hands, which he rested on his cane. Posed in this way, Minato would become absorbed in the scenery. From where he sat, he could see through the shop's open screens to the back, where a marsh was half-hidden among the trees, or he could turn to face the street out front, freshly sprinkled with water, and gaze at the chinquapin leaves hanging over the fence across the street.

At first, something about Minato made Tomoyo uncomfortable, but as she grew accustomed to the way he was always gazing off into the distance, she came to want more from this strange man who might not so much as glance at her from the time he received his tea until he had finished his meal. And yet when their eyes would meet for more than a moment, she felt a kind of danger, as if his gaze might absorb her strength entirely.

When they found themselves facing each other, Minato would smile. It was only an ordinary, kind-hearted smile, but Tomoyo found something special in it—something she never felt with her parents or other customers, something she couldn't quite define. So when Minato was sitting at the counter lost in his long gazes, and Tomoyo was across the room, working on her needlework by the simmering teakettle, she would clear her throat or make some noise to get his attention, even if she was unaware of what she was doing. Startled, Minato would look up and turn to Tomoyo. His upper and lower teeth met perfectly as he smiled, the lines around his mouth softening as one tip of his French mustache rose up. From his station behind the counter, Tomoyo's father would also lift his eyes for a moment. But figuring his daughter was only up to her usual tricks, he would then return to work with a scowl on his face.

Minato was friendly with all the regulars at Fuku and discussed all sorts of things with them. Horse races, stocks, current events, bonsai, go, *shōgi* . . . all the things usually discussed in a place like this. As a rule, Minato left the talking to his fellow diners, no matter the topic. He only rarely opened his mouth to contribute, yet his reticence was never taken as a sign of his looking down on others, nor as an indication of his boredom. This was evident every time someone offered Minato a cup of sake.

"Oh, I don't know, my doctor said I shouldn't drink, but how could I say no? Thank you, thank you."

He would take the cup in his slender but firm hands and hold it up to show his genuine appreciation, swallow it down, then offer a drink in return. Skillfully, he would lift the bottle and fill his partner's cup. It was all too clear in these moments that Minato was the sort of person who was inclined to repay a favor many times over. Because of this, the other customers knew the Professor to be a good and kind man.

Tomoyo didn't like to see Minato behave like this. She felt it wasn't in his character. To react so emotionally every time another customer decided to show him the slightest bit of kindness—she felt it diminished Minato somehow. For a man so somber to light up that way, as though he were an old man starving for affection. . . . In those moments, Tomoyo couldn't even bear the sight of the silver ring on Minato's middle finger or the ancient Egyptian scarab that decorated it.

On one occasion, a fellow customer was so overjoyed by Minato's effusive response that he poured him cup after cup, but when Tomoyo saw Minato enjoying this revelry, even laughing as the exchange of drinks continued, she stormed over to snatch the cup from Minato's hand.

"You're always saying you're in no condition to drink! Why don't you just stop?"

Once she had given the cup back to the other customer, Tomoyo walked away without another word. But she had not intervened out of concern for Minato's physical well-being. It was in fact a strange pinch of jealousy that had made her do it.

"What a loving wife you are, Tomo-chan!" teased Minato's drinking partner.

Minato smiled wryly at the man, bowed, then faced the counter and lifted his heavy teacup.

Strangely, as Tomoyo's thoughts turned more and more to Minato, she sometimes found herself ignoring him in complete silence. Sometimes she even stood up and marched off when he came into the shop. At times, Minato met Tomoyo's coldness with an awkward smile, but when Tomoyo was nowhere to be seen, he would stare at the street out front or the valley behind the shop with even greater despondency than usual.

ONE DAY, Tomoyo took an empty cage to buy some Kajika frogs from the insect shop on the main street. Her father loved keeping pets, and he was good at it, too, but he occasionally slipped up and their numbers would dwindle. It was early summer now, the season when he would have the frogs fill the air with their cooling song.

Just as Tomoyo was about to arrive, she saw Minato come out of the shop carrying a glass bowl. He was so focused on the bowl in his hands that he failed to notice Tomoyo and walked slowly in the other direction.

Tomoyo hurried into the shop and asked for the frogs. She left her cage with the clerk and ran outside to see which way Minato was headed.

Once she had gone back inside and collected her frogs, she chased after Minato and quickly caught up with him.

"Hey! Professor!"

"Tomo-chan! What are you doing here? I never see you outside."

They walked on together, showing each other what they had bought. In his glass bowl, Minato had a pair of Western aquarium fish—ghost fish—with skeletons showing through their gelatinous bodies, little guts tucked beneath their gills.

"Do you live around here, Professor?"

"For now. My apartment's up this way, but I don't know how much longer I'll be here."

Minato offered to treat Tomoyo to a cup of tea, but there didn't seem to be any suitable shops close by.

"I suppose we can't go to Ginza like this, can we?"

"Why don't we just find someplace quiet around here and sit for a while?"

Minato looked up as if he had only then noticed the green leaves all around them. He sighed into the summer air.

"Sure, of course."

Not long after turning off the main street, they found what had once been a hospital at the edge of a cliff. It had burned down years ago, and what little remained of its brick walls now resembled a Roman ruin. Minato and Tomoyo sat down, set their purchases on the grass, and stretched out their legs.

Tomoyo had felt as though she had so many things she wanted to ask Minato, but sitting next to him, she no longer felt the need. Instead, she felt as though she were enveloped in a misty fragrance. She was completely at ease. If anything, Minato was the excited one.

"Tomo-chan, you look so grown up today!"

She thought for some time about what to say, but what she ultimately asked was hardly important.

"Do you really like sushi?"

"Hard to say," Minato replied.

"Then why do you come to Fuku all the time?"

"Well, I don't dislike it. But even when I'm not really in the mood, eating sushi gives me something. Comfort, maybe."

"Comfort?"

Then Minato explained why it was that sushi gave him comfort, even when he wasn't particularly in the mood.

IT MAY BE THAT STRANGE CHILDREN have a way of being born into old families on the brink of ruin. Or perhaps children are simply more attuned to the threat of misfortune in such moments. In extreme cases, a fear of impending ruin may take hold of the child even in his mother's womb, eating away at his very being.

From the time the boy was young, he had no interest in sweets. The only snack he ever ate was *senbei*. He would take care to align his upper and lower teeth, then bite neatly into the round rice cracker. So long as it was fresh, it would make a sound that pleased the boy. Once he had properly chewed the piece and swallowed it completely, he would take his next bite. He would then repeat the routine, carefully lining up his teeth before slipping the cracker between his narrowly parted lips. With every bite, the boy shut his eyes and listened for the sound.

Crunch.

The boy knew there were a great many crunches that *senbei* could make, not just one. He knew the various sounds well, and could easily distinguish between them.

When he happened to find one particular sound, his whole body would tremble with rapture. For a moment, he would lower the cracker in his hand and lose himself in thought. Tears would begin to form in his eyes.

The boy lived with his parents, an older brother, an older sister, and a couple of maids, all of whom found him odd. It wasn't only the way he ate his *senbei,* but how he ate anything at all. He couldn't stand fish. He didn't eat many vegetables either, and avoided meat above all else.

His father would sometimes peek in while he was eating.

"How's the boy? Is he eating his fill?"

Though the family's eventual downfall was in all likelihood inevitable, the father's recklessness only exacerbated matters. He was a timid man by nature, but hopelessly committed to keeping up appearances, to seeming easy-going.

When the boy's mother noticed his father looking on, she would hold up an arm to hide the food on the tray behind her sleeve.

"Please, don't put him on the spot. He won't be able to eat anything if you do."

Same as always, on the child's tray was nothing but seaweed and scrambled eggs.

Eating was truly painful for the boy. Swallowing colorful gobs of smell and flavor, he felt as if he were polluting his body. He longed for something purer to eat, something pure as air. When he was hungry, he felt pain, but it never drove him to eat. Sometimes when he felt particularly hungry, the boy would lick the crystal centerpiece in the alcove or rub his cheek against it. He would remain lucid, but would become more and more faint. If he were watching the sun set over the hills beyond the lake in the valley (the house in which he was raised sat in a part of the city not unlike the neighborhood around Fuku), the boy thought he wouldn't even mind falling forward and dying then and there. But ultimately, he shoved his hands under the obi tied tight around his belly, and with his body hunched forward and face turned upward, he cried out, "Mom!"

Yet the boy was not crying for the woman who had given birth to him, even though he liked her best out of everyone in his family. He often felt that, somewhere in the world was another woman, someone else he could call his mother. Of course, if the boy had ever called out for this other woman and she had actually appeared before him, he would surely have fainted from shock. Still, calling out for this woman was a joy for him, even if it was always tinged with sadness.

"Mom . . . Mom," he called out, his voice like a sheet of paper fluttering in the wind.

"Coming," said a woman's voice.

It was the mother who had given birth to him.

"Oh, no! Look at you. . . . What's the matter?" She grabbed the boy and shook him, looking him right in the eye.

Torn from his fantasy, he turned bright red with embarrassment.

"How many times do I have to tell you? You need to eat!" Her voice was trembling. "I'm begging you . . . I'm begging you!"

After much frustration, his mother found that what best agreed with her son was seaweed and eggs. The boy could eat these without feeling as though he were ruining his body in some way.

There were times when the boy could feel a wave of desolation rise up inside and fill his entire being. When this happened, he felt compelled to bite into something soft and sour—anything would do. He would go pick green plums or *tachibana* oranges and sink his teeth in. In the rainy months, the boy would head into the hills or the valleys around the city to collect these fruits. He knew exactly where to find them, too, as if he were a crow.

The boy did well in school. Everything he read or heard was immediately burned into the folds of his brain like dry plate photography. The boy's lessons were so simple that he found them boring, but his indifference never hindered his academic achievement—on the contrary, it allowed him to do even better.

At home and at school, everyone treated the boy as if he were different.

One day, after his parents had been arguing behind closed doors, his mother came to him and said, in a voice wrought with emotion, "You've lost so much weight that everyone at school's worried. They thought you weren't getting enough to eat at home, and you know the way your father is . . . he takes everything out on me."

Then the boy's mother faced her son, put her hands on the tatami, and bowed deeply.

"Please, you need to eat. I'm begging you," she said. "You need to gain some weight. If you don't, it's going to be like this for me morning and night, and I don't think I can bear it."

What have I done, the boy thought. He had finally committed the sin that was all but inevitable given his strange nature. He had driven his mother to press her palms to the floor and bow before him. He felt his face getting hot. A shudder ran through him. Yet, for whatever reason, he felt peace inside. Now he knew for a fact that he was wicked. If this is how I am, the boy told himself, I might as well be dead. And I know how to put an end to this. I'll eat—I'll eat everything that repulses me, and I'll vomit. Then my body will rot from the inside, and I'll die. The boy had

made up his mind. It was the only way. Death had to be better than this—always making life unbearable for everyone else, to say nothing of how unbearable it was for the boy himself.

So the boy sat down to dinner with his family, acting as though everything were fine, but as soon as he started eating, he vomited. He had done everything he could to numb his mouth and throat, but the moment he started to imagine how the food he had swallowed had been touched by women other than his mother, his stomach forced everything back up. Images stirred violently inside his mind: the faded red under-kimono peeking out from the maid's sleeve, the black hair oil dripping down the temples of the old woman cooking the rice.

The boy's brother and sister looked on in disgust. His father glanced out of the corner of his eye before returning to his cup of sake as if nothing had happened. His mother tended to the mess, casting a reproving glance at her husband, then said with a sigh of exasperation, "See? You can't blame me for this, can you? This is how he is."

Yet even as the boy's mother said this to her husband, she spoke with timidity.

THE NEXT DAY, the boy's mother brought a brand-new straw mat out onto the *engawa,* where the green leaves cast deep shadows. On the mat, she placed a cutting board, a knife, a wooden bowl, and a fly-net cupboard. All of them were recently purchased.

The boy's mother sat her son down on the other side of the cutting board. In front of the boy she set a tray with a single plate on it.

Then the boy's mother rolled up her sleeves, held her rosy palms out for him to see, and flipped them over the way a magician might. Rhythmically rubbing her hands together, she said, "Now watch closely. Everything you see before you has never been used. No one's going to touch them except for your mother, and as you've just witnessed, her hands are as clean as can be. With me so far? Okay, here we go!"

She started mixing vinegar into the bowl of warm rice, and mother and son alike gagged on the sourness in the air. Then the boy's mother pulled the bowl close, scooped up a handful of rice and formed it into a small rectangular block.

Everything needed to make sushi was in the cupboard, ready to be served. The boy's mother reached inside, grabbed something, put it on the rice, and pressed down on it lightly. She then set the object on the boy's plate. It was *tamagoyaki.*

"See? It's sushi. You can eat it with your hands. Try it."

And he did. Landing on the boy's tongue, the sourness of the rice and the sweetness of the egg made him feel as if someone were gently stroking his bare skin. Then, when he swallowed, he felt something strange —a love for sushi and a love for his mother—as it rose inside him like warm scented water. It was so powerful a feeling that he wanted to throw himself into his mother's arms.

But the boy was too embarrassed to admit how much he liked it. He simply looked up at his mother with an awkward grin on his face.

"Well? How about another?"

As if preparing for her next trick, the boy's mother held out her hands, again flipping them over so he could see. Once he appeared satisfied, she scooped out another handful of rice, took another piece from the cupboard, placed it on the rice, then put her creation on the boy's plate.

This time, he warily eyed the white rectangle before him. Seeing the boy's hesitation, his mother said, "This one's no different. Just think of it as egg, only whiter. Eat it."

She spoke with authority, but was not so forceful as to scare the child. This was how the boy came to eat squid for the first time. He thought it was smooth as ivory, and even more pleasant to chew than raw *mochi.* As the adventure with the squid continued, the boy's face began to relax, as if he had let out a deep breath long held inside. He only smiled to show his mother how much he liked it.

Next, she set a slice of semi-transparent white on the rice. As he lifted the piece from his plate, a nasty smell infiltrated his nose. The boy held his breath and put it in his mouth.

As he chewed, the repulsive smell gave way to a subtle flavor that traveled pleasantly down his slender throat.

"That one was a real fish, it had to be," he thought. "And I actually ate it!"

The boy reveled in his savage conquest. He was exhilarated, as if he had sunk his teeth into his first kill. His sides tickled with excitement, which he couldn't help but scratch with equally excited fingers. He squealed with laughter.

Seeing that victory was hers, the boy's mother slowly plucked the sticky grains of rice from her fingers, then, with studied composure, opened the cupboard in such a way that her son could not see inside.

"Let's see . . . what's next? Do we have anything left?"

"Sushi," the boy screamed impatiently. "Sushi!"

"Okay! Back by popular demand. Just a minute, sir."

She did all she could to conceal her happiness behind an almost blank expression—and it was that beautiful face that the boy would always remember most fondly.

Same as before, she held out her hands, showed her son both sides, then started her magic again. It was another piece of fish, white like the last one.

It seemed as though the boy's mother had carefully selected the fish that were lightest in color and odor—*tai* and *hirame*—for his first foray into sushi.

The boy ate everything that his mother put on his plate. As soon as she set another piece in front of him, he picked it up and ate it. It was as if the two of them were racing. Soon they were drawn into an all-consuming rapture—a universe devoid of thought and consciousness—moving to a strange rhythm wholly their own. The boy's mother made five or six more pieces and he dispatched them just as quickly. His mother being an amateur, each piece had its own awkward shape and size, and sometimes when she put a piece down, the fish would slide off onto the plate. When it did, the boy was all too happy to restore the sushi to its intended form. The pieces he put back together in this way tasted the best of all. It was strange. The boy couldn't be sure if it was his mind playing tricks on him or just his eyes, but as the two of them sat there, he couldn't help but feel as though the other mother—the phantom mother he called for in secret—and the woman making sushi for him now were becoming one and the same. He felt as though he wanted the two of them to merge, but part of him was afraid of what it would mean if they really did.

The boy had to wonder: What if the mother he had secretly been hoping for had been this woman all along? If his own mother could make food so delicious, how could he have ever given his heart to another?

"Well, alright. Let's stop here for today. But look at how well you did!"

The boy watched as his mother triumphantly clapped the remaining grains of rice off her rosy hands.

After that, the boy's mother fed him handmade sushi on five or six more occasions.

He learned to enjoy *akagai* that were the color of pomegranate flowers and *sayori* that had twin silver stripes running up their backs. Before long, he was able to sit and eat fish at the table with the rest of his family. Before anyone knew it, he was in such good health that he looked like a new person entirely. By the time he entered secondary school, he was so strong and good-looking that the other students couldn't help but turn and stare.

Stranger still, the young man's father, who had always been so cold, began paying attention to him. He had his son drink with him at dinner, and when he went out to shoot pool or go drinking at the teahouses, he would often bring his son along.

Meanwhile, the family fell further into ruin, but the young man's father was almost drunk with pride seeing his handsome son drinking sake in his dark blue kimono; he watched with joy as women fawned over his own flesh and blood. By the time the young man was sixteen or seventeen, he was already a proper debauchee.

His mother was distraught. She couldn't stand to watch as her husband led her son to dissipation after all she had done to see him through a particularly difficult childhood. Desperate, she pleaded with her husband to leave their son alone, but he offered no response, only an indifferent grin. The young man was disturbed to see his parents antagonizing one another in this way, using him to air their pent-up frustrations about the fate of the family. He felt disillusioned.

As the young man grew older, school was no more challenging. He never had to study to receive top

marks and easily made his way from high school to university. Yet he carried a certain sadness within him. No matter how he tried to free himself from that feeling, there seemed to be little hope. Perpetually bored and melancholy, the young man eventually graduated from university and found a job.

Soon his family was no more, their fortune gone. Both of his parents died, and his brother and sister followed not much later. The man had a good head on his shoulders, so he had a meaningful role to play, no matter where he went. Yet for some reason, he never felt the need to stay on or seek promotion. The years went by. Then shortly after his second wife died, by which time he was almost fifty, a small investment yielded an enormous financial gain. It was enough money for the man to live out the rest of his days in relative comfort, so he left the working world. He began a new life, moving from place to place—an apartment here, a home for rent there—never staying in one place long.

WHEN HE HAD AT LAST FINISHED HIS STORY, Minato said to Tomoyo, "I was the boy in the story. I was that man."

"Now I see why you like sushi," Tomoyo said.

"Well, I don't like it half as much as I used to, but the older I get, the more I think about my mother. Sushi always reminds me of her."

There was a wisteria trellis not far from where they sat, with vines spilling over wildly like briars, crawling down the decayed supports and reaching for the ground. Yet at the tips of the vines were young leaves, among which light purple clusters of slender flowers clung like dewdrops. In the garden, next to a hole where a stone had once sat, there was a Yashio azalea, half of which was burnt black, but the other half was covered in white flowers.

Beyond the garden was a cliff, beneath which a streetcar would sometimes rumble by, out of sight but audible.

Among the dwarf mondo grass, the purple of the irises swayed in the evening breeze. The shadow of a thick hemp palm slanted toward them across the grass. Just then, the frogs in Tomoyo's cage started to croak.

Minato and Tomoyo smiled at each other.

"Well, it's getting pretty late. I guess you'd better get home, Tomo-chan."

Tomoyo picked up her cage and stood up. When she did, Minato gave her the pair of ghostfish he had bought, then walked away.

AFTER THAT, Minato never returned to Fuku.

"Where's the Professor?" one of the regulars would ask. "I haven't seen him in a while. . . ."

While a few of them found his sudden disappearance odd, they all forgot about him soon enough.

Tomoyo regretted not asking Minato for his address. With no way to find him, she would occasionally visit the place where they had last met, simply staring into space as she sat on the stone. There she thought about Minato, sometimes with tears in her eyes, before eventually heading home in a daze. But, with time, Tomoyo stopped visiting the place where the hospital had once been.

These days, when Tomoyo thinks of Minato, she can barely remember him at all.

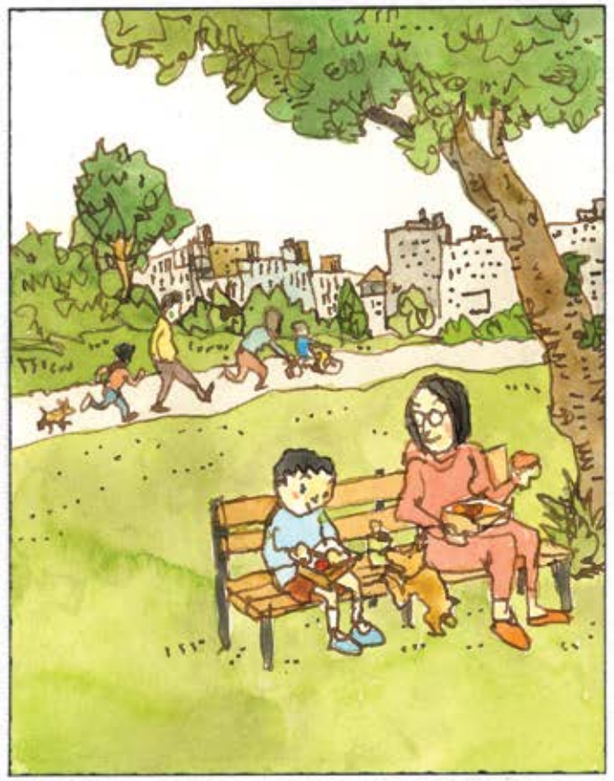
"He must have moved away," she tells herself. "He probably found another place to eat. After all, there are sushi shops everywhere."

THE HEART OF THE LUNCHBOX

by Satoshi Kitamura

BUT I CAN'T ASK MY MOM TO MAKE A LUNCHBOX LIKE THEIRS, CAN I?


HEY,
LET'S GO FOR
A WALK!




MOM, SUPPOSE
YOU COULD BE
ANYWHERE IN
THE WORLD...


...WHERE
WOULD YOU
LIKE TO BE?


OH,
I DON'T
KNOW...
IS IT JUST ME,
OR YOU AND ME
TOGETHER?
US
TOGETHER.
WELL...
I GUESS...


...SOMEWHERE
WILD AND EXOTIC
AND FAR...
FAR AWAY...

WHEN WE GOT HOME MOM SAID SHE'D MAKE A SPECIAL LUNCHBOX FOR ME. "IT'LL BE SO SPECIAL, YOU'LL REMEMBER IT FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE," SHE SAID. I KEPT HEARING STRANGE NOISES FROM THE KITCHEN.

HERE YOU ARE.

BON APPÉTIT!

ALL MORNING...

I COULD THINK OF NOTHING BUT MY LUNCHBOX.

LUNCHTIME AT LAST!

?

WHAT'S THIS? IT'S ALL GREEN!

IN MY CHOPSTICKS CASE...

WHAT'S THIS?

SOMETHING WRAPPED IN FOIL, AND...

...WHEN I SNIFFED THE POWDER INSIDE...

ACHOOOO

...I BLACKED OUT.

WHERE AM I?

WHAT ON EARTH IS THIS?

WHAT! IS THIS MY LUNCHBOX?

WHY IS IT SO BIG?

OR HAVE I SHRUNK?

HELLO... HERE'S A PIECE OF PAPER.

Dear Shota
Put the ladder against the side of the box, climb up and get in. You'll find a lovely lunch there.
Good luck!
See you later.
Love, Mom

SO THIS IS THE LADDER.

IS SHE SERIOUS, MY MOM?

THIS LOOKS LIKE THE TOP OF A TREE.

AND NOW TO FIND MY LUNCH.

WOW, IT'S A BIG TREE.

IS THAT A WOODPECKER?

OOPS! THAT WAS CLOSE.

MY HANDS ARE NUMB.

ALMOST THERE...

I MADE IT!

IT GOT AWAY!

WHAT ON EARTH WAS I DOING?

THE MOMENT I SAW THE RABBIT, I STARTED CHASING IT.

I WANTED TO EAT IT!!

I ALWAYS THOUGHT RABBITS WERE CUTE BUT NEVER EDIBLE.

I MUST BE SERIOUSLY HUNGRY.

THAT MUST BE A BIRD NEST...

WHERE'S MY LUNCH?

!

IF I'M LUCKY, THERE MIGHT BE SOME EGGS.

BINGO!

OH, NO!

HELP!

OUCH!

OH, THAT HURTS.

THIS IS IMPOSSIBLE. THERE'S NOTHING TO EAT HERE.

?

WOW!

I CAN'T BELIEVE MY EYES! MAMMOTHS! I THOUGHT THEY WERE EXTINCT!

I WISH I HAD A CAMERA.

?

BERRIES!

I KNOW THESE ARE SAFE TO EAT...

I SAW THE SAME BERRIES AT THE SUPERMARKET.

SO DELICIOUS! NOW I FEEL MUCH BETTER.

IT'S GETTING DARK...

I GUESS IT'S TIME TO GO HOME.

I NEED TO FIND THE TREE I CLIMBED DOWN.

BUT WHICH WAY DID I COME FROM?

I CAN'T REMEMBER... OH, NO...

I THINK I'M LOST!

CALM DOWN. I MUST THINK... HEY, STOP GROWLING... YOU... WHAT?

!

OH, NO!

HI, SHOTA.

MOM!

THIS BEAST IS TOO HEAVY TO CARRY HOME. I'LL TAKE SOME MEAT FOR TONIGHT.

MOM, I DIDN'T KNOW YOU COULD THROW A JAVELIN.

LET'S GO HOME.

HOW WAS YOUR DAY?

ERRR... IT WAS INTERESTING...

MOM, THIS MEAT IS DELICIOUS!

THIS PIECE IS SO BIG. IF I CAN'T FINISH IT, CAN I HAVE THE REST FOR LUNCH TOMORROW?

OF COURSE!

Kuniko Mukōda

Nori and Eggs for Breakfast

translated by David Boyd

AROUND THE TIME of the 2-26 Incident, we were living outside Tokyo, in Utsunomiya.

During the coup attempt in the capital, the Sannōshita area—just around the corner from my mother's family home—was all over the news. I can't say what my mother was feeling, but she turned to my grandmother and shouted as if she thought bullets were about to rain down on Utsunomiya. "Grandma, get ready!"

I was seven at the time.

The nori we ate back then was thirteen to fifteen *sen*[1] for ten sheets.

My father was an assistant manager at a life insurance firm with a monthly salary of 130 yen. The company house in Utsunomiya had a ten-mat,[2] an eight-mat, a six-mat, and two three-mat rooms downstairs, and a six-mat and a four-and-a-half-mat room upstairs. It had a 200-*tsubo*[3] garden and —as my mother remembers well—rent was seventeen yen.

We kept our nori in a drawer under the *nagahibachi*.[4]

In the morning, we'd wash our faces, then head into the eight-mat room, where my grandmother would be holding two sheets of nori in her knobby fingers, roasting them with care over the *nagahibachi*.

While we waited, my mother would get us into the white smocks she'd made for us. She was afraid we'd make a mess of ourselves, so we always had to put smocks on before we ate: flannel in the winter, coarse cotton in nicer weather. Those were the days before sewing machines were household items. My mother did all the stitching by hand.

When my father finally finished trimming his mustache in the room where my mother kept her vanity table, the three-mat next to the bathroom, he would come and join us. I imagine my father, who was just over thirty at the time, thought a mustache would lend him some gravitas. Mustaches and canes. Those were the big trends back then.

My grandmother would always rip the nori into eight pieces with a satisfying snap. Then she had us children tear our pieces in half again so everybody had eight. That way we all had the same number, even if the children's pieces were only half the size.

I loved nori. All I wanted was to grow up quickly so I could forget about my smock and eat the bigger pieces of roasted nori like my parents.

When we had nori, we used our square Kutani[5] plates. Over eleven or twelve moves, that ten-piece set was reduced to only a couple of plates, but I still have them to this day.

We had roasted nori just about every morning, but in our house the children weren't allowed to start with that. We had to have miso soup with our first bowl of rice, then *nattō*,[6] egg, or nori with the second.

If you stop after one bowl, you'll never get any bigger, they'd tell us. It's the second bowl that makes you grow. It's an absurd idea, but back then it was unthinkable for a child to talk back the way they can now. Besides, we didn't know any better, so we all ate as much as we could.

In my memory, the rice and nori seemed to shine. The eggs were large, and the shells were hard. When you cracked one, a giant tangerine-colored yolk would rise up in the middle.

Other than nori, eggs, and rice, the only things we ever had on our table were probably *tsukudani* and *umeboshi*.[7] We never had the bright color of a red tomato or the sweet smell of butter.

Thinking back on our breakfasts, I can't help but feel as if they were strangely silent. Some homes had radios then, others didn't. Conversation around the table was minimal, and not only at our house. The whole neighborhood was equally quiet, but still brimming with life.

We'd wake up early, start a fire in the stove, load it with firewood and cook the rice. We'd shave dried bonito into flakes. After that, we'd pull up the trapdoor in the kitchen floor, take the stone weight off the miso and stir it, then take out the pickled cucumber or eggplant that we'd let sit overnight and chop it up. Whenever we heard the voice of the man selling *nattō* outside, we'd flag him down.

My mother and grandmother only used the fire and the knives for so long, but it felt as if that energy found its way to the table.

It wasn't long before our parents stopped feeding us roasted nori.

One morning at breakfast, my five-year-old brother got a piece of nori stuck to the roof of his mouth, and it caused quite the commotion.

Even though my father had a real temper, he always doted on us. At the sight of his first-born son gagging on seaweed, he roared, "No more nori for the kids!"

From then on, we had to eat our eggs without nori.

My mother says that sixteen eggs typically cost eleven or twelve *sen* at the local henhouse.

In other words, nori was far more expensive than eggs back then. I suppose that's more or less the same today.

Before long, I started primary school. We didn't have school meals then, so we brought lunches from home. When my mother had her hands full—if we had company staying overnight, for example—she'd send me to school with *nori-ben*: a simple lunch with two or three layers of nori and dried bonito flakes. My mother always felt like she was letting me down on those days, but the truth is I loved those lunches.

Every time we had an event at school or a field trip, I had nori rolls.

I forget how old I was, but on one trip I swapped nori rolls with a friend.

Her nori was a different color than what we had at home. Ours was solid black, but hers had reddish-brown spots. It was too dry, and the taste was terrible. That was probably when I learned that not everybody ate like us, or lived like us.

1. One *sen* is equal to one hundredth of a yen; *sen* are no longer used.
2. One mat is approximately 6 by 3 feet.
3. 200 *tsubo* is approximately 7,100 square feet.
4. An oblong wooden brazier with drawers.
5. A style of porcelain ware that often features bold colors.
6. Fermented soybeans often served at breakfast.
7. *Tsukudani* is fish or kelp strips boiled in soy sauce; *umeboshi* are pickled plums.

Kyōhei Sakaguchi

Forest of the Ronpa

translated by Sam Malissa

food © Ichiko Takehana; photo © Sachie Abiko

MY BED IS NUTS.

When I'm hungry, I don't have to go anywhere—I just open my mouth. Before I know it I'm munching on cashews and almonds. That's how my life goes, no need for me to scramble around picking nuts from trees, I don't even need to shell 'em. The humans take care of everything for me.

There are memories inside my head, from further back. Terrible memories.

Everyone is covered in wounds, and when we go to eat, we get eaten instead, by fearsome creatures with fangs bared, and the pain of it still throbs through my body. It never goes away. I'd be better off dead.

Then my body would be gone.

Dissolved inside the stomach of a fearsome creature.

But I don't disappear at all, I just move on to the next closest body. For the moment, I am still in this body. My front right paw has been missing a digit since I was born, three instead of four. Every day I check it to make sure that I'm still living in this body. That's how uncertain I am about whether I've died again. If I did die, I would right away become someone else.

When I've eaten my fill, I decide I'd like to get some fresh air. I swim through the nuts, eyes closed.

My past selves never closed their eyes. Even when sleepy, one eye always stayed open, watching for variations in the light, for the infinite blacknesses of night. At any moment something could creep up in silence. The memories are vivid.

But I have no idea where any of that happened. I've never lived anywhere but here. I can feel the pain, I know exactly how loud the screams were, but the sense of direction is all scrambled, even the colors seem off.

I know I'm fortunate now. I don't know how it ended up this way, but I never have to worry about food, and there are no predators around. Of course if the humans found us we'd have nowhere to run. We have to be quite careful. But, however it came to be this way, there are no cats here.

The entrance to our home is a hole chewed open by Dermot, whose teeth are more than twice as big as mine. We live inside an oak barrel, stuffed full of nuts. An edible house. So even if there's a delicious smell floating out of the galley, we never feel like investigating. And surely that's how the humans would prefer it.

I move up toward our wood-slat ceiling and pop my head out of the hole.

Right away my nose starts working.

It's that scent.

I can see the forest. There I am in the forest, standing before a dead fox, picking at the meat. Someone is squealing happily beside me. He's covered with mud. His fur is shaggy. He looks exactly like Dermot, but Dermot always bathes and keeps himself very tidy, so it must be someone else.

I hear something from deeper in the forest. Like someone is kicking off a festival, celebrating the fact that they've found prey. The sound comes closer and closer. I look up and see a great tree crashing down on me.

SPLASH.

Next thing I know I'm soaking wet. There's the smell of salt. Then I hear laughter.

"Don't tell me the forest attacked you again!"

It's Dermot. He stomps hard on my tail.

I open my eyes and the sea spreads before me. Where had I been? I hadn't been anywhere. I'm looking at the same scenery I've always seen. I'm floating at sea. I've always been here, since I was born. I've never been to a forest. But the forest is always there, inside my head.

"Hurry up and come back from the forest. We're at sea! On a ship sailed by humans. That's how we have more nuts than we could ever eat in our entire lives, and no one to hunt us. What more could we possibly ask for? If you keep mistaking the waves for the trees and getting all worked up and running around, those stupid humans'll catch you and throw you overboard."

"You never see the forest, Dermot?"

"The forest? I've told you, we were born here, and we'll die here. How am I supposed to know anything about the forest? We're not sure it even exists. But if you're that hung up on it, then when we dock somewhere you can get off the ship and go looking for it. Leave me out of it. As far as I'm concerned, we've got it made here."

Dermot gives a high-pitched squeak in my direction, then turns around and goes back to the nut barrel. I catch a whiff of tobacco smoke and scurry into the shadows, where I watch the water for a while. A dragonfly buzzes by. There's nothing anywhere around us. Only the sea.

Where did you fly in from?

I hear the human's footsteps coming closer. If I die now, maybe I'll become the dragonfly. That's what I'm thinking, but my body leaves me there and runs full speed back to the hole. It's not just Dermot—my body must also think the forest is nonsense.

I'm still watching the dragonfly. I call out to it but it ignores me and flies off merrily over the waves. I lean out over the side and see something floating on the surface: a single slender branch.

It's not just floating there. Someone is on top of it, dancing.

A boat. A branch used as a boat. Of course what's dancing on top of it is not a human, it's a rat like me. I somehow feel if I ask him where I come from, he might know. I shout to him as loud as I can.

As soon as I open my mouth it fills with nuts.

That's when I wake up. The response comes not from the sailor rat, but from old Mashumel.

"There was a rat riding a branch," I tell Mashumel.

"Oho? And what was it doing?"

"He was going somewhere."

"You saw him on the water?"

"Yeah."

"Then that was one of the Ronpa."

"You know about them?"

"I don't know nothin. I never see the forest neither."

"How come I see the forest sometimes?"

"Well, I'd say you must be a Ronpa."

THE HUMANS' SHIP IS SO LARGE, I couldn't even say how big it is from end to end. The faces are always changing. They must be switching in and out somewhere. But the ship has never docked. If there was anything to see anywhere around, I could get some sense of where I was, but in every direction it's just the sea, and the sea is all I've ever known.

And yet, once again, inside my head an island appears, with a flock of swallows flying over the island, and there in the island's inner reaches I can see a forest.

For Dermot, the ship might as well be the earth itself. But I don't buy it. I know that we came from somewhere far away. Dermot asks, "Well then, where'd I come from, huh? I've never been anywhere but here."

"But you *were* there, Dermot. You were eating fox meat."

I try to tell him, but he laughs at me. "That's just your daydream."

I tell him about the Ronpa, like I heard from Mashumel, but he just sniggers through his nose. "That old-timer's crazy, better off steering clear of him."

My own nose starts twitching. That forest smell again.

Dermot just gets hungry, but before I want to eat, my nose always catches a scent, and I think about the lands beyond the sea. I go back to the nuts anyway, but even as I eat them, before I taste anything I see the forest.

With my first mouthful, the nutty essence seeps through my body, and before I can even move my tongue I feel a sensation on my hair. It feels good, and I quickly grow sleepy, but as soon as my body finds the ground it springs back up again.

It's my sleeping body. Unlike my trembling body holed up inside the barrel, this body goes everywhere in search of that scent. There are humans all around, but I pay them no mind, and I press on.

The humans with baskets are different from the ones on the ship. They're always singing songs. The music that comes from their mouths bounces off the gnarled trees and comes back to me, reverberating in my ears.

I see a human's fingers. A plump old lady, wrinkles caked with dirt. As I draw closer, her fingers shrink back like blooming flowers, appearing translucent, as if the sun shone right through them.

I climb up a trunk and through a tunnel of leaves. There are nuts growing, more than I could ever eat. Gently rocked by the breezes, I grow sleepy.

When I tell Dermot about it, when I tell him that it isn't made up, he doesn't believe me. But that's all right. I have other friends in the forest. I don't know their names, but no one starts out with a name anyway. I don't even know my own true name. But funnily enough, when I'm darting through the forest, this doesn't bother me at all.

I MUST HAVE had parents at some point, but they're gone now. I can't even remember losing them. Dermot doesn't know anything about it either.

Mashumel might know something, I thought, so one time I asked him. Mashumel was the oldest of us on the ship, and probably should have been respected as an elder, but everyone kept their distance. The stories he told from time to time were so horrifying, the others probably thought he would bring them bad luck.

Mashumel is always smiling, and when I'm with him I feel at ease. The rats in Mashumel's stories are always being eaten by humans. But I loved the heroes that leapt forth from his mouth. It's like I can feel them marching past, a rush of air even when no wind is blowing. Whenever I act out their deeds and repeat their sayings everyone looks at me funny, but nobody knows that the heroes appear by my side sometimes. I tried to tell Dermot about it once, but he just called me weird and stopped listening.

Mashumel doesn't think the heroes are dead. *They're right here now, alive. Just like the wood used to build the ship is alive,* Mashumel says.

Mashumel's mouth opens, late at night, so softly you can barely hear it. His mouth forgets about eating, forgets about his lectures. It becomes an instrument. Using something unseen, he moves something unseen. When he tells stories, Mashumel becomes something altogether different.

"If you say that you can see the forest, the ones who can't see it get a-scared, and they'll make an outcast of you just like they did me, so have a care what you say. It's just a story, you should tell 'em. If the things you see were to flood this ship, you and I'd be the only ones who'd drown."

AT NIGHT, after everyone in the barrel has eaten, most of them slip into dreams. They eat their nuts, then curl up in the fluffy husks and drift away. I'm no different. But instead of the forest I saw earlier, I see the sea. When I move closer, I can make out a branch floating in the water. The same branch I saw before. It's the first time I've ever dreamed of something that I've actually seen.

I open my eyes. Beside me Dermot is with his family, sleeping soundly. I remember what Mashumel taught me: one deep breath, then quietly open my mouth.

We are the Ronpa, Mashumel had told me. Ronpa are seafarers. But we build no ships. We are different from the humans. We are rats, we simply leap onto a branch floating in the sea and move on, on. That is what it is to be a Ronpa. Ronpa are born at sea, Ronpa live at sea, Ronpa die at sea.

Then what do you do for food?

Of course we could do as you do, sneak onto a human ship and make our lives there. But we do not do this.

Why not?

Because we are half rat, half something else.

What's the other half?

Perched on our branches, we have a map. A map no one can see. No one can see it because it is in our heads. We float on the waves. The lines that stretch between this and that, those lines are our map. No matter how small the branch, for us that is a ship. Great trees, small branches, all are part of the map.

From the branches stretch threads like spider silk, and they go on forever. We cannot walk along these threads. No one with a body can walk that path. But we know the threads are there.

One born on the waves can sense them almost immediately.

Any who cannot see them die before long.

We are the Ronpa. We are not a family. In a word, Ronpa are Ronpa. It is nothing to do with blood. Just that we can see the web of threads. When we cannot see them, our story ends. And so we can never settle on the land.

Once, a branch broke off a tree deep in the forest, and the wind carried it to the shore, and a bird picked it up and dropped it in the sea. But for a tree, this is as normal as walking down a straight road is for a human. Yet even floating in the middle of the ocean, the branches are tied firmly back to their trees. We Ronpa trace those connecting threads. We ride the branches, and we dissolve into their wooden memory. Before we even realize it, we can come to believe that we are the tree. There are some who go beyond just believing it. Their fur changes color, they lose language, their paws fuse with the branch.

The branches go where the tide takes them. But the waves do not roll idly. They flow to deliver up the branches. Not back to where they came from. There is not even any concept of back where they came from. Day after day the branch is reborn. When it becomes tangled in the thread of another tree, it knows right away, and it goes toward that tree.

That is how we write our map. A tree and its neighbor, the roots, the nearby flowers and grass, all are connected. But not like the connection between our heads and our bodies and our tails.

They have no body. In fact they are like those of us who have died.

Thinking of our dead. That is our other task.

Those of us who have died—the forest is like their body, more important to us than even food. We may be devoured and gone, but our unseen bodies persist in the forest.

And so we ride the branches, we feel for trees, we journey to the forests where our dead await us.

After a while, an island comes into view.

Those few of us who are still alive enter the forest. Our boats project their threads out to the trees in Hyperion's Forest, where we always return, and even at night when the sun has set, the threads glimmer in the starlight, breathing.

Those of us who have died are half of what we are, and those of us who live are simply the other half.

So it is that while we live we are also dead. We do not live so as to not die. We encounter the forest so that we can meet our dead half anew, because if we do not know our dead selves, we too will soon disappear.

DERMOT WAGGLES HIS BODY toward the exit of the barrel.

"I always have the same weird dream." He looks directly at me as he speaks. "I'm in a bunch of spiky grass, and I'm scared. I'm hiding. There are no humans there, but I'm still scared. I don't know why. My body's all torn up, but I have no memory at all of where all these wounds came from. I've never even seen a bunch of grass, so it should be obvious that it's a dream, but instead it feels like my life in the nut barrel is the dream. And in my dream I'm always frightened of the humans. It was the same this time, I was in the grass. I tried to wake up, but you were talking about something, and it kind of made me feel cozy and I fell back asleep."

Now Dermot moves unsteadily along the wood-slat ceiling, then out onto the deck under the night sky. I follow him, intrigued. "See, look," he says. "There's an island."

But I don't see anything. It's like we've switched roles. It strikes me as very odd. He doesn't seem to be joking, either. He sniffs the air and follows his nose toward the island.

"Dermot, there's no island. It's nighttime, you can't see anything anyway."

But Dermot just keeps staring out across the water. I start to get worried, and step up beside him to look out to sea. There's a single slender branch floating on the waves.

Up in the sky, the stars are shimmering. *Where are the threads?* I can't see them at all. I knew I wasn't a Ronpa.

Dermot stares quietly at the invisible island.

There's a sudden noise.

By the time I notice, it's too late. There's Dermot in the hand of a human, who had snuck up behind us. It's all because I was telling my strange stories. My body wants to run away, but before I know what I'm doing I charge at the human. I scramble up to the wrist of his right hand, the hand holding Dermot, and sink my front teeth in.

The man screams.

In that instant Dermot slips between the fingers and jumps. When he hits the deck he makes a mad dash for our hole.

I feel a rush of relief. Then the hands close around me.

I scream for Dermot to help me, but he's already vanished into the hole without a backward glance.

The face I see peeking out of the hole belongs instead to Mashumel.

He is calm, watching me in silence.

I am stuffed into a bag and beaten with something.

The image floating in my mind before I lose consciousness is the serene look on Mashumel's face.

A NOISE WAKES ME.

Light filters in through the weave in the bag. My head is still bleary.

Suddenly the bag opens and the man's eyes peer in. I meet his gaze for a fraction of a second but immediately look away, pretending not to have noticed anything. A shadow descends from above. I tense up and then I'm being held again. Without hesitation I once more bite down hard. But this time the human does not scream. Instead he takes me out of the bag and looks straight at me.

"Thought I'd fall for that again, eh? Well now I've got my cowskin gloves on, so you're outta luck!"

The man is saying something. I don't know what it means. He's grinning at me. It doesn't look like my bite bothered him in the slightest.

I realize it's all over.

But the man doesn't kill me. This comes as a surprise, because all I've ever known is that if a human catches you, you get thrown to the ground or put in a bag and stomped on, and before you know it you're dead. But it seems that not all humans are the same. Maybe this man doesn't hate rats. I relax, and have no more thoughts of biting him.

In the man's hand is a strip of dried fish. I can tell that it's not a trap. My hair doesn't stand on end at all. I don't have to compete with anyone else, so I pick up the fish in my front paws and take my time nibbling at it. Maybe I was hungry, because it makes my whole body feel happy.

I look at my right paw. Three digits, as usual.

So I'm still not dead. Eating the fish perks me up.

"I'll keep you nice and well fed."

While the man says whatever he's saying, he strokes me with his other hand. It doesn't feel at all bad. Then he puts me back in the bag. He also drops in a whole bunch of dried fish, so I decide to lounge around and snack. Before long I'm sleepy again. But almost immediately my eyes snap back open.

This is because, for the first time in my life, the ship comes to a stop. How long since it had last docked? I have no idea. I don't even know how to measure how old I am. But I imagine we'd been at sea a long time.

I want to look outside.

From inside the bag I can't tell what's happening. I can sense humans nearby. They're all around me. But I'm not scared in the least. In fact it feels somehow familiar.

I can hear human voices coming from different directions, from far away too. The man is going to get off the ship. I'm lucky. If we were just staying on the ship, that wouldn't be fun at all. I feel thankful toward the man.

I wonder how Dermot's doing. I was caught instead of him, and he might be worried about me. No, Dermot is probably just fine. And I had seen Mashumel's face too. Just like he said, I'm not dead at all.

I can tell that I'm getting closer to the forest floating in my head.

The man is walking, but there's no rocking or swaying. So this is dry land. I'm full of excitement at having arrived in this new world. I gobble down my fish strips, throw my arms and legs open wide, and squeak as loud as I can. The man strokes me gently through the bag.

Then he catches hold of me and takes me out.

The light is bright, blinding me.

My head is swimming.

It's the first time I've ever seen the ship from outside of it. I knew it was big, but it looks enormous. In that instant I catch sight of the same familiar landscape, filtering into view the way the light came through the weave of the bag.

I can smell grass. It feels familiar, even though I know it doesn't belong to me. Maybe we're close to where the man lives, because even though I had never been to this place, it feels more and more like I'm returning home.

Before me is a large fallen tree. It's the first wood I've ever seen with the bark still on. It's the same tree I'm always clambering around inside my head. Was that a tale from long ago? The tree I'm looking at now is lying on its side, uprooted. But it isn't dead. Buds emerge from the bark, and the torn roots stretch out like limbs, trying to reach somewhere.

The man stands in front of the tree and mutters something, one word, then another. Then, still holding me in his hands, he begins to bend at the waist. His eyes are closed. It seems my kind can ride humans as well. I feel a sense of something like calm, and in my mind I picture the Ronpa floating through the waves on their branches.

The man dances like a branch. From the ends of his whiskers and the tips of his fingernails there are threads spooling out.

Is he divided in half too?

Has the scenery inside my head been what this man sees?

Searching for me. Me searching. Searching for rats. Rats on ships. Rats who have never known grass. Rats who have never seen tree bark. Rats who sleep as they were born, inside well-planed wood. Rats who sleep among their food, inside barrels.

I'm starting to think of all sorts of strange things.

I know this fallen tree. That branch.

I feel as if I'm in a separate space from all the time I've spent since my birth. Time is gathering from somewhere far away, washed here on the waves. Like branches. Like ships. Like numberless rats in search of food. Converging on this fallen tree, this one point, crowding in. I am the fallen tree.

I am fallen. By the time I feel the crushing sensation on my neck, it's too late. The man has placed me atop the tree. As he looks at me, his face reminds me of Mashumel.

AS I DANCE, I run through the grass. It's not a forest. It's always just been called that. I always return here. When I exchange lives, everything their eyes captured, everything their skin felt, everything that ever moved their heart—all of it is passed on to me. The life before me, and then one before that, and the one before that . . . as I dance, they all appear.

I take my knife and slice lengthwise down the rat's belly. I pull out the innards, then after washing the body in the water bubbling up from under the fallen camphor tree, I stick the blade into the fat and carefully remove the skin. I hold it up to look at the fur along the back, so fine the tips are transparent in the sunlight, then rinse the skin in the spring. Round droplets bounce off the fur.

It's a good one, not a mark on it.

I'll get a nice price for this, I think, while I roast the rat with the bones still in.

But it has to be fresh, so as soon as I've eaten I bury the bones in the earth beside the camphor tree and head for town.

Everything is fine up to then.

But somehow, though I walk and walk, I never make it back to town. It's like I'm going around in circles. Even though the sun is always where I expect it to be. Why is this happening? I did the dance in the forest, like I was supposed to. Eventually the sun sinks, and I spend the night in the forest.

I feel bad for the rat that I wasted his precious back fur. Giving up on selling it in town, I enter a grove of black bamboo and find a perfect piece for making a brush. I gingerly cut the long strands of back fur and gather them together, eventually producing a serviceable brush.

Ever since then, I haven't managed to get out of the forest.

As I write, I check the fingers on my right hand.

Three fingers. But they're human fingers.

I am not a human. The human me can write that, but no one would ever believe it.

I have no idea which one is me.

I take the brush in my three fingers and dip it in diluted sap.

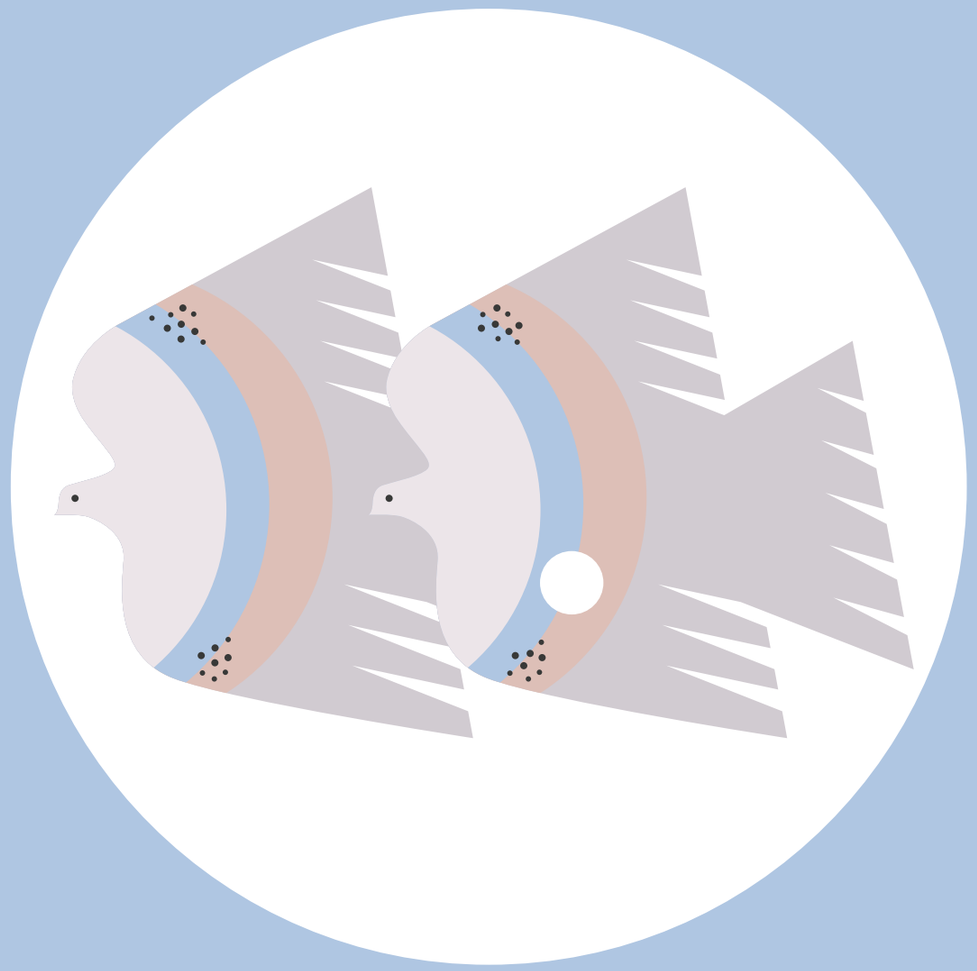
All I can do is write what I have seen.

As for leaving the forest, I've given up on that completely.

Naoya Shiga

Turtledoves

translated by Ted Goossen



TURTLEDOVES ARE FINE-LOOKING BIRDS, and I like their husky, off-key voices. I used to hear them when I lived on the outskirts of Tokyo in Shinmachi, in Setagaya, and even more frequently on my occasional visits to Ōhito hot springs. Turtledoves always fly in pairs. Now my wife and I live in Atami, on a mountainside in Ōhoradai, so the sight of a pair of turtledoves winging through the sky right at eye level has become familiar to me. This year an old friend of mine, Randō Fukuda, came to visit on the last day of the spring hunting season. He arrived from his home in Kajiya, Toshihama, shouldering his hunting gun and dangling a string of wild birds—partridges, turtledoves, bulbuls, and the like—which he'd shot on the way. It was a greatly appreciated gift, for we hadn't eaten birds like these since the war.

"Let me go shoot a few more for you," he said.

"Why don't we go duck hunting in Atami instead," I replied.

"Duck hunting in Atami" actually meant paying a visit to our friend Kazuo Hirotsu. Hirotsu and I had been outmatched many times playing mahjong with Fukuda, who, besides being expert in bird hunting, fishing, and diving for abalone, was also an accomplished mahjong player. Fukuda looked pleased with the idea and accepted readily, then checked what time the next bus was scheduled to pass.

"Well then, we've got half an hour," he said, "so I'll do a bit more hunting while you're getting ready." He changed from his shoes into a pair of split-toed workman's boots and headed up the hill at the back.

Fukuda returned about twenty minutes later. Since I had heard no gunshots, I'd assumed he hadn't bagged anything, but he handed over the still-warm bodies of a turtledove, a bulbul, and a bunting, all of which he had shot in that short span.

I was prepared to leave, so I waited for Fukuda to change back into his shoes, then we walked down the slope to take the bus to Atami.

The next day I could see only one turtledove flying about. A pair of turtledoves on the wing gives a strangely hurried impression; one always takes the lead and the other follows eight or ten yards back, striving to not be left behind. I'd watched the two turtledoves flying in this fashion for months. Now there was just one bird, which flew back and forth before my eyes a number of times in the course of the day. Though I gave little thought to the partridge, or the bulbul, or even the turtledoves Fukuda had shot elsewhere, to watch this solitary bird after being used to seeing it with its mate left me with a bad feeling. I hadn't killed the missing bird, but I had eaten it, and my conscience bothered me.

Several more months passed. One day I again saw two turtledoves flying together. I was happy to think that the turtledove had finally found a suitable partner and gotten remarried. However, I learned that in fact such was not the case: this was a new couple that had moved in from somewhere else, and the solitary turtledove continued on alone as before. This situation remains unchanged today.

The hunting season started again recently. A neighbor of mine can often be seen sauntering past in his hunting outfit accompanied by his two pedigreed English setters. In his case, though, I've been led to understand that the birds can rest easy as far as his marksmanship is concerned—it's rather his dogs that have to watch out. The dangerous one is Randō Fukuda, with his split-toed workman's boots. He stopped by again four or five days ago.

"How about not hunting around here this year," I said.

"If it's bothering you so much, why don't I polish off the other one too," he answered with a grin. That's the frightening sort of man the birds have to deal with.

Seven Modern Poets on Food

selected and translated by Andrew Campana

Hisajo Sugita (1890–1946)

ELEVEN HAIKU

Opening the pot,
a delicate green—
aster-leaf rice

炊き上げてうすき緑や嫁菜飯

I draw a cartoon for a child
begging for sweets—
spring rain

菓子ねだる子に戯画かくや春の雨

Butterbur miso—
the daughter-in-law must have taken over
the temple kitchen

蕗味噌や代替りなる寺の厨

The rain won't stop
clouds hang low
ripening loquats

降り歇まぬ雨雲低し枇杷熟れる

The joyous roar
of a big cauldron—
boiling crabs

大釜の湯鳴りたのしみ蟹うでん

Legs
sticking out of the pot!
boiling crabs

大鍋をはみ出す脚よ蟹うでん

As soon as I bite
into a fresh tomato
I crave more

新鮮なトマト喰ふなり慾もあり

Come
eat this homegrown strawberry!
a mother proclaims

手づくりの苺食べよと宣す母

First strawberry—
the child I wanted to feed it to
is far away

初苺喰ませたく思ふ子は遠く

Potato soup—
worth all the soot stains
on these grand sliding doors

芋汁や紙すすけたる大障子

Jewels tumbling down
at the pull of a vine—
winter strawberries

蔓ひけばこぼるる珠や冬苺

Akiko Yosano (1878–1942)

SUNDAY BREAKFAST

日曜の朝飯

All together now, for our Sunday breakfast
(two parents and six children, faces scrubbed)
Let's sit around these two low tables
and put on our freshly washed smocks
Little Auguste will sit quietly
Right next to Mom, right?
Good morning!
Good morning!
Look, even Auguste is bowing, Good morning!
As always, there are two loaves of French bread
and today, butter and jam
and a pint of milk too
Some rice with green peas, a rare treat,
and miso soup with little clams
Kidney beans
and some freshly pickled turnips too
Everyone, help yourself to your favorite things
Help yourself, no need to rush
Help yourself, as much as you like
They say that breakfast you eat heartily
Lunch you eat to put on weight
Dinner you eat for pleasure
But that's not what it's like for us
Meals in a house like ours, you know,
all three of them, every day,
Mom and Dad eat so they can work
And you kids, you eat so you can play well
grow up well, sing well
go to school well, read books
so you can know things well
But help yourselves, no need to rush
help yourselves, as much as you like
Just on Sunday mornings, at least
Dad and Mom
can take their time eating, like everyone else
Drink your tea, get ready to go,
and let's get you to your Sunday classes
Everyone, time to go!
All together now, our Sunday breakfast

さあ、一所に、我家の日曜の朝の御飯
（顔を洗うた親子八人）
みんなが二つのちやぶ台を囲みませう
みんなが洗い立ての白い胸布を当てませう
独り赤さんのアウギユストだけは
おとなしく母さんの膝の横に坐るのねえ
お早う
お早う
それ、アウギユストもお辞儀をしますよ、お早う
何時もの二斤の仏蘭西麺包に
今日はバタとジヤムもある
三合の牛乳もある
珍しい青豌豆の御飯に
参州味噌の蜆汁
うづら豆
それから新漬けの蕪菁もある
みんな好きな物を勝手におあがり
ゆつくりとおあがり
たくさんにおあがり
朝の御飯は贅沢に食べる
午の御飯は肥えるやうに食べる
夜の御飯は楽しみに食べる
それは全く他人のこと
我家の様な家の御飯はね
三度が三度
父さんや母さんは働く為に食べる
子供のあなた達は、よく遊び
よく大きくなり、よく歌ひ
よく学校へ行き、本を読み
よく物を知るやうに食べる
ゆつくりおあがり
たくさんにおあがり
せめて日曜の朝だけは
父さんや母さんも人並みに
ゆつくりみんなと食べませう
お茶を飲んだら元気よく
日曜学校へお行き
みんなでお行き
さあ、一所に、我家の日曜の朝の御飯

Shizunojo Takeshita (1887–1951)

SIX HAIKU

Trees aflame with greenery—
in the kitchen
a cake is being baked

緑樹炎え割烹室に菓子焼かる

Strawberry jam—
in the process of crushing the berries
I crush an ant

苺ジヤムつぶす過程にありつぶす

Strawberry jam—
let's not let the boys
have any of it

苺ジヤム男子はこれを食ふ可らず

Shuttering the windows
not a soul left in the schoolhouse—
rows of dried radishes

窓しめて魂ぬけ校舎干大根

Bought by a college student
what a sad fate
for a salted sardine

大学生に買はれて哀し塩鰯

So coarse
and so meager
but still—the year's first rice

かく粗くかつ軽けれど今年米

Hokuto Iboshi (1901–1929)

SEVEN TANKA

Catching a bear
for the first time since who knows when
The wonderful taste
of that meat
after so many years!

久々で熊がとれたが其の肉を
何年ぶりで食うたうまさよ

Now I only rarely indulge
my sweet-tooth self
But when I eat candy
I think of Tokyo

甘党の私は今はたまに食う
お菓子につけて思う東京

Eating together
at a stand-up ramen joint in Tokyo
around this time last year—
It was fun, wasn't it?

支那蕎麦の立食をした東京の
去年の今頃楽しかったね

While talking about Kamchatka
we split a single apple in two
and each ate half

カムチャッカの話しながら林檎一つを
二つに割りて仲よく食うた

The taste of a meal on an empty stomach
after working hard
Oh man, it's good—
I slurp up salmon soup

働いて空腹に食う飯の味
ほんとにうまい三平汁吸う

I've got used to the back-breaking labor
but I'm still astonished
at how I can devour a whole pot of rice
in one go

骨折れる仕事も慣れて一升飯
けろりと食べる俺にたまげた

I've become a man
who can eat a whole pot of rice in one go!
—an announcement to my friends
from the fishing grounds

一升飯食える男になったよと
漁場の便り友に知らせる

Awajijo Takahashi (1890–1955)

FOUR HAIKU

Grilling mochi
for my dear friends—
the first week of the year

餅焼いて親しき客や松の内

In a big pot
bubbling and overflowing
rice porridge with nazuna leaves

大鍋に炊きあふれけり薺粥

A clear broth
perfumed with green yuzu
the early days of summer

吸物に青柚かをりて夏浅し

Chestnut rice—
exactly enough
for the number of guests

栗飯や心づもりの客の数

Takuji Ōte (1887–1934)

APPLE CUISINE

Take it in your hand—
a snowfall of puréed apple vanishing like a dream,
like a woman's body wrapped in a flannel kimono
Softly piling up, apple purée
almost dissolving on the tongue, sweet and sticky
a light snowfall of apple that somehow resembles
  the lovely frisson of jealousy,
beautifully served up with caramel bubbles
on a pure white plate,
waiting to be pierced by a silver fork soaked in perfume.
On a quiet evening, wind rapping at the door,
a lonely autumn's nostalgia
for apple cuisine!

林檎料理

手にとつてみれば
ゆめのやうにきえうせる淡雪りんご、
ネルのきものにつつまれた女のはだのやうに
ふうはりともりあがる淡雪りんご、
舌のとけるやうにあまくねばねばとして
嫉妬のたのしい心持にも似た淡雪りんご、
まつしろい皿のうへに
うつくしくもられて泡をふき、
香水のしみこんだ銀のフオークのささるのを待つてゐる。
とびらをたたく風のおとのしめやかな晩、
さみしい秋の
林檎料理のなつかしさよ。

Kurako Nishigori (1889–1949)

A TANKA

The *noren* shop curtain
advertising roast sweet potatoes
has transformed
into a rattan sign for shaved ice—
summer has arrived

焼き芋の暖簾は青き氷屋のすだれと化して夏は来りぬ

HISAJO SUGITA (1890–1946) is the pen name of Hisa Sugita, born in Kagoshima on Kyushu. She founded *Hanagoromo,* a journal for women haiku poets, with the aim of fostering a new generation of women in a largely male-dominated literary form. Her turbulent personal life made her the subject of many novels, plays, and television dramas in the decades after her death.

AKIKO YOSANO (1878–1942) is the pen name of Shō Yosano, born in Sakai, Osaka prefecture. One of Japan's most well-known modern poets, she became famous for her wild, romantic, and innovative tanka poetry, particularly her 1901 collection *Midaregami* (*Tangled Hair*), as well as her pioneering feminist writings. A devoted Francophile, she gave two of her thirteen children French names, Hélène and Auguste (who appears as a toddler in the poem included here).

SHIZUNOJO TAKESHITA (1887–1951) is the pen name of Shizuno Takeshita, born in the village of Hieda in Fukuoka prefecture, now part of the city of Yukuhashi. A schoolteacher and poet, she quickly became known for her haiku promoting women's independence. She was a key member of the haiku coterie Hototogisu ("Cuckoo"), whose titular periodical remains the most prominent and longest-running haiku journal.

HOKUTO IBOSHI (1901–1929) was born in Yoichi, a town in Hokkaido. He was an indigenous Ainu poet and activist, and his works were closely linked to his aim of promoting a unified Ainu identity and recovering aspects of Ainu history and culture.

AWAJIJO TAKAHASHI (1890–1955) is the pen name of Sumi Takahashi, born on Cape Wada in Hyogo prefecture. She was a member of the haiku coterie Unmo ("Mica"), and became famous for writing haiku that evoked poetry from centuries earlier.

TAKUJI ŌTE (1887–1934) was born in a hot spring inn in the village of Nishikami Isobe, now part of the city of Annaka in Gunma prefecture. An extremely prolific poet who worked largely in a Symbolist mode reminiscent of Baudelaire (whom he also translated), he did not publish any poetry collections in his lifetime and gained recognition only after his death.

KURAKO NISHIGORI (1889–1949), born in Niigata prefecture, was an early feminist activist, Christian, tanka poet, and essayist, whose work often centered around advocating for more rights for mothers in Japan. She was the president of the World Association of Mothers for Peace in Japan.

Barry Yourgrau

The Goose

© Yumi Uchida

"ARE YOU HUNGRY?" asks the Brilliant One as I come in our door at Baker Street. He briskly swings a cape around himself and snatches his deerstalker hat from the wall. "Because let us return, to dine on that fine goose later! For now, let's away—the trail to Covent Garden is clear, the suspects lurking there amid the poultry and provender, the clues tantalizing for scrutiny and solution!"

"Actually, I'm starving," I reply. I hang up my coat.

"You are?"

He looks bewildered.

"Famished," I confirm. "If you don't mind"—and I head over to the dining table and inhale deeply the aroma of the glorious mahogany-brown bird. I sit, wedge a billowy napkin into my collar, and seize the carving knife.

Of course he stares at me with his hawk eyes flared in disbelief.

"I must say," he protests, as I carve myself a thick slice of bird. "You couldn't wait a couple of hours?"

"I'm *hungry*," I reply, digging in. I pour out a hefty glass of claret, glug it down noisily, and belch.

"By heavens, this is absurd!" he cries, and slings his cape and hat onto the couch. "Wait"—he leans forward, eyeing me keenly—"is that cotton wool stuffed in your ears?"

"Earache. Damned new stethoscope I used all day in examinations," I lie. His words are happily muffled to me.

He commences now his typical pacing up and down, fuming at the delay, snorting at how the prime suspect, poor wretched fellow, is *obviously* wrongly accused by the ox-brained police, is *of course* not the thief, how could he be, given the presence of—Suddenly he whirls and glares at me. "Did you just mockingly mutter, '*blah blah blah*'?" he demands.

"Not at all," I reply, all innocence. "I said *catarrh*—damned touch of cold in my chest." I tap the body area in question and clear my throat.

He grunts, and resumes his pacing and brilliant ratiocinations—then suddenly whirls again, and storms into his study with an exasperated oath, and slams the door. The screeching of his infernal violin starts up.

I press the cotton wool deeper into my ears. With a grim smile, I continue savoring the dark, juicy bird—delighted at the monkey wrench I've thrown into the Brilliant One's works.

Because I've had it with him. I've been seeing a discreet alienist on Harley Street, who has supplied me the strength of character to admit how much I find him insufferable, how obnoxious it is to be with such an unrelenting know-it-all, someone so arrogantly prying into appearances and privacies, dragging shameful intimacies into the spotlight on the basis of dandruff and sweat stains.

I glug down more claret, and languidly munch another delicious mouthful. This is my valedictory meal at Baker Street, thank you. Tomorrow I'm moving out, which will come as news (I chuckle) to the Brilliant One. From now on he can write up his own damn adventures! I'm sick of transcribing them. Me, I'm going to write romance novels. Pretty girls, moonlight, kind-hearted dashing heroes (all doctors, like me).

I tear off a goose leg and gnaw away contentedly, as the study door is wrenched open, and his cries ring out at the sight of me still at table, and he holds up his watch and waggles it at me in recrimination.

© Sachiko Kishimoto

Sachiko Kishimoto

Misaki

translated by Ted Goossen

FOR THE PAST SEVEN YEARS, when autumn arrives a group of us heads down the coast to a place called Misaki to spend the night.

The trip was inspired by a single phrase, uttered with great feeling by a friend one evening when a number of us were out on the town: "Drinking is a lot more fun when we don't have to go home afterwards." Most of us agreed. So we set to thinking: if that was the case, why not plan a short trip together? Something like a school excursion maybe? Yeah, a drinkers' excursion!

Marshaling that peculiar ability to make snap decisions when you're drunk, we agreed on a location —a company-run resort one of us had access to— and we were off and running. We've been making the same excursion now for seven years.

Each year follows the same general pattern.

In small groups of three or four, we catch the Keihin Express for the hour-long trip from Tokyo, then share taxis to the resort. Arrival can be any time in the afternoon. The fridge is stocked with beer, so early birds can grab a cold one and carry it down to the beach on the other side of the highway to get a head start. It's a sandy beach with little vegetation and lots of boulders and driftwood, so there are plenty of places to sit. No one around to bother us, either.

When the sun starts to go down, we gather in the dining room. Placing all the bottles we have brought with us on the table, we take a group picture. The person snapping the photo calls out, "Look this way, please!" to get the bottles' attention.

Then we go build a bonfire on the beach.

The bonfire idea was introduced about four years ago. We sit around the fire in a circle and silently pass around a bottle of whisky, swigging from it like cowboys around a campfire out on the range, or the late Ken Kaiko, writer and noted drinker. No, check that. That was our initial idea. Now, though, it's a whole different scene—we stand or dance around the fire drinking our booze (beer and shochu mostly) and roasting marshmallows and little sausages on sticks. Meanwhile, the sun is sinking directly in front of us.

Once the sun is all the way down, we head back to the resort, where an impressive spread, including wooden boats of sashimi and seafood hot pots on

burners, awaits us. We pick at the food while we tend to our first priority, our drinks. The cluster of bottles on the table rapidly dwindles. As the evening progresses, some call it quits early and head off to bed, while others soak in the resort's onsen bath and then come back to drink some more, or fall asleep in their chairs, or slip outside to cool off. It's up to us.

When nine o'clock rolls around, as if by an unspoken agreement, we take a stroll, a cold beer, glass of wine, or bottle of something in our hands. The moon is always bright. We walk along the seawall until it comes to an end, at which point we sit down and drink whatever we brought with us. The waves are louder than in the afternoon, and the wind coming off the sea is perfect, neither too cold nor too warm. If someone is fishing nearby, we lower our voices so as not to scare away the fish.

The next morning, we stagger out of bed, eat breakfast, pack our bags, and take the bus to the harbor. The biggest issue is whether to polish off the booze we have left or stow it in our luggage. Clear liquids like sake, shochu, and white wine are poured into empty Alpine Spring Water bottles to be consumed discreetly as we walk along. Plastic water bottles are the hip flasks of today's drinkers.

If the bus ride has left any of our members woozy, we park them on a bench to recover while the rest of us walk around. We purchase sliced raw tuna, steamed fish, tuna candies (weird-tasting things that could be used to penalize losers on TV game shows), locally grown vegetables and other stuff at the harbor's souvenir shop. When noon rolls around, we walk up to Maruichi, the local seafood market, and eat our fill of fish—raw, steamed, grilled, and dried—then buy some more dried fish to take back to the city.

This brings our drinkers' excursion to its official conclusion, but some are reluctant to call it quits, so we head back to a café on the shopping street, where we drink wine with sardine and whitebait pizza on the side.

It is always thus: the harbor sunny and warm, the seagulls floating lazily in the sky, the rubber trees ridiculously tall, as though growing in some southern land. Gazing upon these things and sipping our chilled white wine, the feeling rises in our breasts that, yes, this is what it means to be truly alive, a most pleasant emotion, too pleasant perhaps, since in the end it leaves us somehow sad. It is for that reason that we drink even more on the Keihin Express back to the city.

This pattern has been repeated for seven years. Though the core members have remained the same, our group's numbers have waxed and waned, with couples and children and friends, and more couples and children, coming and going. Some of the couples have gotten married. Other members have passed away.

The seven years of memories jangle around inside me, overlapping each other in a welter of recollections and images, as if I am looking down on layer after layer of stratified earth. Only the location is set: otherwise, we are an everchanging cluster of humankind, drinking, walking, laughing, existing together.

Gathered around the fire, none of us speak. Gathered around the fire, we shout and make merry. The wood we gathered was insufficient, and the fire goes out. We gathered loads of wood, and the fire burns on and on as the setting sun turns the sky red. We roast potatoes and cheese and sausages wrapped in aluminum foil. We brought nothing to roast over the fire, so we use chocolate, which melts almost immediately. We fix our eyes on the lighthouse in the distance.

P is our biggest drinker, known to get off the Keihin Express early to visit another bar on the way back. P failed to show up twice, both times because he was on the wagon. P started the trend of pairing his drinks with "Green Raccoon" cup noodles. On the bus to the harbor, P smacked his lips drinking shochu while pretending it was water. X spent hours fast asleep in the resort's bath. X raised a plate of sashimi to his lips, pretending he was about to devour the whole thing in a single bite. X is dead and gone. X spilled some sake on the futon, and when a maid blamed someone else, cackled and pointed at the accused. U lay on her back, buried in the resort's thick lawn. U made salted rice balls from our leftover rice. U ate steamed buns to go with her drinks. W took dozens of photos of the harbor, none of which included people. W telephoned a Misaki real estate agent to inquire about the possibility of renting a room. W almost toppled off the seawall. Q came on the excursion by herself. Q is married. She arrived with her child in tow. Z wore a zombie T-shirt. Z wore a skull T-shirt. Z wore an aloha shirt inscribed with phrases from the Wisdom Sutra.

We set off for the ocean but are driven back by the rain. We set off for the ocean and bump into another group of rowdy drinkers gathered under a see-through bubble of a tent, but when we try to act friendly they give us the cold shoulder. We sit on the seawall looking up at the stars, extravagantly praising one of us who knows something about them. We walk on and on along the oceanfront path until, finally, it hits a dead end.

OUR DRINKING EXCURSION was canceled last year. There was no particular reason. Perhaps we've reached the end of the line. Or, perhaps we'll pick it up again later. Since our common bond is drinking, it'll be fine if we continue it and fine if we don't.

ONE YEAR (I can't recall exactly when), we were out for a stroll on a night when there were lots of shooting stars. "There's one!" "There's another!" people exclaimed, but I missed them all. I guess I was looking elsewhere or was just too smashed. Finally, at the end, I saw one. A really big one, with a long tail. Did I make a wish or not, or was I too drunk to even try? I can't remember.

Aoko Matsuda

Dissecting Misogyny
A Live Demo!

translated by Polly Barton

OKAY, LADIES! Behold this large, newly sharpened knife with its serrated tip. Isn't it formidable? I've been using it for some years now, and it's my absolute pride and joy, let me tell you.

Right, I'm going to make a start in on the head. This calls for quite a bit of strength—yes, that's right, slicing through a pumpkin seems like child's play in comparison. Not a task for the complete beginner, I assure you, so I wouldn't think about trying this at home. Just take this opportunity to observe, ladies. Accidents can happen all too easily, and I can't accept responsibility for any injuries that occur in the home, I'm afraid.

So you see, I'm applying pressure, like this, to sever the neck. Oof! This is a particularly tough one! I've been doing this for decades now, but from time to time the knife seems to get stuck midway. In this situation, the trick is to bear down on it with your full body weight so it. . . . There, see?

Okay, so the head's off. Oh dear, I see one of our audience members is a little distressed. I do understand your feelings entirely, madam, but please try not to shriek, for the sake of the other audience members. Gosh, has that lady over there passed out? Oh, and another one over there? Would someone mind calling an ambulance? Yes, that's it, if you can keep fanning them it would be most helpful. Oh look, this young lady has brought some smelling salts with her. What forethought! I'm impressed. Oh yes, if you don't mind sharing them around, that would be much appreciated. Goodness, what delicate flowers we all are, ladies! I'm mortified to see the distress I've caused. You know I really wouldn't be inflicting this on you if it wasn't necessary, but sometimes sacrifices just have to be made. This is my job, after all.

So, as the fainters in the house are probably already aware, the head is full of dark, filthy gunk. See the way it's bubbling and gurgling, as if it were spilling out of a sewer or something? It's a peculiar color, isn't it? Very hard to describe, yet uniquely disgusting. Look what it's done to my lab coat! This was spotless when I put it on, and now you can barely see any white for all the splatters. This happens every time. Honestly, it's hard enough just keeping up with the washing in this line of work!

Good, so now I'll move on to the trunk. This is a pretty large specimen, as they go, so it'll take some oomph. As I said before, you really mustn't go trying this at home. This stuff is definitely best left to professionals like myself.

Okay, so I'm going to open it up, starting from the stomach. This part of the job is hard work, and it's important not to rush it, so I'm taking it one small step at a time. Right, there we are. That's the trunk all opened up now.

Oh, I see we've got a couple more collapsed over there! Maybe it's wise to take a little break at this point. The stench is pretty overpowering, isn't it? You have to wonder what on earth could create a smell as awful as this. In an ideal world, I'd open the windows, but we're tucked away in a windowless corner of the department store. . . . There's really not a lot I can do. I just have to ask you to bear it as best you can. We're nearly through, I promise. You know, I've thought for years about a good way of evoking this stench in words, but I still haven't managed to hit on quite the right description. I suppose if I absolutely had to compare it to something, I might say it was a bit like the soles of the Guardian of the Underworld's fungus-infected feet. Or maybe the gelatinous concentrate of a tomato that's been left for decades in the deepest, darkest corner of a rubbish truck until it rots to a maggot-infested pulp. Of course, I fully appreciate that such simple descriptions can't come close to approximating the nuanced reality of this stink—I'm just saying, if I was *forced* to provide a comparison.

Well, it seems everyone has regained consciousness, so I'll stop nattering on and proceed to the final task, since my allocated time on this demo stage is limited. I appreciate that you ladies all have a lot to do today, too: shopping for groceries, returning home and preparing dinner, and getting through all the other chores that await you. I don't know how many of you heard the announcement a little while ago, but it seems that fresh tuna is on special today in the supermarket on basement level 1.

So, now I'm going to remove the bones. A little piece of trivia for you: the bones are surprisingly flimsy, and come apart right in your hands. If you look carefully, you'll see that there's no core or marrow running through them, and there are whole sections where they aren't even joined together. Look, here! This is a perfect example, see? Oh, this courageous lady is moving her face right up close to have a look.

You see how easy it is to pull them out, though? It begins to seem like a miracle that it ever managed to live in this pathetic state. Sometimes it's hard to even locate the things. Okay, so I'm just going to whisk them out in quick succession . . . It's a breeze, this part! See, I'm all done. A task like this, I'm sure every one of you ladies could manage.

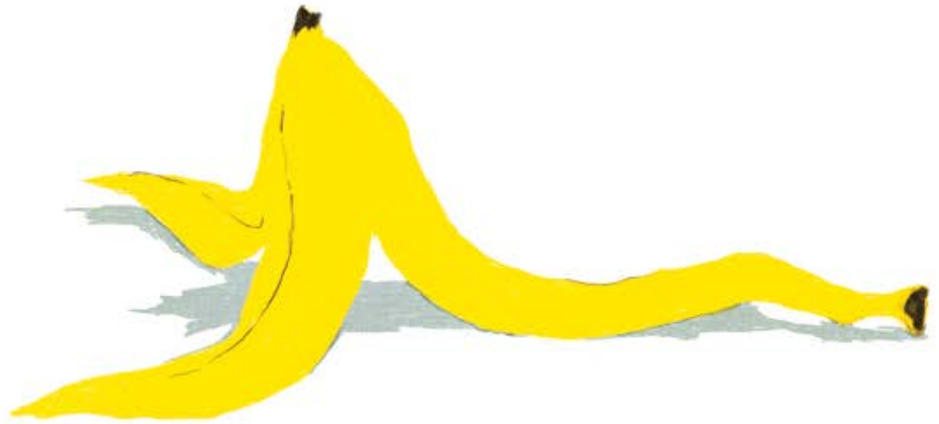
And that concludes my live demonstration! So now you see what misogyny looks like, dissected and slit open. It doesn't make a very pretty sight with its flesh all over the tabletop like that, does it? But we've come to the end now, so there's to be no more fainting, okay ladies?

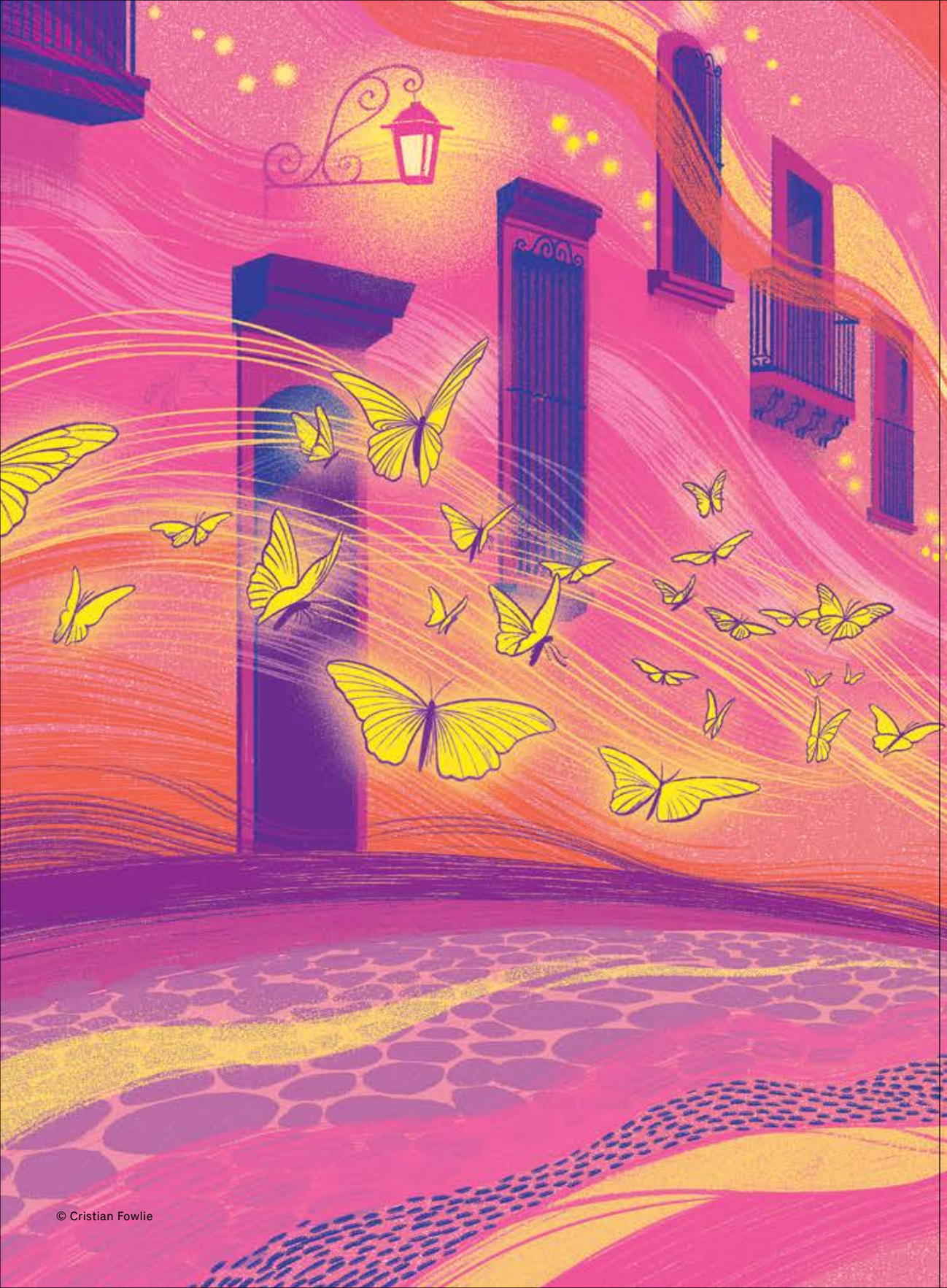
After you've all sat so patiently through the live dissection, I'm sorry to say that I can't offer you a tasting session. It's just too messy, unfortunately. And as you know better than anyone, the smell is atrocious. It's not really fit for eating, truth be told. I doubt any of you would even want to try.

So, I'm going to just bundle all of this into a black trash bag and throw it away, like this. Another little piece of trivia for you: the remains can be included in the burnable rubbish. They burn very quickly, and turn straight to ash. But no, of course, as previously stated, I don't recommend trying this at home.

So there, it's all gone. Misogyny is no more! Oh, thank you for such generous applause! It's your encouragement that has kept me going all this time. That's no exaggeration. I owe everything to marvelous ladies like you!

Finally, I should tell you that these knives with their astounding cutting potential are just $99 plus tax for a set of two. That's a special discount price limited to today only, so I highly recommend seizing this opportunity right now. I will gladly sharpen them for anyone interested, so you can take them home ready to put to use immediately.





Hideo Furukawa

Counterfeiting García Márquez

translated by Jordan A.Y. Smith

I'M SURE YOU'LL NEVER BE ABLE TO UNDERSTAND ME. What kind of person I am, how tall I am, how old I am, what I look like—of course some of those questions I can answer. Of course. But I'd like to state that while it's easy enough to *answer* questions, what I find hard is *posing* questions. Now that's tough. Take interviews, for example. Being interviewed or asking the questions—which requires more craft?

Imagine, if you will.

Articulating cogent responses to some questions—dodging others—is just one part of it. Don't forget the ability to choose perfectly bad responses.

If you can manage to come up with good questions *and* get them out, more power to you. But questions that make the interviewee exclaim, "What a great question!"—do you have the imagination it takes to craft those?

I'm certain that would be quite difficult.

Lousy questions are easy. Because every question that ain't *good*—is *bad*.

Sure, some questions I can answer reflexively, bounce that reply right back. For example, my name. Someone asks my name—I'm ready with the answer. My name's Gabriela. At that, more questions come rolling in. Likely, a veritable flood of them. "If that's your first name, then how about your last name? Please give me your full name." I immediately answer, "I'm Gabriela García Márquez." Then what?

From there, it gets tricky.

Some will ask, "Where does that name come from, what country? I mean—how can I put it—what language is the name from?"

Some press on. "García is Spanish, right? Does that mean you're from Spain?"

Those with a bit more common sense may ask, "Your family must be Hispanic—from Mexico or Cuba, perhaps Guatemala, Peru, Argentina, or maybe even the U.S.?" Then, they'll clarify: "I mean, there's a significant number of Spanish-speakers in the U.S. these days. . . ."

All such questions arise precisely because the speaker does not, or cannot, see me. If they knew I look completely Japanese, most likely I wouldn't be asked questions like this. In that sense, none of these are good questions. They're tedious. I want to retort: *Are you asking because you genuinely want to know?* For me a "good" question would be something like: "Then are you related to García Márquez?"

If asked something like that, I might shoot right back, "Which García Márquez?" Now *I'm* the one asking questions.

"The Colombian novelist—that García Márquez. You know, they sometimes write on the spine G. García Márquez, with a G in front of García Márquez. The one who went to his eternal rest in spring of 2014—he's deceased now, but no matter. . . . The G is for Gabriel, so we're talking Gabriel García Márquez here. *That* García Márquez."

And I'd affirm: "Correct."

NEXT COME QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS PLACE. It defies explanation. I can't say where this is, or what it is. Its shape and its dimensions can't easily be put into words. If someone poses the questions, of course some I can answer. Of course. However, as I've already made abundantly clear, not everyone can come up with questions. By which I mean, *good* questions. Conversely, anyone can respond to questions. You too are surely capable of *good* responses. And you can intentionally choose to give *bad* ones.

Moving forward from that premise, I might throw back a question like:

Can you guess who I am?

This question doesn't demand an immediate answer. On the contrary, I want to give you an easy task, a mission. A mission to figure out who I am, no matter what. I will scatter hints along the path. About this location, for example. This place that gives the impression of being incomprehensible. Imagine for a minute. In the spot we call *here,* from this exact spot, there exists a *there* and a *yonder.* That is, *here* is such a place that it may include *there* or *yonder.*

Perhaps this would meet with, "Ahh, if that's the case, then I can imagine it," or "That's easy," and I'd think, *Impressive.* But if I end up being judged, if the question gets dismissed outright—"I have zero clue. What are you trying to say?" or "That is one terrible question"—I'd think, *Damn, I knew this would happen.* So I use a little metaphor. An allegory. I begin it thus:

"Say this place, *here,* is a temple.

"A Buddhist temple.

"You have come to pay your respects.

"Something of a pilgrimage. You enter the Buddha hall.

"Light some incense. You light it, yes?

"And your palms meet in prayer.

"What are you facing?

"The statue of Lord Buddha. There's always a Buddha enshrined there.

"A wooden carving of Buddha.

"Look closely.

"If the statue is carved skillfully, you won't sense that it was once a tree. It won't make you feel that way. The only thing you feel is that the Buddha is right before your eyes.

"However, there are other kinds of Buddha carvings.

"Naturally, some are just poorly carved. They make you think, Okay, they've shaped some wood. It's *that* kind of carving. You might say that the material has not been adequately worked. The carver was inept.

"But some are carved roughly on purpose.

"With *intent.*

"The tree, that substance we call wood, is evident—some statues of Buddha are designed to leave some sense of their original form as a tree.

"Some look as though they've barely been carved at all.

"Yet you can clearly recognize their likeness to Lord Buddha.

"They exude holiness.

"And that is exactly what I want us to think about.

"If the carver has maintained its essential *woodenness,* then the statue will belong fully to the temple as a place, to *here.* Temples are where people pray, where they gather, where they build, where they find salvation. Thus temples exist in the human world. The Lord Buddha comes right into the human world. But if a simple yet well-carved statue of Buddha convinces you that the Lord Buddha is right in front of you, while simultaneously reminding you that it is crafted from a tree—what then?

"You can't say that such a statue enters the human world in any definitive sense.

"Or rather, you can say definitively that it *halfway* enters the human world.

"But the other half is in limbo: it retains its essential treeness and stays in the realm of the wood.

"Do you follow me? That is where the two worlds are linked: the world of the human and the world of wood. It's a channel. That place—that single, geographic location—occupied by the sacred Buddha image, actualizes a state where the two worlds coexist. It's a state wherein the *here* includes the *there,* or rather, you might even feel it is *there* or *yonder* that envelops the *here.* If you keep your eyes fixed on it long enough, eventually you'll sink into utter confusion.

"Does that make sense?

"However, this place where I am is not a temple."

Then what is it? I, the one posing this question, am Gabriela, full name Gabriela García Márquez, and I can tell you that this is my house. I can tell you this is where I was born.

I can also tell you this house has a designer. The architect of the concept behind it.

And I can tell you he's a Japanese novelist. I can say this pointedly: *Not the Colombian novelist.* So if asked whether I mean *that* novelist, I state: No, I do *not.*

I CAN GIVE YOU a bit of info on this novelist. Let you in on a few things. He is Japanese and still living. Whereas the Colombian novelist passed away in 2014, this one did not. While the Colombian novelist was still alive, one visited the other's house.

That's right—the house.

Or more precisely: the house*s.* I'd like to be sure you know that the novelist called Gabriel García Márquez died in Mexico. Specifically, he died in the capital city of Mexico—that is, in Mexico City. Where García Márquez lived for decades.

In South America, the Colombian novelist had met with all kinds of trouble, the so-called ups and downs of life, and moved to Central America, to Mexico, where he set up his final residence. By *final,* I mean the last place he would hang his hat. Until he arrived at that "final" residence, he moved again and again, though always within the Mexico City environs.

When he died, the country mourned him as a distinguished Mexican.

I'm tempted to think that to be born and raised in Colombia and to publish novels in Spanish is virtually the same thing as not being born in Mexico yet still living in Mexico and publishing novels in Spanish, yet one could also say they're quite distinct.

In both countries they speak Spanish—their official language.

In Spanish, the female version of Gabriel is Gabriela.

Returning to our living novelist, this Japanese novelist traveled to Mexico in the early 2010s, and visited the various homes of García Márquez with the first name of Gabriel, traversing the boroughs of Mexico City in the process. The novelist can tell you all about that himself. I will have him tell those tales. That is, the following is what I've heard from him. I'll reconstruct the things I've heard.

Like this:

There are houses from when he was still a nobody. Not so much a *house* as a rented room. An apartment. It's still there in Mexico City. The room is inside a house, so I guess you'd call it a house. Why in the world would I go around to all of García Márquez's houses? Some of the addresses were uncertain. From anonymity to fame to superstardom, the houses stood in progressively ritzier areas, so my prowling and loitering naturally drew suspicion. Sometimes I got a bit of a grilling. I'd tell them: I'm a novelist from Japan, here on a mission to retrace the paths carved across Mexico by García Márquez. They asked "good" questions —easy to answer—and my replies generally satisfied. Perhaps it was akin to Mexican pride? Patriotism? That could be what my replies appealed to. People were suddenly welcoming. How do you say *Welcome* in Spanish again? Bienvenido . . . or something like that. *¡Bienvenido a México!* . . . if memory serves. At the time, I had a pretty fitting reply prepared.

I started with García Márquez's house during his anonymous period, *vamos*.

The house after that, *vamos*.

And the house after that, *vamos*.

In hot pursuit of his subsequent moves, *vamos*.

To find García Márquez on exact street corners, and the specific places he roamed while he penned his works, *vamos*.

To where each work was born, *vamos*.

And chase them all down I did.

Vamos is such a versatile interjection. It can be a filler word like, *Um* or *So* . . . It can even be an interjection like *Well!* or *Well?* And my answers, with their vast variety of *vamos*es, turned out to be pretty convincing. That's right, answering was easy.

The mere fact of answering them seemed to prove I wasn't a threat.

And if the answers contained a bit of information, the impression of tameness solidified.

No further explanation needed. What more could there be? Or rather, what would be the point of my responses exceeding the scope of what was being asked? Was I satisfied with my own answers? No. Unlike the long, drawn-out *noooo* in English, the negative in Spanish is a very brief, cut-off *no. No.* Overall though, could people even grasp the meaning of what I was doing—could they possibly understand? Moreover, was there any need for them to understand? Did they have to? How could I explain . . . They were just *houses.* Nothing more. People talk about being obsessed, right? Completely taken with something? *Ah, yes, so I'm obsessed with houses.* But that wasn't it either . . . Because I wasn't at all clear about that myself. In other words, I was blind to my own obsession with houses, and had been for some time. Look, I didn't even tell people about the house where I was born. Nor did I reminisce about it. Thinking back now, I'd been trying to not recall it, to block any memory of it. One could say I'd been repressing it.

But we were talking about García Márquez.

About the Gabriel García Márquez who never returned to his native Colombia, making home after home after home after home after home in his newfound promised land of Mexico.

You're not obliged to know of this novelist. No one is obliged to. No one has to read his novels. You don't even have to pick them up. I, on the other hand, did. I picked them up and read them through. It's enough for you to imagine them through my words here. What kind of writer was he, what did he write, what type of book? Establishing that you're not obliged to know is our very point of departure. Though at this point, saying *departure* is a bit odd—we're getting on board, riding, already rolling down the track.

I wasn't all that young when I encountered García Márquez. That is, I wasn't terribly young: I was already in my twenties. A bit past twenty-three. Maybe even twenty-four. At eighteen, I'd left the house I was born in. And the area where that house stood. The region. I left for college in Tokyo. After I'd been living in Tokyo for five or six years, I encountered the book referred to as García Márquez's masterpiece. I find it pretty damn mysterious when people say an encounter with a book is an encounter with the author. Why do we say that? In that sense, I could say I met García Márquez when I was twenty-three or twenty-four. I wonder if people say that about me. I wonder if there are readers I've never met who would say, "I met you when I was twelve." I bet if someone dropped that on me, I'd probably fall apart and start questioning my own powers of memory, wracking my brain to recall where we'd met before.

The book referred to as his masterpiece is quite hefty.

As thick as it is engrossing.

That's the first thing I should report. And what is so engrossing about it? I'd never before that experienced such an exhilarating read. I'd never seen another book of its type. A species unto itself: peerless. That's what made it so pleasurable. Yes, I was astonished at the pure pleasure. Wait a sec, it's easier if I just tell you—it was, you know, *that* one, that thick book I read had *One Hundred Years* in the title. Or maybe it's better to say it included the number *100.* That number, I'm obsessed with it. And true enough, the book encompassed a full *one hundred years*.

However, they were one hundred years in a completely fictional town, existing precisely nowhere.

The town was built by someone.

That someone was, of course, also fictional.

That someone's family, every episode in each of their lives, was collected between this book's covers.

But that writing style! It just flowed, I tell you! Several characters have the same name. The same destiny repeats. But a full one hundred years does pass. If we're to believe the title, it's a hundred years. I feel as though it's longer . . . a much much much longer time must be passing. After reading it, this impression gelled. I, at least, was certain there.

That captures it nicely, right? I need only three sentences to explain it. First, characters with the same name appear—many of them. Second, identical destinies repeat. Third, one hundred years pass. How's that?

If you start by imagining such a story, you'll comprehend García Márquez. Comprehend the works García Márquez wrote. Comprehend that type of work.

Yes?

The crucial thing is either to keep in mind what a fascinating book it is or, if you haven't read it, to keep in mind that people find it fascinating. If it's a book you've read, then summon it to mind. Actually, I've conjured it back in my imagination like that any number of times. Felt I wanted to give it another read. As though, since it's such a thick volume, there would be details I'd forgotten. Episodes and anecdotes, as it were. Or, since the whole volume is woven from such episodes, I'd forgotten well near all of it.

I've actually reread it every few years. At a certain point, I began to understand that the book was about a house. The first and second time I read it, I thought the fictional town was the main point. Within that town, a fictional clan prospered, fell into ruin, and vanished—a parable of how even the mighty must fall, like *The Tale of the Heike* in Japan. And that rise, fall, and extinction was also magical in context—I could focus on nothing else. However, for each clan there is but one house, one residence. Their estate. In the book, mysterious and fantastical things occur in rapid succession, or rather, the characters who cause those things to occur are born in rapid succession, and since they are all members of that family, of course they are born on the estate. That's the basic pattern.

So now, the house.

"See, there was this house.

"And it's on my mind. Is what I find most fascinating the fact that here . . . or there, there was a house? Am I obsessed with this house?

"More than with the fictional town?

"Even more than that?

"My thoughts continue. And, this house, is it also fictional? That is, if we consider the town fictional.

"How did this conundrum come into being, come to engross me so—I know not. It's just the realization that in a volume of such magnitude, what stands out as the most realistic, the most *real,* is the house.

It dawned on me early on, unconsciously. And then something completely insane happened. García Márquez's autobiography came out. The Japanese translation hit the market. And boy, did I read it. When was that? Might have been the year before I went roaming all over Mexico City. I got into reading it, and in the first chapter, García Márquez appears just as he's about to turn twenty-three. As a young man, what was Márquez up to? What was he trying to do?

"He was taking a little trip.

"Heading back to the town where his grandparents' house stood.

"García Márquez recognized that land as his true hometown.

"The town is called Aracataca. Doesn't that have a deep, resonant ring to it? Each syllable is united through the vowel sound: *a, a a a a, A ra ca ta ca.* The town sat next to the Caribbean coast of Colombia, and its territory was quite small. More of a village, really.

"But Aracataca was important. That's where García Márquez spent his early years, at the home of his grandparents.

"García Márquez was raised by his grandparents, by his grandfather and grandmother. Certain circumstances surrounded that fact.

"That is why his grandparents' house can be called García Márquez's home.

"And that's where his feet took him, after a considerably long while.

"Or, hold on. Whether the scene of his homecoming was directly depicted . . . I can't quite recall just now. Because unlike that book with *One Hundred Years* in the title, I'd read this one through only once. But no matter. I'm giving an account of what impressions do remain after I read it, so it doesn't matter. I also skimmed through two or three biographies of García Márquez. It was more like skipping than skimming though—because they were in Spanish. So I didn't technically read them, though I did look at the illustrations. Thoroughly. And there was a floor plan of this house. Or *that* house—ah, that's right. Ultimately, that house, that estate, that whole town, where the fictional clan lived, was born from that house in Aracataca. By revisiting that house, the young García Márquez found an answer.

"I don't know if there was a question at the time.

"Though there must have been one.

"So, just as García Márquez was about to turn twenty-three, this is where the story began to take shape in his imagination. He had his awakening: *It's coming to me.*

"It was a clear awakening.

"It was his grandmother, his *abuelita,* she was the one who told all those stories to the young García Márquez. All the time, all kinds of tales. His grandpa did too. That was the first thing. All of that was in the house. In other words, the seed was planted, there were people to sow it. But if it had been planted on an asphalt road, would it ever have sprouted? Earth is essential. Without the soil, all is in vain. Futile, yes? The house in Aracataca was what we could call *good* soil.

"It's an awesome point to comprehend. This was the key. I found it mind-blowingly awesome. The crux, the gist, the absolutely crucial point. And this point, which will nimbly leap over anything I'm being asked—let me just throw it right out there. For my own satisfaction, I will lay it all down so I never have to tell myself *no no no.* It's this: my realization about the importance of this house led me to venture all over Mexico City. All over the Mexican metropolis, I trekked around visiting the homes of García Márquez. Notably, I never visited Colombia. What I wondered—still wonder, actually—is whether a house like that can manifest from lived experience. With his upbringing, his background, García Márquez was simply born into the Aracataca house, right?

"But the real enigma comes next. In addition to this volume with *One Hundred Years* in the title, García Márquez produced a mountain of other works, all of them significant, writing well on into his seventies. We won't take time to dive into specific examples here. They're too long for us to get into. But the shorter ones will suit our purposes well. Short stories. Because that's what's linking you and me right now. So back to that enigma.

"The house he built himself as an adult.

"I set out to investigate it.

"Could just anyone obtain one?

"Or, if not everyone could manage to, could some people conceivably do so if they gave it their best?

"Quite an important question."

In other words, it's a good question, the novelist said—that Japanese novelist. That conceptual architect of my house, the one that exists as I narrate it herein. The imaginary house where I was born.

This is the place I am now, and here, in this place, I have spoken time and again with the novelist. In actuality, I have heard the novelist speaking time and again. As I've told you repeatedly, this place is tough to explain. Just one thing: I have deemed this place to be my home. I could provide a bit more detail about that. Such as the fact that in this house there are no fish. That nothing in the fish family lives here.

It's about time for the tale of fish.

Story time.

Lend me your ears for this tale.

BUT I WANT TO CONTINUE with the story of the house, so for a moment, let's go back to that Colombian novelist. Let's go back to the beginning. I'll have Gabriel García Márquez's work tell the tale. It can speak for itself. We can reconstruct somewhere a passage written in García Márquez's own hand. It has passed through translations, with the inevitable distortions, but a big part of my duty, my obligation now, is to restore it.

A certain short story poses to us the following question, a line spoken by one of the characters: "What changes color when painted with a slightly dirty brush?"

Another character replies thus: "That must be a house."

You see, their conversation is about a house. This brief exchange is embedded in that story. The short story. Let me remind you here that the short story is the subject of our discussion. García Márquez's stories, several of them, actually. And the impressions they left me with. Reading books always leaves a stain. What kind of memories do short stories leave you with? A novel will likely impress its plot upon you. Even if you don't remember all the particulars, at least the general plot development will remain. But what about short stories? What do you recall about them?

You could rephrase what I've written like this: "What sticks in your mind?"

After an hour, what sticks?

The next day, what sticks?

The following week?

I'm not asking about a month later, or a year. Because at that point, what remains is not really a stain. And I'm intrigued solely by the stains left after reading. I'm interested in the fact that all you retain from the books you've read—stories in particular—is the form they take in your memory after you've read them—they exist only in that form. And the stains inside you are completely different from those in others. That is what intrigues me, and that is where I hail from.

Therein am I born.

Let's return to that short story with the conversation about a house. I'm retracing our steps back to the story containing the question and answer that I responded to. The story's title contains the word "sea." And a word pertaining to temporality, and a phrase designating loss. We'll take an example from the short story whose title contains the word "sea." I present for you a collection of stains from several dozen readers, stains that can function as paraphrases or general impressions. I'll line them all up.

It was a story about killing crabs.

It was a story about eating a sea turtle.

It smelled of roses. Or, I think it was roses.

It had a town that sank into the sea.

One of the characters was missing an eye.

The sunken town had a music hall. Or was it music?

There is one character who talks about how when you die, you'll be washed out to sea, so she wants her body to be buried underground. But her request is never granted. Then a miracle happens.

Something about a town in the middle of the ocean.

A priest's body levitates. Maybe forty centimeters? Forty centimeters off the ground. Yes, I think that was it.

It was a story about not killing crabs.

These are the stains of readership. I can add more to this lineup, but what I want to underscore is that each of the versions, or rather, each of these people retains a distinct memory. They have had distinct experiences. However, differences notwithstanding, if I were to ask, "That story had a town in the middle of the sea, right?" someone who had forgotten up until then might have their memory jogged. If I said

instead, for example, "In *The Tale of the Heike* there's this one line: 'Down there, far beneath the waves, another capital awaits us. There is another capital down there beneath the waves.' You know, beneath the waves, a capital, a city. Now does that help you recall anything?" they might be taken aback.

That is where I come in, where my labors begin.

I weave.

EVERY DEAD BODY, no matter whose, has its particular dimensions. If they're to be buried, then everyone, each individual, will require a plot of land. And a plot of land, wherever it is, comes at a cost. Be it Colombia or Japan, land is never free. Nothing is free. So although the rich can buy land, the poor cannot. And that is why we sometimes call the rich "grave owners."

So what happens to those who have no grave? When they die, what do they do—what becomes of them?

They can't simply be abandoned somewhere.

After all, *somewhere* is still land, so that would be tantamount to dumping. Even if you don't dig, don't bury them, land is land, someone's property, regardless of size or value—with infinite variations—all land has a price. There's no such thing as *somewhere.*

As far as places other than on land, there's the sky and the ocean. The surface of the ocean, the ocean depths, and deep, deep down, the ocean floor.

But as far as the sky goes, truth be told, it's not a place humans can touch. It is of God, Heaven's domain. The sky is for angels. As you are well aware, priests occasionally levitate. They levitate about forty centimeters up.

So the ocean is all that's left.

We send the bodies out to sea.

And the towns that are of no more use to this world, they too are abandoned to the sea.

Villages are submerged. Drowned.

But if that's the case, the following is surely plausible: when you die, if you're buried at sea—say, because you're poor, you're cast into the ocean—you wouldn't be alone, would you? Because there are so many poor people. Plus, there's a town down there. And if there's a town, there will be a music hall, right? There's music for you to enjoy. And friends to enjoy it with. If you're a woman, you can find yourself a fine man. If you're a man, you may come across a fantastic woman. There's much to look forward to. After all, if the world abandons to the sea any town it does not need, there won't be just one town—there will be many. You can travel around, meet and get to know all kinds of people. Undoubtedly, some towns will have gardens. Rose gardens, even? Emitting their scent, a scent that carries right up to the lands above water.

Such abundance!

However, I don't know whether you'd be able to bring back things you lost from your life above. Take *time,* for example. Or *youth*. Whether those can be restored or not, you'd have to go back and reread to be sure. When that one-eyed character dies, would his eye be restored? Would he return to the time when he had both eyes? That's anyone's guess. All to say, time is an indeterminate factor. Another problem, perhaps the greatest, would be the fact that there are native inhabitants under the ocean. Sea turtles, for example. If a town just sank down on top of their original territory, and the dead began to be entombed there, enjoying some music overflowing with sentiment, having a ball, what would the sea turtles do?

Would the sea turtles demand that their rights be honored?

Surely, they would press their claim to the ancestral waters, the ocean's surface, the depths.

They would insist: *You lot have no currency with which to purchase this territory.*

War would ensue.

Yet it might be a necessary war. Because the dead people would surely use the turtles slain in their victorious battle for food. If the plan is for them to go on dwelling in the depths of the sea, they'd have to figure out provisions. And so they would.

And what of the crabs? There are, of course, crabs in the sea. All over the ocean floor. Swimming and walking around. Yet they also live on dry land. Around bays, under the sand. In the holes they dig. That's right. Crabs would be seen as enemies. Accordingly, they must be killed. War would be inevitable. But crabs might also be seen as *partners of the dead,* needing access to the land. In that case, there'd be no need for war. Conversely, there are things we could learn from them.

The dead could reside in the seas. The living could reside on land. Those who come and go between them could be either.

The living could die. . . .

The dead could live. . . .

Oh, look, another crab has been killed.

The crab hasn't been killed.

The smell of roses. You are swimming.

Or aren't you dead yet? You're walking on land. There's a town here. Your town. Over there is the land under the sea.

IF THERE IS A CARIBBEAN SEA, there is also a Pacific Ocean. When the sea appears in the story, the reader does not follow along with the writer's actual vision. The reader summons the sea from memory—for example, the sea where their parents used to take them when they were children, or the sea they once gazed on with their wife, or for those who have never seen or gone in the ocean, it can be the ocean as they have long imagined—the main thing is that they approach it through their own familiar visions. That's what reading is. Even if the Caribbean is what's being depicted, they may imagine the Pacific, the Sea of Japan, the East China Sea, or the Sea of Okhotsk. That is what they see, and that is what they read. Though of course there's no malice in this, no conscious intent. It's the same with the crabs. If someone says, "Crabs," in that instant, all types of crabs appear. Perhaps the Caribbean crabs García Márquez depicted are not even among them. Big ones, edible ones, inedible ones, all types of crabs. They have been read. They have been seen.

Therein lies the birth of our individual forms of stain. Our readerly stains. Each person's stain differs, and they can be the same stains we picked up from other works other people have read. Let's examine another scenario. Take that story with the word "wings" in the title. It also mentions that the wings are enormous, and there's a man who possesses them. In regard to the short story with "wings" in the title, I have heard people say that story too is about killing crabs.

However, no one claimed it was a story about not killing crabs. What else have I been told about it? What other types of stain have I picked up on? I've heard from a few people, a few dozen even. I'll line them all up.

It's about an angel who is summoned into a mountain of crabs.

An old angel is balding, and missing a few teeth.

It's the story of a chicken coop.

There's a Jamaican character. He's a man who's troubled by the sounds the movement of the stars makes. So he gets insomnia. The angel's wings resemble those of a bald eagle.

Something about an angel who needs to practice so that he can fly.

That's the story of an angel locked in a chicken coop.

And many have told me that the story was not at all a sad one.

OF COURSE, angels have wings and so belong to the bird family. That's only natural, if you think about it. What's the definition of a bird? Something with wings that occupies the sky. True enough, not all birds satisfy all the requirements. Chickens seldom take to the sky. Angels, however, satisfy both conditions, so must naturally be considered birds.

Angels are distant relatives of bald eagles. Because their wings are bald eagle wings.

But as they age, their relation to chickens prevails. Because they can no longer fly. Because they spend most—nay, all—of their time on the ground.

So his confinement to a chicken coop is fitting. Far from flagrant abuse, it's rather a warm welcome. Hence, nothing to be sad about.

But those teeth.

The missing teeth.

Because of that, he would be unable to eat so many things. That is the sad part. It's sad too that a noble angel would go bald, but such misery does follow on the heels of old age. They bring porridge to his chicken coop. That's breakfast, lunch, and dinner for the angel.

As to the crabs, of course in those parts there were people who cooked and ate them. These people looked on the angel with pity. The crabs, inedible ones included, ran rampant all over the town: shells were hard, and so were the claws. They could only be broken by biting them. Mighty tough for the toothless.

So they decided to hide their crab eating. They worked out an agreement not to let the angel see. The townsfolk did, that is. Yet for some reason, they

thought it was okay if he saw them kill the crabs, that much they could show him.

They began to kill crabs right in front of the chicken coop. "Crabs! Goddamn crabs!" they'd yell.

Now chickens cannot produce a miracle, nor can bald eagles, ducks, finches, hummingbirds—but the angel, now the angel should be able to produce one. That would be only natural, yes? What is the definition of an angel? They are God's emissaries, and moreover they have wings. The latter qualifies them as part of the bird family, but in light of the former—they are miraculous, close to God himself. They are not at all *merely* birds. In fact, they are not birds at all.

That is why people seeking miracles were drawn to his chicken coop. They came from far and wide. As far as Jamaica, even. "Those things are too loud for me," said one man, pointing up at the heavens. Countless stars shone in the night sky. "Look, I'm sure you understand me. Just watch the stars carefully for a bit, and you'll see—they're all moving. They spin round and round, making that horrid grating noise. That noise, that noise! Ahh, I cannot sleep. I haven't slept a wink in twenty long years. Mister Angel, sir, can you not do something about them?"

Well then, kill more crabs, the angel wordlessly commanded. *All around this chicken coop, build me five, six—nay, nine!—heaps of dead crabs,* he ordered. *And show me some hospitality!*

Crabs were killed.

All through the night, crabs were killed.

The angel chuckled wryly. Opened his mostly toothless mouth, and laughed.

Then in a great fluttering and flapping of wings, five, six—nay, nine!—angels of roughly the same age descended from Heaven, one by one, crashing down into the heaps of crabs. "Good God," they moaned in the language of angels. All nine of them stared at the Jamaican, then at their fellow angel crammed into the chicken coop, and waited in apparent expectation of his command. At that, inside the coop, the angel who had summoned them all gave a single flap of his wings. One section of the wire mesh on the coop blew off. Whereupon the nine angels, their feet sunk deep in the nine heaps of crabs, gave their wings a mighty flap in response. At the beating of their wings, the stars in the night sky slipped back into motion. Without a groan or a squeal—a nice clean movement. The angel in the coop flapped his wings once again. A second section of mesh was blown away. The nine flapped their wings. The stars began to glide with an audible swoosh. Then the angel in the coop began to flap his wings, as though practicing, once, twice, then more firmly, thrice, as the coop came rattling apart, and the nine angels began to levitate from their heaps of crab. Centimeters up, meters up, they rose, up toward the stars now resounding in a magnificent melody, so different from the squealing noise the Jamaican complained of. Swoosh swoosh, whoosh, sa-whoosh, resounding magnificently, and the Jamaican cried out, "Ah, what an incredible feeling! I, I'm sleepy!" At which point the grand total of ten elderly angels, all of them, soared to heights beyond the range of the human eye.

You see? The angels transcended the world of birds.

THAT JAPANESE NOVELIST TOLD ME that the expression *Tennin ga gosui suru* appears multiple times in *The Tale of the Heike*. *Tennin* means a person from heaven. *Gosui* means five types of decay. Five types. Buddhist terms, he explained. In other words, in Buddhism there are heavenly beings that correspond to the angels of Christianity. So we might render it: *Angels undergo five types of decay.* When these heavenly beings approach death, they decay, meaning that—similar to how the angels of Christianity age, and just as García Márquez described so unambiguously—they become pitifully old. Garments sullied with grime, underarms drenched with sweat and emitting a fug of body odor, their full radiance lost—all kinds of things happen. Various theories on that decay are scattered through the sutras, and if you take them all together, there are actually more than five types. Accordingly, the angels might experience seven, eight, or even nine types of decay. Just as García Márquez wrote of the broken-toothed angel, the balding angel, of the variety of his decay. Yes, Gabriel García Márquez wrote of this in the short story with "wings" in the title. And my name is Gabriela, Gabriela García Márquez, and I have collected the readerly stains, the impressions from several readers—several dozen, actually—in order to resurrect the short story with "wings" in its title. I have done this just now, as I have before.

But really, it's not a resurrection.

I'm fully aware of that.

Just as I could never definitively pronounce myself as a resurrection of García Márquez.

Because I am Gabriela, Gabriela García Márquez, in no way born of Gabriel García Márquez.

As a woman who does not exist within the interior of any story, I am here. I was born right here.

Surely, you've remembered?

How I posed the question to you, and in so doing bestowed upon you a casual duty, a responsibility—do you recall?

Can you guess who I am?

However, we have time. Plenty of time. I'll scatter a few more hints. The biggest hint is in the fact that I weave, that I have woven before, and that I will go on weaving—stains. The stains of a multitude of readers. For example, I can persuade you to sense the smell of crabs wafting from a story where no crabs appear, and from there, the sea, the feeling that you can approach the dead. However, in that short story, the dead are present from the beginning. The title itself includes the words "drowned man," after all. But there's also a phrase that describes him as beautiful.

The short story with "drowned man" in the title was not, however, where I picked up the stain related to killing crabs.

Neither is it where I found the stain about not killing crabs.

Was it the one about the drowned man's corpse being covered in hard scale-like shells? At first that's how it was, until they scraped them off with a tool for scaling fish—that stain I picked up and imagined them as carapaces. I imagined those hard shells as the man's exoskeletons. With a bit of free association, people are crabs.

Of course, there are myriad other stains I've picked up. My collection is always growing, never shrinks. For example, that there's a moral; that a certain kind of drowned body kept on growing after his death; that it somehow contains a lesson entirely alien to Japanese people. That everyone in the village became related. That the name Estéban was more highly esteemed than Latauro, the story tells us.

Estéban, yes. I can speak of the dead man. Here too. Once again.

THE DROWNED MAN appeared like the crabs did. Just appeared in the village. Since the drowned man couldn't speak, of course he could not tell them his name. But because they couldn't bury him without knowing his name, a second funeral was out of the question. Perhaps not impossible, but so discourteous as to undermine its very meaning. So the villagers set out to find the drowned man's name. Where would a name be? It would certainly be hidden somewhere. Even after his death, the drowned man had continued to grow under the sea until he'd become a veritable giant, covered from head to toe in something like an exoskeleton made of hard shells. The townspeople raked them off. They sought his name where the shells had fallen. They conjectured. His name must be Latauro. Latauro, for sure. But then the villagers thought about it. If this village gives him a funeral, and because of that, Latauro is thought to be one of our villagers, and I'm thought of as his father, and I as his mother, and I as his uncle, and I as his nephew, and I as his niece, that would be horrid. So, we must be mistaken about his name. It's a mistake! Alright, I know. This guy's name is Estéban. And because this drowned man has such a magnificent name as Estéban, he is my son. My son, I say. My nephew. My uncle! And so the villagers all became relatives through him. Thanks be to the giant Estéban. Thank you, Estéban. You have left us with your eternal memory.

THIS IS THE TALE I have just now woven. It's close to the original story, the novelist said. The closest possible resemblance, the Japanese novelist remarked. You are now so adept that you can weave tales similar to the originals, he told me. But your birth, he continued, coincided with the moment the readerly impressions from two stories began to merge, so you may have been born from several stories, those of García Márquez melting together, fusing, he said.

Just now, I wasn't putting words in Estéban's mouth. A drowned man can't speak, so he didn't. The person

who speaks for the dead man, let's say, is me, and it is you. You, the living. And perhaps that living novelist. So I speak for that novelist. The Japanese novelist, the one who in the 2010s went to Mexico, went around to García Márquez's houses, traipsing all over the capital, Mexico City. I can definitely resurrect things I've heard—I've heard so much. So there's much I can make him say. The novelist. But right now, I want to hear the tale of the fish.

Yes, the tale of the fish.

It starts like this, and finishes in a jiffy. Thus, with the line, "It was a fish." It goes on, "It was a fish. Surprisingly. Because the fish was on land. Under the eaves of an old building. As far as the location of these eaves, it was my home turf, that is to say, not Tokyo but the place I was born and raised, my old hometown—the eaves of my original home. Though I guess it wasn't technically under the eaves, as the eaves were falling down. What surprised me was the realization that the fish was living in my home. Do you understand? I'd never faced a fish in close proximity. That fish was seriously huge. It had spikes on it. On its back, tons of them. Its tail arched. And its whole body was covered in tiles.

"It had been up in the roof.

"It had been there the whole time. Toward the top of the roof's ridge.

"It had actually inhabited such a space. And, it had fallen. You understand? I too had a house. I had my grand house. My Aracataca house, so to speak. I had told basically no one about it, hardly even thought about it anymore, or rather I tried not to think about it anymore, which was precisely why it haunted me so, possessed me without me realizing, and the cause of all this was that estate, the great house where I'd been born. Inside my house was my grandmother. My grandmother. The one who had loved me so much. Who had raised me so well. Grandfather wasn't there—not since I first started going there. Grandfather died when he was the age I am now. So I never joined the word *Grand* with *father*. I had parents. But they may as well have not been there. Those were just the circumstances. Everyone has circumstances, right? But not everyone has a house. Or perhaps they do. But not every single one of them falls apart. My Aracataca house did fall apart. Several years back, there was an earthquake, and it was partially destroyed. Then it gradually fell apart. And the fish in the roof came down with it. Rolled right onto the ground.

"It was a *shachihoko*.

"You've heard of them, the *shachihoko*—the mythical carp with a tiger head?

"This one was a decorative roof ornament used to ward off evil. The house catching fire, things like that. A charm to keep our house safe from fires. It was never intended for earthquakes. Speaking of earthquakes, there was a quake in Mexico back in 1985. In the capital, Mexico City, where 9,500 people lost their lives. For García Márquez—for Gabriel—I believe it forced him to move for the nth time. Or perhaps I'm remembering it wrong. A biography about Gabriel for myself, existing only in my mind. If so, then there is only one copy in the whole world. I must cherish its virtue and value.

"The fish was on the ground.

"Our eyes met. You see? Our eyes actually met.

"At which point, I finally understood. This fish, which had occupied the ridge of our roof, in truth had not been 'living' there—not in the sense that he'd moved in.

"The bugger had been born into the house. This guy *was* the house.

"That's why he looked at me. Stared intently. Mouth closed. Only his eyes were open wide.

"*That's it, he is the house.*"

That's the end of the fish story.

PUBLIC SPACES were used to accommodate the insomniacs in the vicinity. They called it "housing" or "the rooms" (there were various types). They stood in groves of apartment towers around the neighborhood. There were loads of so-called cultured folks. The novelist who occupied a unit on one of the lower floors had been invited to help with the space's design concept. Surprised at the request, the novelist consented. *I can just tell them some tales,* he thought. But he wondered what tales he could tell in the vein of Scheherazade's *One Thousand and One Nights.* To put them asleep, or to keep them awake. Short tales with the hint of continuity, from story to story, unending. Intuitively, he had a vision of the Colombian novelist, Gabriel García Márquez, of preparing a space where his short stories could be told one after another. One that would be both housing and residences. Of course, it would be furnished with sofas and more. They had secured sponsorship from a major bed manufacturer. Rumor had it that other spaces were prescribing sleeping medications. Apparently within the bounds of the law. They were crawling with doctors and pharmacists, people said. The novelist had an acquaintance who was a psychiatrist. Several, actually. He remembered their words. They'd observed that often the reason people can't sleep is psychological: so what if, the novelist thought, I told them stories when they were unable to fall asleep, and later asked them to come back to spin out all the fragments and impressions of stories, and then I could compare the individual fixed psychological patterns of each. So went his thinking. From there, couldn't you devise a treatment? His thoughts wandered this far. Those who visited the room and listened to his stories would be asked to come back to visit hours later, or half a day, a day, maybe several days afterward to confess—like in a Catholic confessional—to regurgitate the stains from their readings. The novelist would serve as confessor. But eventually they noticed the presence of someone beside the novelist. "An assistant?" they enquired, "A nice person, they would say, someone tall and imposing, no, someone diminutive, a young girl perhaps, no, one with abundant life experience, one with raven tresses, no, blond and red-haired and blue-eyed and with black eyes and with eyes of jade."

"And now your birth has begun," muttered the novelist. "Right, Gabriela?"

HAD THE FISH'S MOUTH OPENED, that is the tale he would have told. I can say this with unshakeable conviction: if he had, at that moment.

Hiromi Kawakami

Simone + Reminiscing

translated by Ted Goossen

artwork © Seitarō Kuroda; photo © Kanji Yoshima

In the beginning, it was the dog school principal who had the doll.

She was wearing a black dress, but her legs and arms were all mismatched, while her face looked like it had been put together in a game of pin the tail on the donkey, with features scattered every which way. She was the perfect size to hold in my arms. Not too big and not too small.

She already had a name.

"It's Simone," the dog school principal declared, pushing her in my direction. "You take her."

"For me?" I asked. He just nodded. I didn't like the name Simone so I renamed her Ruri, but the principal had sharp ears, and when he heard me call her that he bellowed, "Simone!" End of story.

SIMONE HAD A TRAGIC HISTORY. Her first owner, a French girl, died of illness at six; her second doted on the doll till the age of twenty, when her central European home was caught in a civil war that left her, after a series of traumas, a psychological wreck. Her next owner was some sort of pervert, who sadistically tore her apart, tormented her eyes and nose, and then stitched her back together.

From there she crossed Eastern Europe and eventually found her way to the Far East, specifically Japan, though not before she had been tossed about further on the waves of fate. One owner was a little girl who had to give her up after only three days; another was a man in his thirties, who apparently treated her very nicely, putting her to bed in a silk-lined basket, changing her clothes each day, and swabbing her face and body with disinfectant. The downside in his case was the nonsensical name he gave her, Betsy Fungarini Moskell. After that she had to bear the weight of a pile of crates in the hold of a cargo ship.

The dog school principal had found her at the seashore.

"Did someone give her to you?" I asked.

"No, I came across her on the beach," he replied.

I didn't see how he could know so much about the doll's past, but I didn't really care. She enchanted me from the start. Her mismatched arms and legs, her weirdly jumbled features, her battered, grimy body—none of these made any difference. I just thought she was incredibly cool.

Kanae, true to form, said only, "What an ugly thing!" when I showed the doll to her. I could tell, however, from the way her eyes darted back and forth—not her usual look—that she was jealous, and was dying to get her hands on it.

I spent the next half-month pampering Simone. Determined to outdo the attentions lavished on her by the man in his thirties, I bathed with her each evening, sewed her dresses, combed her hair, and slept with her at night. The doll loved to hear about vampires, so every night I told her vampire stories new and old from all over the world. She had passed through Transylvania on her journey, but the vampires were all gone by that time, so she never got to meet the real thing. That was one of her greatest regrets.

On the first Thursday of the following month, I got home from school to discover the doll was gone.

I searched the house, asked my family, combed the streets of my neighborhood, all to no avail. There was no doubt in my mind—Kanae had stolen her.

The next day, Kanae's face had an odd glow to it. I grilled her, but she pretended to know nothing. That glow, however, lasted but a single week. Her older sister was the next to grab the doll, followed by Michio, Kiyoshi Akai, Hachirō, and the woman who ran the Love—the local bar. Finally, Grandpa Shadows, who was already dead himself, carried her off to the netherworld.

And that is where the doll remains today. Word has it that she is happy to be there surrounded by her former owners, including the little French girl, the poor young woman caught in the civil war who ultimately killed herself, and the crewman on the cargo ship who retired and lived to a ripe old age. Well, as long as she is happy, is the consensus of our neighborhood. It is also said that she is known in the netherworld by the name Ruriko Simone. I'm pretty proud of that.

"Times past and gone are always beautiful, aren't they," muttered Romi.

"I wonder," I whispered in reply. Though it felt as though the summer heat had been with us until only yesterday, in fact the clamoring insects of autumn had already fallen silent. Romi and I had just finished eating a late lunch on the open-air patio.

"I wonder what everyone is up to these days." Romi let out a languorous sigh.

"The dog school principal died a long time ago. Kiyoshi Akai's whereabouts are a mystery, and rumor has it Kanae is living in Belgium."

"What's she doing in Belgium?"

"You know Kanae—she must be up to something or other. Living off a man, perhaps, or running some nice little business."

"As long as she's alright. But we're all pushing eighty. Do you think she could still land a fellow?"

"Age isn't a problem for Kanae. Eighty, a hundred, two hundred—it wouldn't make any difference."

That's so true, we chuckled. Then, quietly, we reflected on our own lives. Romi married in her twenties, was blessed with three children, went back to her job in her thirties, worked till retirement, and now is active in an NPO that looks after refugee settlement. I was married twice (neither lasted long), worked a number of jobs, set aside some money, and now am on easy street thanks to a consulting firm I established in my fifties.

"What happened to the woman who ran the Love?"

"I hear she's still around. She's way past a hundred and twenty. Her daughter and grandchild are still living with her in that tiny bar. Add her great- and great-great-grandchildren, and there are over thirty altogether, packed in like sardines. All women too—not a man in the bunch."

"And the lady farmer, the one who used to be a man?"

"She died young. In her sixties, if I'm not mistaken."

The waiter came to see if we wanted anything else. Romi ordered a margarita, while I asked for a Chartreuse cocktail. They showed up before long in frosted glasses.

"I can't drink like I used to," Romi said.

"Speaking of which, how did your husband die again?"

"When he said he'd met another woman and wanted a divorce, I lost it. So I finished him off."

"The way that Dolly taught us?"

"Yeah, I'm pretty proud of myself. When he told me, I didn't let on how I felt. He never saw what was coming—I was all smiles until the very end, as warm and helpful as could be."

"How long were you all warm and helpful? Like for a month?"

"No, I gave it to him bit by bit, so it took a year. How about you? Did you let your exes walk away alive?"

"Sure."

"You're sweet, you know that?"

"Yeah, I guess I am."

The women in our neighborhood haven't had much luck with our menfolk. We marry them, then they go out to sleep with other women, or beat us up, or run off with our money. Almost all of them are like that. As a result, the number of men is decreasing—at this point, the ratio is nine women for every man. In fact, scientists have come here to research why so many men are dying. They think some sort of environmental illness might be to blame, but so far they have found nothing.

"And men are so cute, too."

"Yes, they're the cutest of all creatures; yet, they all turn out bad in the end."

"Do you think we'll fall in love again?"

"Not me. I'm done."

"I'm still hoping."

"You're a dreamer at heart. Dreaming beautiful dreams."

How short the days are now. Romi giggles to herself. She must be remembering something. I drain my lukewarm chaser. There are many secrets we're still hiding, I think as I look at Romi's face. Romi giggles again. I smile. We get up to go, leaving a banknote substantially larger than the check on the table. See you around, we bid each other a curt farewell. The day is quietly coming to an end.

Steven Millhauser

A Tired Town

AT FIRST IT WAS NOTHING, REALLY. One morning toward the middle of July, as I set off on my daily walk along the tree-shaded sidewalk, I gave a little wave to my neighbor, old Mrs. Schumacher, seated on her porch in the cushioned rocker beside the white wicker table. Even as I waved, I noticed that her eyes were closing, her hands slipping from the book that lay open in her lap. Across the street, Jim Garrity started to wave to me from behind his lawnmower and broke off with a yawn. A few houses down, one of the Hollister boys lay on his back on the grass, his arms stretched out and his head resting on a skateboard, and later that morning, as I stood in line at the supermarket, the woman in front of me raised the back of a hand to her mouth and burst into a long, shuddering yawn, while behind me a teenager in low-slung jogging pants and a half-tucked T-shirt began to open his mouth, shook his head, and yawned again. It was nothing, nothing at all—the sort of thing you expect to see, on a hot day in a small town in summer. But the next morning I saw old Mrs. Schumacher leaning sideways in her chair as her book lay open on the floor, I saw Garrity's eighth-grade daughter sitting on the top step of her porch with her cheek pressed against the iron banister and her eyes shut tight, and farther down the street a painter in bib overalls stood at the foot of his stepladder, his head bowed against the pail shelf, his arms hanging at his sides, his paintbrush lying near his feet.

That was how it started: a yawn here, a droop there. It might have been the mid-summer doldrums, or some germ floating in the atmosphere, or maybe a toxic chemical that had worked its way into our water supply and was now moving through our bodies. Whatever it was, I'd begun to feel the effects myself. I struggled to get out of bed each morning, yawned as I brushed my teeth, became sluggish during the day. I found myself putting off small tasks, like mowing the lawn or touching up the front porch steps. I'm an energetic man in my late fifties, recently retired from guidance counseling at the local high school, a man who has always loved his summer vacations, and I struggled to throw off the tiredness even as I felt myself succumbing to its power.

You could sense it in other neighborhoods. All over town you could see them, the yawners and droopers.

They walked along sunny sidewalks with their mouths wide open, they nodded off as they sat weeding their lawns. On a residential street near one of the elementary schools, a man stood in his driveway with his head bowed and his eyes closed, holding in one hand a hose that was squirting water past his dusty car. Even on Main Street, which always attracted lively crowds of summer visitors, things had changed. People sat drowsily at café tables or stood with slumped shoulders in front of shop windows, as if trying not to fall forward against the glass. In the mall at the edge of town, you could see them dozing on slatted benches or sitting on the floor with their backs against the bottoms of store windows. One man, seated on a low wall surrounding a display of ferns, was bent far forward, his fingers on his shoelaces. Only after observing him for a while did I realize that he was fast asleep. A weariness was coming over our town. You could feel it spreading like an infection.

I resisted every step of the way. I forced myself to get up early every morning, I took cold showers, I strode along the sidewalk swinging my arms in an exaggerated way. Toward the middle of the second week I made an appointment with my doctor, who kept yawning as he looked into my ears and listened to my heart. Rubbing his eyes with the knuckles of both hands, he assured me that I wasn't the first to come to him with this complaint. He and his colleagues were advising rest and caution until the source of the problem was determined.

Meanwhile, the Town Council acknowledged what it called a "possible health hazard" by ordering an inspection of our reservoir and our supply pipes, as well as dispatching a group of health inspectors to local restaurants, child-care facilities, and public pools. Citizens were urged to stay at home or avoid driving whenever possible. Only the other day, the police had been called to a traffic light in the center of town, where the driver had fallen asleep at a red light and sat slumped over the wheel.

Apart from all such questions of health and safety, I felt an instinctive rebellion against this outbreak of tiredness. It was as if premature old age were sweeping over our town. The lack of energy, the desire to remain quiet, to stay indoors, to move as little as possible—all this struck me as a withdrawal from the wider world, a retreat from the life of the community into a narrow preoccupation with self. And what about the practical consequences? Yards and houses were showing signs of neglect. Town services like garbage collection and street repair had grown erratic. Workers in stores and gas stations kept coming in late or failing to show up at all.

In the midst of our deepening crisis, a number of voices rose up in support of the new order of things. Tiredness, it was said, was a deliberate challenge to the unfair demands of everyday life. One group, calling itself The New Way, claimed that our town had chosen to protest against a social arrangement driven by greed, consumerism, and conspicuous consumption. Tiredness, in their view, was an expression of moral resistance. A few voices fought back, mine among them, arguing that moral behavior had nothing to do with the weariness afflicting our town, and that in any case an ethical response to life demanded more than falling asleep all day. Another group maintained that just as the individual body needed periods of rest, so a flourishing communal body could only benefit by retreating now and then from the stresses of normal life into peaceful quietude. In that claim I heard nothing less than the sound of exhaustion itself.

As the summer advanced, signs of decline were visible everywhere. Knee-high grass and seed-heavy stalks grew in front yards; long blades leaned over the walks. Cans of paint hung from the rungs of abandoned ladders resting against house sides. Newspapers in plastic wrappers lay on sidewalks and porches, garbage containers and recycling bins remained between house and drive with their lids pushed up by bulging bags. Downtown, a scattering of customers sat at the outdoor cafes, leaning their heads on crossed arms or staring dully at stripes of sun on sugar packets in wire holders. A police car without a policeman was parked in front of a closed hat shop. A few people strolled slowly along the sidewalks, as if making their way through a thick mist, though sunlight glittered on the store windows and the windshields of parked cars.

Toward the middle of August a town meeting was held in the high school auditorium to address issues pertaining to public health. Only one of the seven members of the Public Safety and Health Committee appeared, apologizing for his lateness and fanning himself with an envelope. A man introduced as Deputy Moderator rose slowly and stood with both forearms resting heavily on the podium as he spoke in a barely audible murmur and seemed to have difficulty reading his notes. In the sparse audience people leaned back against their seats with their legs stretched out, their eyes half closed, their shoulders slack.

One Saturday afternoon I forced myself into my car and drove through deteriorating neighborhoods to visit a friend of mine, a math teacher who lived on the other side of town. In the high grass of his front yard a power mower sat next to a can of gasoline, on the front porch a window screen in an aluminum frame leaned against the side of a white plastic chair, and in his darkened living room he lay on the couch with a magazine on his chest as he slowly opened his eyes and asked me what day it was.

I could feel it in myself, this draining away of attention to things. How nice it would be, I said to myself, to stop what I was doing, to lie down, to take a little nap, to forget whatever it was that was on my mind. Every morning I forced myself out of bed, I pushed myself out into the day. One morning I noticed that a cellar window at the side of the house had developed a crack. I told myself it would probably be a good idea to remove the window, lay it on a towel in the back seat of the car, and drive over to Stan's Glass, one of these days. Another time, returning home from a walk, I sat down to rest for a moment on the chaise on my front porch. The lawn was definitely in need of mowing. I felt my eyes beginning to close, my head tipping to one side, and like someone escaping the embrace of a demon I lunged to my feet and began pacing up and down the porch, turning my head back and forth and shaking my hands rapidly, as if any lack of movement were a form of capitulation.

One afternoon I was walking along a familiar street in my neighborhood. Patiently I noted the details of decline, as if I were assembling evidence to present before an investigative committee exploring the decay of our town. The blades of grass on most lawns were more than a foot high, though here and there an abandoned lawnmower had left a trail of shorter grass. A shutter hung crookedly beside a front window. On one driveway a toppled recycling bin lay on its side before a scattering of plastic bottles and cardboard boxes. It was a brilliantly sunny day, near summer's end. The houses themselves looked tired, as if they had closed their eyes and fallen asleep. As I walked along, I became aware of something, without knowing what it was. I stopped and looked around. Everything was still. It was the stillness, I realized, that had drawn my attention. No lawnmower or power saw sounded in the summer air. No hammer knocked against a nail. No car door slammed. I heard no sound of bicycle tires in roadside gravel, no hum of distant traffic, no squawk, no yap, no laugh, no whisper.
It was a moment of silence so absolute that I felt as if I were hearing silence itself. As I stood bound by that silence, I felt a strange calm coming over me, a calm that had nothing to do with tiredness. The silence seeped through my skin, entered my blood. It flowed through me, washing me clean of what I was. The town and all its familiar, well-loved sounds seemed only a distraction from something deeper or richer that I could not name. I felt that my whole life had been an evasion, though of what I couldn't say. In the silence I could feel another way rising within me. It seemed to me that at any second I would understand something of immense importance. Somewhere a chair scraped. I tried to shut out the sound, but now I was aware of a dish clinking, a yawn rising from someone on a nearby porch. I could feel my skin and bones taking shape again. All at once I realized that I was standing motionless in the middle of a sidewalk, on a summer afternoon.

Back at my house I looked without interest at the porch steps and the lawn, thinking only of the silence that had seemed to summon me to something higher or better. When the tiredness came over me, I no longer felt the need to struggle against it. Was tiredness really so different from busyness? Upstairs in bed I lay down and closed my eyes.

I woke to a roar of lawnmowers and power saws, of cars driving by and children shouting in the street. I dressed quickly, rushed downstairs, and flung open the front door. In every yard, neighbors were pushing lawnmowers, digging up weeds, sweeping off porches and front walks. Old Mrs. Schumacher was standing at her porch rail, vigorously shaking out a small rug. Turning to me she called out cheerfully, "Better late

than never!" I wondered whether she was referring to herself or me. Green recycling bins and trash cans stood at the curb, a recycling truck with a side lift was raising a container and turning it upside down, and near the end of the block a man in a white hardhat and orange nylon vest stood high in the air, in a bucket at the end of a boom, working on a utility line. Hammers rang out, hoses shot streams of water at cars in driveways. Two boys passed, each bouncing a basketball. A jogger with earbuds ran along the side of the street. Three girls walked by, talking and laughing. My lawn startled me: the grass was even higher than I'd remembered. Without a thought of breakfast, I hurried around to the back, dragged my mower out of the shed, and set to work.

Later that morning, I learned from Mrs. Schumacher that everyone in our town had fallen asleep for three days—could you believe it? Three whole days. It was all over the news. Word on the street had it that we'd all caught some kind of bug, though officials were still investigating. This morning the entire town had woken up feeling refreshed and full of life, ready to tackle whatever needed doing. Her handyman was on his way to check for squirrels in the attic and change an O-ring on a dripping faucet, but that was nothing compared to Barbara Leitkowski on East Maple, who had mice in her kitchen and was standing on a chair waiting for the exterminator to get on over there and rescue her. Three days? I ran my hand along my prickly cheek.

Inside, I showered, shaved myself smooth, and devoured an egg and bacon sandwich on rye toast. Outside, I set to work on the peeling porch steps. I scraped off big chips of old paint, sanded thoroughly, applied the primer in even strokes. Even as I worked I knew that as soon as I finished I would sand and prime the porch rail. Later I'd tackle the porch posts and the floor. The backyard hedge needed trimming. The concrete foundation along the sides of the house could use some patching up.

When I finished priming the rail, I had no desire to rest. Instead, I set off to see what was happening in the neighborhood. In yard after yard, people were trimming hedges, tilting watering cans over bushes, slapping paint on shingles. Through open windows I could hear the whine of vacuum cleaners and the tumble of washing machines.

Downtown, the outdoor cafes were so full that waiters were carrying extra chairs outside. On the broad sidewalks between rows of storefronts and bumper-to-bumper parked cars, the crowd moved eagerly, trembling in sun and shade. Now and then people ducked into an ice cream shop or a furniture store or a handbag boutique, or stopped to examine the jackets and skirts hanging on outdoor racks. Hands clutching smartphones rose up to take pictures. Wakened from its sleep, the town was surging with energy. I could feel it streaming within me.

As I returned to my block and swung onto my front walk, I observed with pleasure the freshly primed steps and porch rail. A brush soaked in turpentine lay on a sheet of newspaper. Tomorrow I'd apply a coat of gray latex paint and set to work sanding the porch floor and the cobwebbed posts. After lunch today I would touch up the window trim, replace the cracked cellar window, clean out the rain gutters. Avoiding the front steps, I went around back and entered the kitchen. I passed through the living room and out onto the porch, where I flung myself onto my chaise in order to listen to the sounds of the neighborhood. I sensed in myself a pleasant tiredness, which had nothing to do with the recent plague of exhaustion. It was more like a brief pause before the next burst of energy. As I listened, I was able to distinguish three separate power mowers, two chain saws, an edger, two hammers, the cry of a grackle, the crunch of bicycle tires on gravel, music from two car radios, a hose, a sprinkler, a rattling dish, a barking dog—on and on it went, the sounds of life, until gradually they blended together in a deep rumbling hum. Sitting there in the warm shade of late summer, I tried to recall that earlier walk, with its sudden moment of silence, when I seemed on the verge of understanding something that would change my life forever, but it all felt vague and far away, as if I had imagined it long ago, on a summer afternoon in childhood, and with a new burst of attention I listened to the clatter of a skateboard, a nearby shout, a shut door.

Makoto Takayanagi

Five Prose Poems

translated by Michael Emmerich

LIVING ON THE FAR SIDE OF THE MOON

The man lives on the far side of the moon. He can't have lived there his entire life, obviously—even he must have been born elsewhere. Don't ask me what unfortunate tide of events landed him there, on the underbelly of the moon. All I know is that he lives there now. He can never be spotted from here—how could he be?—and yet I can sense his presence, always, with such clarity it almost hurts. He has that special minus aura that is the unique characteristic of those who inhabit the far side. His body is a channel for all the negative energy of that far surface of the moon, which our eyes will never see. I have heard that back when the moon was still newly sprung from the womb of our earth, the far side could in fact be seen at certain moments in the cycle of its waxing and waning. My great-grandfather knew those days well, but he died when I was small, and I never got the chance to ask him what he could tell me of the far side of the moon. One theory I have encountered has it that the moon decided of its own volition to keep its face turned ever toward its mother, the earth. I suppose each of us has a darker face that we prefer not to share with our parents. Thus, after years spent in solitary training, the moon managed to synchronize its orbital and rotation periods. Still, minute discrepancies in the two periods caused by the cosmos's magnetic fields will occasionally reveal just a little of the far side. On such nights, I peer through my telescope, eager to catch even a glimpse of the man. Every night, he beams out secret communications. I do not know for whom he intends them. But secretly I believe they are meant for me. As the transmissions begin, just like that, a soft, pearlescent halo forms around the moon, which, an instant later, acquires a brilliant radiance, shining bewitchingly for just a moment, shooting silken threads of light in every direction. The entire surface of the earth ceases its breathing, as if everything has gotten tangled up in those threads; the only sound in the night air is the pulsing of the moon. My heart beats out its rhythm then, in time with the moon. Yes, each and every night, the man transmits his messages to me, from the far side of the moon. Daily they grow more extreme. Confronted by mysteries of space beyond anything my body could possibly contain, I feel that my head is teetering on the edge of its own big bang. At such times, I too transmit the secrets of the moon's far side, angling them toward heavenly bodies as yet unknown.

THE HEAD OF AN ALBATROSS

First of all, one must have the head of an albatross. Humans, being unaccustomed to flying, have got it quite thoroughly into their noggins that they are incapable of flight. And yet who decided that it is so, that humans cannot fly? It is a prejudice, pure and simple. We must begin by cutting ourselves loose from this conventional mindset. Hence the necessity of the albatross head. It is not action that will remake the world but our cognizance of it. Needless to say, I do not intend to make light of action; but hurling oneself blindly into the challenge of flight is an action that accomplishes nothing. If one begins by transforming one's recognition of what it is to be in flight, then subsequent actions are bound not only to be legitimate, but also to produce satisfactory results. Thus, the head must first be made to fly. The head must be made comfortable with flight. Once you have instilled in the head a cognizance of flying, it becomes possible to modify and improve the body however you see fit, and unlike olden times when Icarus flew, we have no trouble nowadays, in these more technologically advanced times, with developing surrogate wings. What we need, if we are to fly, is not wings but a head for flight. But why, you ask, an albatross? Because the human body is so big—it would be physically impossible to make it fly using the head of a little bird such as a sparrow or swallow. The largest birds are most suitable, though it goes without saying that an ostrich head would not be practicable insofar as it has forgotten how to fly, which is the whole point, and would leave you yearning instead to skitter about the savannahs like a cross-country runner. Thus, given its great size, its strength in flight—it can cover a remarkable 800 kilometers in a single day—and the force of its commitment to life, which allows it to live until the age of fifty, the albatross is unquestionably the best option. The albatross is, moreover, unafraid of humans and has an affinity for other species, so there is little chance that its head will reject the human body after it is attached. All this being said, I will frankly admit that a few problems remain to be solved. Once the albatross's head is attached, people tend to become extremely sluggish in their movements on the ground, and develop an exclusive dietary preference for fish and shellfish. In addition, having once chosen a partner, they will never leave their mate until one of them dies. Still, even these disadvantages mean nothing at all when you view them as the cost of flying.

SAMBUCUS SIEBOLDIANA'S LAMENT

I mean, seriously—who decided that 接骨木 was a suitable way to write this word? Nothing in those three kanji has any connection whatsoever to the pronunciation *niwatoko*. Names give voice to form, so they say, and I guess the alternate orthography, 庭常, does at least reflect the sound, but frankly I find it hard to conceive of a written form with less bearing on the actual object than 接骨木. Take 山樝子, for instance—much better. I wouldn't go so far as to say it expresses the actuality of the plant, but at least you can intuit the pronunciation, more or less. 山 *san*樝 *sa*子 *shi*. . . string them all together and, sure, *sanzashi* makes sense. 躑躅 looks a bit like 髑髏, which gives the word a hair-raising sort of aura, but as long as you don't actually misread it as *skull* the two kanji do perhaps call up the image of an azalea blooming its head off in some mountain village. 仙人掌 is pretty out there as a juxtaposition of kanji, and figuring out the pronunciation would be difficult, but I suppose someone, somewhere, might possibly see, in a cactus's profile, the hands of a holy immortal who abides in the wilderness. But 接骨木? I know they say in ancient times people healed broken bones by smearing the ash of charred branches over the wound. That's just a ridiculous explanation. Another etymology has it that the plant's bulging nodes resemble knuckles or other joints, but I don't buy that for a second. You can't derive the pronunciations of 無花果 and 向日葵 from the kanji, either, but for anyone who has taken a moment to observe these plants and their habits, these names do make a lot of sense. 蒲公英 has the air of a Chinese name, and a certain charm, too, once you've stared at it for a while. By the same token, 杜若 does indeed suggest, in its visual form, the youthful energy of the flower, holding itself up perfectly straight above the water. Just looking at the word 合歓木 summons a languid, tropical breeze that lures you to sleep; and 罌粟 presents quite vividly to the imagination a field of pretty flowers nodding in the wind. The written form of 檸檬, so evocative of the fruit's spindle form, is redolent as well of that exuberant yellowness and refreshing citrus scent; and 梔子—particularly the first of the kanji—exudes, subtly, the sensuous perfume of the thing. Or take 羊歯, whose straightforward referencing of sheep's teeth stands as a masterful metaphor for the shape of fern leaves; or 辛夷, which paints in the mind's eye the magnolia's artlessly bumpy fruit. Consider these examples, and then consider 接骨木. How could anyone argue that those kanji express even the merest hint of the reality of the *niwatoko*? The conventional pronunciation doesn't fit at all, and nothing in them is suggestive of a flower or a fruit. There's something irritatingly prosaic about the word, as it is written, and it's simply too far removed from the being of the plant. I don't see how anyone could let this pass unchallenged.

PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN WALLS

Since they first appeared in the works of Apollinaire and Marcel Aymé, the existence of people who dissolve into or pass through walls has become a matter of common knowledge; very little is known, however, about those who inhabit walls. There are, in this world, three types of people. First, people who believe walls are there to be surmounted; second, people who see walls as barriers to be passed through; and third, people who think walls are for living in. Members of the first group are interested only in climbing over walls, and regard any given wall as a metaphorical representation of the Obstacle blocking their way. Thus they will insist with an air of utmost seriousness that the taller the wall, the greater the joy they feel in scaling it, etcetera. We need hardly concern ourselves with these insouciant bozos. Members of the second category possess a special talent: some are people like M. Honoré Subrac who, in a fit of anguish, wished to vanish into a wall, only to find that he had done precisely that; others, like M. Dutilleul, discover quite by accident, as the consequence of a blackout, that they have the ability to pass through walls. Again, these are not the people I wish to discuss, unfathomable though their abilities are. Those it behooves us to remember belong to the third class: people who secretly inhabit the walls. Now, at long last, the time has come for us to talk of the world in the thickness of a wall. As castle ramparts so vividly demonstrate, walls tend to be regarded as architectural structures whose purpose it is to separate inside from outside; this understanding is, however, exceptionally shallow. If we consider the wall in itself—if, that is to say, we view the wall from the vantage of the wall—we will perceive that there is neither inside nor outside but only the spatial expanse that is the wall. The wall is a screen upon which are projected images of the mind; it is the embodiment of all mental phenomena; it is, indeed, the mind *qua* mind. All the world's phenomena exist solely so that they may be contained within a single extension of wall. Thus, to speak of living in the wall is but another way to speak of living in the world. To comprehend the world, we must align ourselves more closely with the mute sufferings and jubilations of the wall's inhabitants, who never demand that we acknowledge them. We must feel with great sympathy each minute element of the fertile world that unfolds within the walls. For this is the one and only approach left to us by which we may apprehend the world.

My brother insists he has come here from a distant celestial body. It was all a mistake, he says with a sad smile, that he was born here on planet Earth, abandoned like an unclaimed suitcase in the rain at the wrong airport. The anxiety that comes of having landed in another world is constantly churning within him, frothing in his chest. The rustling of the trees outside the window; bits of dandelion fluff floating toward him on the breeze . . . things are forever casting meaningful glances his way, shaking his soul with the sweetly painful memories they carry, just behind them, of that celestial body. They are secret messages from the place he belonged. That's why they hit me so hard as they slip inside, my brother says, smiling. He has difficulty hearing the words we earthlings speak; they sound muffled, like a conversation conducted underwater. He hears us, that is, but it is as though the words pertain to some unfamiliar language whose meanings he finds opaque. The sheet of tiny ripples that glitter on the lake in the setting sun appears to him like a piece of fabric woven with seemingly purposeful geometric designs. The swallowtail butterfly that pirouettes in the air with such poise, stopping for a second before suddenly launching itself again, springing up rapidly only to ease off to one side and then, again, begin a fluttering ascent—it, too, sketches for him a meticulous map of the mysteries of space. All these things, with their curious exhibitions of movement, exude rays of invisible light that creep through my brother's temples into his brain, communicating to him secret instructions from outer space. These messages fill every crevice in his chest, he tells me as he stares into the distance, with such longing, tickling the switch panel of his internal memory. The rustling of the zelkova's leaves in the wind seem to trace, instant by instant, the waves of space, and never combine to form a single sound. The melodies they sing are forever tangled, beating out intricate rhythms. And there, deep within the hissing of the wind, you can detect a song, flowing onward, possessed of a clear purpose. You shouldn't try to hear it with your ears, he tells me with a brooding glance—grasp it with the antenna of your soul. Alas, my brother has forgotten the most important thing: how to make sense of the message. Somewhere along the way, on his journey into the world, to earth, he lost the indispensable key. He squirms from the frustration of it—to be surrounded by messages from space, to have them darting about overhead, every which way, and yet be incapable of deciphering them.
I wonder if my brother will be able to read the order to return to that celestial body, his rightful home, when it arrives, perhaps as soon as today, or tomorrow, and my own chest, too, churns and froths.

Jeffrey Angles

Finding Mother

UNDER ORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES, the arrival of a birth certificate in the mail is hardly life-changing; however, the arrival of mine in my mid-forties sent shock waves through my world.

I'm not talking about the birth certificate I'd seen before—the one that showed my name and the names of my parents, the one I'd used to get my first driver's license. I'm talking about my original birth certificate—the one that had been issued soon after my birth, when I was a newborn being put up for adoption.

From the age of seven, I knew I was adopted. I'd spent much of my youth feeling out of synch with the world around me, as if I was an exchange student who had come to live with a family in a foreign country. Although my adoptive family shaped many things about me, I was still profoundly different from them, not just in my appearance and bookish personality, but also in my values, politics, curiosity, and wanderlust. As I grew into a teenager, I began to feel rootless, like tumbleweed that fate had delivered to its current resting spot. So naturally I found myself wondering about the source of the seed that had grown into me. But records were sealed, meaning that I didn't have any way to look into the circumstances of my birth.

When I was forty-three, the laws changed in Ohio, making birth records available to hundreds of thousands of adoptees. I sent away for my birth certificate, and when the official-looking envelope arrived from the Bureau of Vital Statistics, I tore it open so quickly that bits of paper fell to the floor like confetti.

There it was. My mother's name.

She was only twenty when I was born. The birth certificate also gave her address and the fact that I'd been her first live birth. No father was listed.

I rushed to the internet. I didn't expect to find much since I assumed she had married and was now using a different surname, but much to my astonishment, within the first ten hits was a short message on an adoption information website. It had been posted eight months earlier.

I am the biological sister of a boy born on July 10, 1971 at Riverside Hospital in Columbus, Ohio. His mother's name is Linda C—. Please send any information. We want to find him. We have been looking for years.

I was stunned. The boy was me, no doubt about it. I'd wondered about my birth for years, but I'd never dreamed that my birth mother—much less her family—had been looking for me too.

When I sent away for the certificate, I wasn't all that sure that I'd try to contact her. After all, adoptions don't usually take place in happy circumstances. As a scholar who spends huge amounts of time poring through archives and newspapers, I felt confident that I could do enough research on my own to fill in the blanks and figure out what I wanted to know about my birth mother without disturbing her life.

But she'd been looking for me? Fate had cast me a line, and I grabbed onto it.

I puzzled over what to write. There was so much that I wanted to say. After pouring my heart into a long message to introduce myself, I realized that might be coming on too strong. In the end, my email was only a couple of paragraphs long. I wrote my phone number, attached a few recent photos, and also included the bio from one of my books to show that I wasn't an internet troll.

It was after 11 p.m. when my cellphone rang, displaying a number from Salt Lake City.

Utah? So far away . . . Could that be right?

The voice at the other end was the sister who had written the message—Carrie. She was hesitant to talk at first, so I jumped in and started explaining how I had gotten in touch through the name on my birth certificate. On it, there was a mother's name—her mother's—but no name for the father.

Suddenly, she erupted into an excited torrent of words. "It's really you . . . It's really you! My Mom—no, *our* Mom—told me she didn't give them the father's name because she didn't want him to know. Only her real son could have known that. Plus, you look exactly like my other sisters—yes, there are three of us here, including me!"

Carrie and I started talking about ourselves, our lives, our families, and our jobs. A half-hour into the conversation, she admitted she hadn't yet been in contact with her mother about my email, but now that she was sure I was the right fellow, she'd hang up and call her. "I don't know how long it will take her to be ready to talk to you," she told me. "Giving you up was one of the most difficult things in her life—she's quietly carried around a huge knot inside for more than forty years. But I'll talk to her. I know you have a million questions, but she should be the one to answer them for you. Be patient."

It was well after midnight when we hung up, but my adrenaline kept me wide awake. We had friended each other on Facebook while talking, and now I scrolled through her smiling photos one by one, realizing the women beside her were my sisters.

Yes, she was right. They did look like me—just without the thick beard and mustache. I kept clicking "like," "like," "like."

Then there she was. A photo of Linda. My mother.

She was much shorter than I expected, with a broad, inviting smile and colorful clothing. I clicked "love" underneath.

In Utah, my clicks were a sign that I was still awake. Around 1 a.m., the phone rang again. It was Linda. We both exclaimed, "Oh my goodness!" then, surprised we'd both said the same thing at the same time, we laughed nervously, wondering where to start.

She leapt in. "I have to tell you . . . I've thought of you every day since you were born. I've kept your birthday marked on my calendars, even when I didn't have anyone else I could talk to about you. It was hard all of those years having this big secret. Plus, I worried about you so much . . ." Her voice began to waver. "I didn't know what had happened to you, and I was so, so worried something bad might have happened . . . Is it true that the couple that adopted you were two young teachers?"

I assured her that she was right. Until they retired, my mother taught elementary school and my father taught high school math. Algebra and geometry . . . I guess he was living up to his name: Angles.

She told me, "When you were born, I knew I was too young to keep you. I had things to do, but I wanted you to have a good life. The lawyer told me that there was a nice young couple that wanted a baby, and when I heard that they were teachers, I felt sure they had to be good people, but how could I know for sure? After they took you away, I began to worry that I'd made a mistake. Maybe the lawyer had lied. Maybe they'd sold you on the black market or something . . . I didn't have any way to know."

She stopped for a moment and sighed. "I'd made a promise to the agency that I would never look for you. Plus, I didn't know if you knew you were adopted, and I was afraid that if I suddenly showed up, I might ruin whatever relationship you had with your parents. It's such a relief to know you turned out okay."

I tried to imagine what it must have been like to see my birthday marked on her calendar every year.

As we started talking about our lives, her first question was, "Do you have a family?"

I told her that I had a partner of eight years, and that we were living together. I wasn't entirely sure how to tell her that my partner was a man. Utah is a conservative state, and I didn't know how she might feel about such things. Twenty years ago when I told my adoptive parents in Ohio that I was gay, there were tears, anger, and disappointment. Our relationship healed over time, but it was only in my late thirties that they accepted that my sexual orientation wasn't a choice.

She immediately picked up on my use of the word *partner* instead of *wife,* and guessed correctly what that meant. When I confirmed this, her answer surprised me. "Oh, I'm so glad! I know how hard it can be for some people to find the right person. I'm so proud of you!" The genuineness of her sentiments rushed across the airwaves, making the air vibrate with joy.

Linda asked me about my profession, and when I told her, her reaction was again unexpected. "You speak Japanese? It's such a hard language! I only know a few words, and that's just because I do aikido . . . You know, I'm a third-degree black belt!"

I couldn't believe my ears. When I was a scrawny fifteen-year-old, I started aikido as a way to protect myself from the bullies who haunted the back hallways of my middle school. I never got a black belt, but aikido helped my confidence immensely. One day, four jocks started picking on me at school, and when the biggest one went to punch me, I dodged his punch and pulled him backwards, using the forward motion of his punch to throw him off balance. (Even now, I can still hear the crack of his head as it slammed against the linoleum floor.) I immediately got the hell out of there, but no one ever wanted to fight me again. In short, aikido changed my life. Even long after quitting, I still credit aikido's dance-like motion for giving me the freedom to inhabit my own body comfortably and to interact with people confidently.

But how could we have both chosen the same martial art? It's not as if it's all that common—like karate or taekwondo. Aikido isn't genetically inherited, or is it?

We quickly realized that we had both studied in the same dojo with the same teacher. Our time there never overlapped, but the coincidence was enough to make my jaw drop. Perhaps there are elements of personality, interests, and attitudes that do carry different generations to similar places in the world.

The more we spoke, the more I discovered that even though we had never met, everything about me seemed to line up with her and her family. We love the same things—the same kinds of food and political views—even our philosophies of life felt similar. We both are peacemakers in our family, and in fact, Linda had trained in graduate school as a mediator, a skill she found useful in the community where she lives in Salt Lake City.

She explained that she lives in an "intentional community" where people go to live purposefully with one another, sharing space and other aspects of their lives. "Like a commune, but each person has their own apartment, and we don't share financial resources." She told me the community functions like a big family—sometimes dysfunctional, but full of dynamism, energy, sharing, and friendship. A lot of the people there are ex-hippies and younger liberals who want an alternative to the carefully guarded, individualistic way of life so common in our world.

The mention of hippies led us to her past.

"It was such a dark time when you were born," she told me. "America was at war in Vietnam and with itself." In high school, she'd fallen in love with a young man who was drafted and sent to war—the man who would eventually become the father of her other children, my half-sisters.

In college, she threw herself headlong into the anti-war movement. She was a suburban girl who had led a sheltered life, but she began to hang out with some of

the free spirits she met at the protests and eventually moved into a house with them.

People came and went from the house, and one of them was a handsome, blond, bearded jock-turned-hippie from New York. He stayed with them for a couple of weeks, during which he and Linda had a brief affair. She said, somewhat sheepishly, "You have to understand how difficult things were back then . . . I was so lonely, and the person I loved was away at war . . . I wanted some comfort in those long, dark days."

By the time she realized she was pregnant, he was long gone. When I asked his name, she could only remember his first name—perhaps because she'd tried not to think of him over the years. After all, she didn't want him to know. She clearly couldn't keep me, and she feared that there might be complications for adoption if a father was involved, especially one who had vanished long before any sign of morning sickness.

Even as she laid her heart bare, I couldn't resist telling her that sometimes when we were growing up, my adoptive sister had often pointed to the things that I like and called me a "hippie love child." How surprised she'd be to learn she'd unknowingly hit the nail on the head.

Linda told me she'd refused to identify my birth father, despite pressure from all sides. She had a vision for her future, and she wasn't going to give it up. Even so, she wasn't prepared for the great, unresolved emptiness it left in her. When she was in labor, the hospital staff blocked her view of the birth with a screen. After I was born and started to cry, she asked to see me, but the doctors refused, telling her that seeing a baby who is going to be put up for adoption can make the mother waver in her decision. I was swaddled in a blanket and carried out of the room, still wailing. "I never saw your face, not even a second."

I promised her that she would get the chance to see me now. Even though it was the middle of the night, my partner was up next to me, listening in from my side. I looked at him for confirmation and then said, yes, we'd both come to Utah to meet her.

And we did. A couple of months later, I knocked on her door in Salt Lake City. Right next to it, a huge satsuma plum—a variety from the south of Japan where I've spent lots of time over the years—was covered with heavy fruit. She answered with open arms, while inside, my three sisters waited expectantly with their families.

So now I have two mothers: the one who raised me, and the one who gave birth to me. I call them both on weekends. I share with both of them my successes and concerns. I visit them, and they visit me. I recognize that each one shaped different aspects of my personality—before meeting Linda, I saw those distinctive sides of me as existing in an uncomfortable state of unresolved conflict, but now I recognize how seamlessly those parts coexist in the man I am today.

My family doesn't fit the traditional mold, but that's just fine. After all, the more love, the better.

Why hasn't this been translated? Remarks from nine translators

There are still so many missing links—books that are an indispensable part of Japanese literature yet remain inaccessible to readers abroad because they have not (yet) been translated. We asked nine translators to choose a book they think should be translated into English, to describe why it blew them away, and perhaps suggest why it has not yet been translated.

—Motoyuki Shibata

Seikō Itō's
IMAGINATION RADIO
Jeffrey Angles

In the last couple of decades, the multitalented Seikō Itō—writer, TV personality, actor, and rapper—has emerged as one of the most innovative novelists of the post-Murakami generation, eager to explore alternatives to traditional novelistic form and narration. Although he has been publishing since 1988, his major breakthrough came with his bestselling *Sōzō rajio* (*Imagination Radio*), which won the Noma New Face of Fiction Award and appeared on many lists of the best books of 2013.

This surreal novel, humorous and poignant in turns, begins with a long-winded monologue delivered by a radio broadcaster named Arc who describes himself, for reasons that only become clear much later in the book, as having been caught at the top of a tall cypress tree. Weaving together his life story and commentary about his favorite music, he speaks from his treetop over the electromagnetic waves of imagination, delivering his programming to listeners in the form of "Imagination Radio," audible in their own heads.

As his monologue progresses, he begins to read emails from his listeners, and it becomes increasingly clear that this strange form of communication traverses the boundaries separating the worlds of the living and the dead. Because the story takes place in northeastern Japan—in the region where the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown took place in March 2011—the monologue evolves into stories from the more than 20,000 people who died as a result of those disasters. The narrative also spills outward to incorporate the stories of those who died in accidents, from illness, even stretching back to the firebombing of Japanese cities during the war. In doing so, the book situates the stories of 2011 in a long line of traumatic experiences visited upon the Japanese population during the twentieth century—the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the wartime firebombing of Tokyo and other major cities, the earthquake that leveled Kobe, and most recently the 2011 disasters throughout the Tōhoku region.

When published in 2013, the novel struck a nerve and received a large amount of media attention as one of the first generation of novels to emerge from the devastation two years earlier. Many readers, including some who were still feeling personal grief and anxiety about the state of the nation, described the book as a requiem for the dead—an attempt to give voice to the stories of victims of disasters and war across the barrier of death. Through this novel, Itō seems to be suggesting that by identifying with others and using our imaginations, it is possible to listen to the stories of the dead, hear their grief, and give meaning to their lives while also helping to alleviate our own unresolved feelings of trauma and pain.

Kō Machida's
CONFESSIONS
Polly Barton

I can still remember what it was like to pick up *Confessions,* the first book by Kō Machida I ever encountered, and pass my eyes over its first sentence: "Born in the Suibun district of Akasaka village in the county of Ishikawa in Kawachi province in the fourth year of the Ansei reign as first son to the peasant Heiji Kido, Kumataro Kido started out life as a lily-livered dimwit of a child, but as time went on, he matured steadily into a hopeless troublemaker, and by the twentieth year of the Meiji era, when Kumataro had just turned thirty, he was already a perfect wastrel whose life was given over to the pursuit of drinking, gambling, and women." Up I sat in my chair, eyes wide, a huge grin spreading over my face. It seemed to me that I'd been plugged into a socket. What was this writing? It was alive—no, it was live, coursing with snap-crackle electrical energy.

As well as being an Akutagawa prize–winning writer, Kō Machida also has a career as a punk rock singer, and there was something about this mosaic of styles and registers, this polyphonic pastiche, irreverent and subversive and yet locked on to everything that really mattered, which seemed to me to embody the very spirit of punk.

I suppose I'd be lying if I said that electrified intensity persisted unabated throughout all 856 pages of this magnum opus, but it's not far from the truth. Based upon the true story of a killing spree that took place in 1893, immortalized in a song often danced to during annual Obon festivities, *Confessions* follows the plight of pathological overthinker turned brutal murderer Kumataro Kido, from his spoilt childhood through to his suicide. The plot certainly has various excitements in store, and the portrait of late nineteenth-century Sakai—now a suburb of Osaka, but at the time an independent province—is rich with detail, and yet the real momentum of the novel derives from the impetus of the internal monologue, those swooping sentences that expose the utterly relatable machinations of a chaotic mind. For *Confessions* is above anything a reflection on human folly, a psychological study of the causes and effects of crippling self-consciousness, and its preoccupations are as contemporary, arguably as universal, as any work set in the present day. It is also almost unbearably funny.

And while this book may be a cult classic, it is hardly a literary underdog. As the Heisei Emperor stepped down, the *Asahi Shimbun* gave a roundup of the most significant books of the Heisei era (1989–2018), on which *Confessions* was ranked third after Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and Haruki Murakami's *1Q84*. Surreal, touching, deranged, and endlessly inventive, *Confessions* is a work of utter originality from a veritable literary genius. That it hasn't yet appeared in English is a travesty.

Tōson Shimazaki's
SPRING
Michael K. Bourdaghs

I always struggled to make sense of Tōson Shimazaki's second novel, *Spring* (*Haru*, 1908). I'm apparently not the only one. Once a central figure in the canon of modern Japanese literature, Tōson has seen his stock fall in recent decades. People still remember his debut novel, *Broken Commandment* (1906), the dramatic story of a young schoolteacher desperate to conceal his origins in Japan's outcaste community, as well as his last masterwork, *Before the Dawn* (1935), an epic retelling of Japan's Meiji Restoration. We have English translations of both, as well as a translation of *The Family* (1910) and a few odds and ends, but not of *Spring*. Even in Japan, *Spring* is something of a forgotten novel. It was once celebrated as a cornerstone in the history of modern Japanese literature, the turning point in the rise of what would be called the I-novel genre—but nobody talks about it like that anymore. *Spring* is still in print, but few bookstores actually carry it. Even the massive Aozora Bunko website hasn't bothered to put it online.

A few years ago, though, the lightbulb went on, and I grasped what made *Spring* so compelling to generations of readers in Japan. My eureka moment occurred, of all places, at the 2015 Experience Music Project pop music conference in Seattle. I happened to attend a reading by Lisa Jane Persky from her in-progress memoir about the downtown NYC punk rock world of the mid-1970s. Persky, one of the founders of the seminal *New York Rocker* magazine, related a typical day in the life of the young, gifted, and flat-broke members of that now-legendary underground scene. Her words resurrected that community of passionately creative young persons, haunted by poverty, drugs, sex, and illness, surrounded by a world that refused to acknowledge them. She told tales of beautiful shooting stars who flamed out early, of ill-fated romantic pairings, of the lucky ones who made it out alive with minds and souls intact.

Listening to Persky, I realized in a flash that Tōson's *Spring* is telling the same story. Looking back at thirty-six—that is, on the cusp of middle age—Tōson was trying to capture a fleeting moment from the early 1890s when a circle of unknown young poets and their supporters (read: lovers) stumbled onto a new vision for what poetry—and love and life and art—could mean. The hero Kishimoto is clearly modeled after the young Tōson himself, and we can link the other characters in the novel to members of the *Bungakukai* magazine coterie, the first generation of Japanese poets to fall in love with Wordsworth and Keats, and who would go on to reinvent Japanese poetry. In the novel they encounter love and sex and bone-breaking poverty, they grapple with depression and disillusionment and suicide. We and they are haunted by the charismatic but tragic figure of Aoki, modeled after Tōkoku Kitamura. It's a story that never grows old because it's the story of lost youth. Readers of English deserve to meet Aoki, Kishimoto, and those other young poets and to watch them flare up in all their incandescent, doomed beauty.

Yukio Mishima's
LESSONS IN LETTERS
David Boyd

Fifty years after Yukio Mishima's suicide, some of his most important stories are now appearing in English for the first time. Last year, New Directions published Sam Bett's translation of *Star* (*Sutā,* 1961), and Penguin Classics published Stephen Dodd's translation of *Life for Sale* (*Inochi Urimasu,* 1968). In *Star,* Mishima explores how performers "act," in both their public and private lives; in *Life for Sale,* he offers a dark, if comical, commentary on postwar consumerism. Dodd is currently working on the long-anticipated translation of Mishima's sci-fi-tinged novel *Beautiful Star* (*Utsukushii Hoshi,* 1962). Thanks to new translations such as these, the English-speaking world is gradually gaining a fuller understanding of "Japan's dynamo of letters," as John Nathan once called him, and starting to recognize just how dynamic the iconic author truly was.

Even with the most recent round of Mishima translations, a key segment of the writer's body of work continues to be entirely overlooked: the numerous novels and novellas he wrote for women's magazines toward the end of his career. It sounds as though one or two translators are thinking about tackling the best known of these works: *Ongaku* (Music, 1964), which was originally published in the magazine *Fujin Kōron* (Ladies Review). *Ongaku* deals with sex and psychoanalysis as only Mishima can. While there is no English translation, the book has already been translated into Chinese, Italian, and Spanish. Still, even more than *Ongaku,* I'd like to see an English translation of a novel that Mishima wrote for another women's magazine: the deviously playful epistolary novel *Mishima Yukio Retā Kyōshitsu* (*Yukio Mishima's Lessons in Letters*).

Mishima began publishing *Lessons in Letters* in 1966 in *Josei Jishin* (Women's Own). After more than thirty installments, serialization concluded in 1967, the same year that the author started his Sea of Fertility tetralogy. Even for Mishima, *Lessons in Letters* is a strange bird—a full-length novel that doubles as a letter-writing manual. As the story's conceit is tied to issues of language, rhetoric, and etiquette, *Lessons in Letters* may prove challenging to translate. Each of the book's short chapters takes the form of a different type of letter: "An Old-Fashioned Love Letter," "A Fan Letter to a Celebrity," and so on. But as the story progresses, the letters become increasingly odder ("A Letter to Vilify Your Rival in Love," "A Letter from a Woman Who Has Given Up on Everything," etc.). As you can probably tell from these titles, there's a good deal of humor to be found in this unusual book. *Lessons in Letters* isn't your typical Mishima novel—and that's all the more reason it should be translated now.

Haruki Murakami's
SPIDER MONKEY OF THE NIGHT
Anna Elliott

All of Haruki Murakami's novels and a considerable number of his stories have been translated into English, but there are still quite a few untranslated stories I'm sure Murakami's fans would love to read, including the 1995 anthology of short shorts *Yoru no Kumozaru* (*Spider Monkey of the Night*).

Spider Monkey of the Night is a collection of surreal tales, each about two pages long, with whimsical illustrations. Although the stories were originally written for quirky advertising campaigns for J. Press and the Parker Pen Company, they have nothing to do with preppy clothes or fountain pens. And while they touch on characteristic themes and elements that appear in Murakami's longer fiction, in this collection those themes often get a delightfully lighthearted treatment. I'm sure that readers would enjoy the wit and humor usually seen only in passing in Murakami's longer works condensed here in rich, bite-sized form.

In one story, a sea turtle threatens to attack the narrator and his girlfriend, but it so detests the songs of Julio Iglesias that playing his recordings keeps the turtle at bay. "An Ad for a Jazz Café That Was in Kokubunji Long Ago" is a glance back to the jazz club that Murakami and his wife ran in their twenties. Another story sounds like a concerned citizen's complaint about the havoc wreaked on a Tokyo subway line by large monkeys playing practical jokes on people, but the police and the government show little interest. There's also a parody of a detective story, ending with a challenge to the reader reminiscent of Ellery Queen.

A few stories deal with difficult relationships, but even those include entertaining references. For example, a narrator whose girlfriend became "donutized" feels "worn out like Humphrey Bogart in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre.*" In another story, a woman talks about using a wrench to break the collarbones of men who try to assault her, recalling them only in terms of what type of car they drove.

Finally, readers will have a chance to run into some familiar characters. "Eels" features May Kasahara (who figures in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*), and two other stories feature a plumber named Noboru Watanabe, an obsessive collector of vintage pencil sharpeners. Readers may recognize his name from *The Elephant Vanishes,* a story collection that includes "The Wind-Up Bird and Tuesday's Women," in which Noboru Watanabe is a cat; "Family Affair," where he is a computer engineer; and "The Elephant Vanishes," where he is a zookeeper. This is an inside joke: Noboru Watanabe was the real name of the late Mizumaru Anzai, the author's friend (and the book's illustrator).

Of the thirty-six stories, only a few would seem to defy translation. (The philosophical reflections on Japanese proverbs, written in Kansai dialect, would be especially challenging.) I wonder why no one has translated *Spider Monkey of the Night*?

Fumiko Enchi's
THAT WHICH TAKES AWAY THE LUSTER OF VERMILLION
Michael Emmerich

Nearly twenty years have passed since I read Fumiko Enchi's trilogy *Ake o ubau mono,* whose title might tentatively be translated—quoting James Legge's version of *The Analects—That Which Takes Away the Luster of Vermillion.* To say I remember this novel vividly is only partially true, since all that remains are a few fragmentary scenes; the atmosphere of certain spaces; the texture of the prose; and the sharp, thin calligraphy of the title on the 1970 omnibus edition I read, which was, as I recall, the handiwork of the recently minted Nobel laureate Kawabata Yasunari. And yet the memories I do have possess a power and a palpability of a sort evoked by few other books.

I read *Ake o ubau mono* during a time in my life when I had decided to read one book by Fumiko Enchi for every five I read by other authors. I had been trying to purchase first editions of all her books, and had for the most part completed this task, meaning that I had about a hundred volumes on my shelves with her name on the spine. For those who are familiar with her work through English translations, Fumiko Enchi is best known for *Masks,* in a wonderful translation by Juliet Winters Carpenter, and to a lesser degree for *The Waiting Years* and *A Tale of False Fortunes,* translated by John Bester and Roger Kent Thomas respectively. Among the large number of other works Enchi published during her six-decade career as a writer—which coincided almost precisely, incidentally, with the Shōwa period (1926–1989)—*Ake o ubau mono* is notable for its power not just as a work of fiction, but also as a work of fictionalization, since it quite clearly echoes Enchi's own life. It is compelling, as a result, on a number of different levels: both as a novel, and as a sideways sort of portrait of a particular period in modern Japanese history, and of what it was like for a woman writer to live and write then.

I would love to see *Ake o ubau mono* translated. I doubt I ever will, since it's so long, and it seems unlikely to sell enough copies to cross the line from red to black. Still, one can hope.

Yasutaka Tsutsui's
PROFESSOR TADANO OF THE FACULTY OF LITERATURE
Ted Goossen

How many translators have experienced this? You pick up a book, start to read, and almost before you know it, you are imagining how well it would work in your language. Scenes unfold in all their fullness, priceless lines spring unbidden to mind—you sense a masterpiece in the making. And you may be the one to translate it! This feeling strengthens as you continue reading. As your anticipation heightens, your pulse quickens. It is a bit like the first stages of falling in love.

And then—pow!—something happens in the story, and the spell is broken. You feel disappointed, even betrayed, though the mistake was yours for allowing your desire to run on ahead of your better judgment.

I had an experience along these lines when reading Yasutaka Tsutsui's *Professor Tadano of the Faculty of Literature.* The title rests on "tada no," which means "just," as in "just a professor of English." The novel is quintessential Tsutsui, a caustic dissection of the entrenched absurdities of the Japanese university and the academic profession, and it hit me at a most opportune time, since I had just started teaching at a university. I roared with laughter as I read about the Japanese professor who, facing pressure from his department to take his sabbatical abroad at some prestigious university, leaves only to secretly return after two months, holing up in his own home like an escaped fugitive. Tsutsui lampoons the petty rivalries of campus politics, and fumes at the many ways students and junior faculty are exploited. It all rang true.

And then, just like that, it blew up in my face. I came to a scene in which a professor rumored to have AIDS runs around campus threatening to bite people. The book was published in 1990, when treatment for the disease was still being developed. I had friends and even a family member who were dying of AIDS, so I couldn't just shrug this off, even though I knew that the disease was rare in Japan at the time. Tsutsui loves railing against the politically correct, too (witness his fury when the term "epileptic fit" was excised from his work), so I imagined he saw his characterization within that context.

Satire is like that, of course: whether or not you can laugh along depends so much on your own experience. The first satirical novel that made me laugh was Joseph Heller's *Catch-22.* I was thirteen or fourteen, and I thought my dad would love it too, since—much like the antihero in the novel—he had flown bombers in World War II and witnessed war's absurdities up close. In fact, he hated it. I mean, *really* hated it.

Perhaps there is a sort of catch-22 operating in the world of satire. When culture, language, and history are added to the equation, how many potential "masterpieces" are torpedoed before they leave the dock?

Rieko Matsuura's THE DAY OF THE FUNERAL

Lucy North

The Day of the Funeral (*Sōgi no hi*) was Matsuura's debut work, published in 1978 when she was studying French literature at Aoyama Gakuin University. It won the Bungakukai New Writers' Prize and was nominated for the Akutagawa Prize. It is short (60-odd pages), intense, and stark—somehow reminiscent of Samuel Beckett. There is no storyline as such—merely an evocation of a relationship, recounted in an atemporal present. The narrator, a young woman not yet twenty, is a professional mourner (*nakiya*), employed at funerals to weep. She describes her relationship with another young woman who is a professional laugher (*waraiya*), employed at funerals to laugh. (Such professions do not exist in contemporary Japan, but they help create the mythical atmosphere of the story.) At the beginning of the story, the *waraiya* has mysteriously failed to turn up to a funeral; the *nakiya* is bereft. The narrative progresses through a series of recounted and relived moments and dialogues. The language is heightened, abstract, strange, and poetic. There is an enraged female mourner at a funeral; a mysterious four-year-old girl, whom the *nakiya* and *waraiya* meet twice, each time through a pane of mirror-like glass; sadomasochistic play between the two girls, involving pressure and suffocation; and a brief sexual relationship with a young man. The reader gets a strong sense of the need that exists between the *nakiya* and the *waraiya.* They recount their dreams, which seem to speak of engulfment, incorporation, some sort of separation. By the end, we understand that the *waraiya* has vanished, perhaps died. The *nakiya* is about to embark on her adult life alone, but with a "fragment" of her former partner remaining within her.

Rieko Matsuura is known to English readers for *The Apprenticeship of Big Toe P* (*Oyayubi P no shugyō jidai,* 1993), translated by Michael Emmerich in 2009. That book is a provocative, picaresque spin on a coming-of-age story, about the travails of a naive young woman who wakes up one day to discover her big toe has turned into a penis. "In learning to adjust to her new sexual organ," the book's description explains, "the heroine is forced to reconsider her body, her sexuality, and her life." A rambunctious tale of sexual misadventure, *The Apprenticeship of Big Toe P* is also an insightful account of queer awakening.

The Day of the Funeral is an enigmatic, melancholy, and poetic work, which lends itself to a psychoanalytic reading, and which presents many of Matsuura's later themes and her preoccupation with non-heteronormative relationality, in concentrated, highly abstract form. In the Japanese, it is published in an anthology (titled after this story) of Matsuura's early work, with *Fat Phobia* (*Himantai kyōfushō,* 1980), about a thin college student and her masochistic relationship with her three roommates, all of whom are fat; and *Summer of Thirst* (*Kawaku natsu,* 1979), which concerns an intense sadomasochistic relationship between two women. All of these stories were written before their time.

Midori Osaki's WANDERING IN THE REALM OF THE SEVENTH SENSE

Hitomi Yoshio

I first encountered Midori Osaki in a graduate seminar on modern Japanese literature at Columbia University in New York. In the context of the modernist movement of the 1920s and 1930s, Osaki's story—with its whimsical title, "Miss Cricket"—stood out as quirky and strange and refreshing. There was an intimacy to her work that made me feel that I was discovering an author no one else knew about. The misanthropic and precarious characters depicted in her writing fueled this image of the author as a solitary figure, whose expansive imagination effortlessly traversed national borders.

Midori Osaki was born in 1896 in the town of Iwami on the Sea of Japan. The most prolific time in her life as a writer was between 1927 and 1932, when she was part of a vibrant community of avant-garde artists and writers in the Kami-Ochiai neighborhood of Tokyo. She wrote experimental works, taking inspiration from contemporary European avant-garde movements, popular psychology, and Hollywood movies and German Expressionist films. She published not only stories and poems, but also a comic play (*Apple Pie Afternoon*), an experimental translation (Edgar Allan Poe's "Morella"), and a monthly film essay (*Rambling Thoughts on Film*).

In 1931, Osaki published a novella that was to become known as her masterpiece, *Wandering in the Realm of the Seventh Sense.* To bring a quirky female character to center stage, Osaki sought to invent new ways of representing human existence by breaking down traditional practices, from narrative structure (how stories are told) to character development (how the characters come alive). The novella presents a dreamy world of poetic vision and psychological wandering as Machiko, an aspiring poet, goes through a series of epiphanies triggered by ordinary things and happenings around her. Through a collage of different narrative voices and texts, and a rejection of fixed categories of gender and sexuality, the novella presents a world of fragmented sensations that refuse integration. Like Virginia Woolf's stream of consciousness, Osaki's literary innovations and modernist aesthetics offered a powerful critique of patriarchal views on gender, genre, and the position of women writers.

Several contemporary Japanese authors have noted her profound influence on their work, including Mieko Kawakami, whose novel *Breasts and Eggs,* translated by Sam Bett and David Boyd, was published this year to great acclaim. While translations of Osaki's works exist, most notably by Alisa Freedman and Kyoko Selden, published in academic journals, Osaki is virtually unknown outside of Japan. I would like to see these excellent translations collected into one volume and featuring *Wandering in the Realm of the Seventh Sense.*

Contributors

JEFFREY ANGLES (b. 1971) is a professor of Japanese language and literature at Western Michigan University. He has translated many writers, including Mutsuo Takahashi, Hiromi Itō, and Takako Arai. He is the author of *Writing the Love of Boys: Origins of Bishōnen Culture in Modernist Japanese Literature.* His translation of the modernist classic *The Book of the Dead* by Shinobu Orikuchi won both the Miyoshi Award and the Scaglione Prize for translation. Angles is also a poet; his book of Japanese-language poems *Watashi no hizukehenkōsen* (My International Date Line) won the 68th Yomiuri Prize for Literature.

POLLY BARTON (b. 1984) is a translator of Japanese literature and nonfiction, based in the UK. Recent translations include *Spring Garden* by Tomoka Shibasaki (Pushkin Press) and *Where the Wild Ladies Are* by Aoko Matsuda (Tilted Axis / Soft Skull Press). Her translation of Kikuko Tsumura's *There's No Such Thing as an Easy Job* is upcoming from Bloomsbury. After being awarded the 2019 Fitzcarraldo Editions Essay Prize, she is currently working on a nonfiction book entitled *Fifty Sounds.*

MICHAEL K. BOURDAGHS (b. 1961) is a professor of Japanese literature and culture at the University of Chicago. His book *Sayonara Amerika, Sayonara Nippon: A Geopolitical Prehistory of J-Pop* was published by Columbia University Press in 2012 and has been translated into Japanese. *The Dawn That Never Comes: Shimazaki Tōson and Japanese Nationalism* was published by Columbia in 2003.

DAVID BOYD (b. 1981) is an assistant professor of Japanese at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. His work has appeared in *Monkey Business, Words Without Borders,* and *Granta,* among other journals. His translation of Hideo Furukawa's *Slow Boat* (Pushkin Press, 2017) won the 2017–18 Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission Prize for the Translation of Japanese Literature. He has translated two novellas by Hiroko Oyamada—*The Factory* (2019) and *The Hole* (2020)—for New Directions. With Sam Bett, he is currently co-translating the novels of Mieko Kawakami.

ANDREW CAMPANA (b. 1989) is an assistant professor of Japanese literature at Cornell University. He has been published widely as a translator and as a poet in both English and Japanese, and is currently working on a manuscript on Japanese poetry from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, exploring how poets have engaged with new technologies, such as cinema, tape recording, the internet, and augmented reality.

ANNA ELLIOTT (b. 1963) is the director of the MFA in Literary Translation at Boston University. She is a translator of modern Japanese literature into Polish. Best known for her translations of Haruki Murakami, she has also translated Yukio Mishima, Banana Yoshimoto, and Junichirō Tanizaki. She is the author of a Polish-language monograph on gender in Murakami's writing, a literary guidebook to Murakami's Tokyo, and several articles on Murakami and European translation practices relating to contemporary Japanese fiction.

MICHAEL EMMERICH (b. 1975) teaches Japanese literature at the University of California, Los Angeles. An award-winning translator, he has translated books by Gen'ichirō Takahashi, Hiromi Kawakami, and Hideo Furukawa, among others. He is the author of *The Tale of Genji: Translation, Canonization, and World Literature* (Columbia University Press, 2013) and *Tentekomai: bungaku wa hi kurete michi tōshi* (Goryū Shoin, 2018) and the editor of *Read Real Japanese Fiction* (Kodansha) and *Short Stories in Japanese: New Penguin Parallel Text.*

HIDEO FURUKAWA (b. 1966) is one of the most innovative writers in Japan today. His novel *Belka, Why Don't You Bark?* was translated by Michael Emmerich; his partly fictional reportage *Horses, Horses, in the End the Light Remains Pure: A Tale That Begins with Fukushima* was translated by Doug Slaymaker with Akiko Takenaka; and his novella *Slow Boat* was translated by David Boyd. His stories have appeared in every issue of *Monkey Business*; vol. 1 features an interview with Haruki Murakami by Hideo Furukawa.

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, Yōko Ogawa, and Sachiko Kishimoto, among others. He translated Haruki Murakami's *Wind/Pinball* and *The Strange Library,* and co-translated (with Philip Gabriel) *Men Without Women* and *Killing Commendatore.* His translations of Hiromi Kawakami's *People from My Neighbourhood* (Granta Books) and Naoya Shiga's *Reconciliation* (Canongate) were published in 2020.

HIROMI ITŌ (b. 1955) is one of the most important female voices in contemporary Japanese poetry. English translations include *Killing Kanoko: Selected Poems by Hiromi Ito* and *Wild Grass on the Riverbank,* both translated by Jeffrey Angles. *Monkey Business* vols. 5, 6, and 7 featured excerpts from her novels.

SEIKŌ ITŌ (b. 1961) is a writer, performer, and one of the pioneers of Japanese rap. His novel *Imagination Radio* (2013) reflects on the March 2011 earthquake and nuclear disaster through the eyes of a deejay. He also writes nonfiction, including a 2017 book on Doctors Without Borders. Itō has long been interested in Noh, and he and Jay Rubin have collaborated with Grand Master Kazufusa Hōshō in a contemporary performance of the traditional Noh play *Hagoromo.*

HIROMI KAWAKAMI (b. 1958) is one of Japan's leading novelists. Many of her books have been published in English, including *Manazuru,* translated by Michael Emmerich; *Record of a Night Too Brief,* translated by Lucy North; and *The Nakano Thrift Shop, Parade: A Folktale, Strange Weather in Tokyo* (aka *The Briefcase*), and *The Ten Loves of Nishino,* translated by Allison Markin Powell. "The Dragon Palace" appeared in vol. 3 of *Monkey Business* and "Hazuki and Me" in vol. 5. "Banana" appeared in vol. 4 and was included in *The Best Small Fictions 2015* (Queen's Ferry Press). *People from My Neighbourhood,* translated by Ted Goossen, was published by Granta Books in 2020. The series continues to be featured in both the Japanese and English editions of *MONKEY.*

MIEKO KAWAKAMI (b. 1976) is a novelist, poet, singer, and actress. Her novel *Breasts and Eggs,* translated by Sam Bett and David Boyd, was published in 2020 and was featured in the *New York Times*. Her novel *Heaven,* also co-translated by Bett and Boyd, will be published in 2021. Her awards include the Akutagawa Prize, the Nakahara Chūya Poetry Prize, and the Waseda University Tsubouchi Shōyō Emerging Voice Prize. Her novella *Ms Ice Sandwich* was translated by Louise Heal Kawai. "War Bride," which appeared in vol. 7 of *Monkey Business,* was included in her 2012 award-winning collection of prose poems. Her short stories and prose poems, translated by Hitomi Yoshio, appeared in vols. 1–7 of *Monkey Business*.

SACHIKO KISHIMOTO (b. 1960) is known for her translations of Nicholson Baker, Judy Budnitz, Lydia Davis, Thom Jones, and Miranda July. She is also a popular essayist; her latest collection, *Some Kind of Reason,* appeared in 2012. Excerpts from *The Forbidden Diary,* a fictional diary, translated by Ted Goossen, appeared in vols. 1–7 of *Monkey Business*.

SATOSHI KITAMURA (b. 1956) is an award-winning picture-book author and illustrator. His own books include *When Sheep Cannot Sleep, Millie's Marvellous Hat,* and *Lily Takes a Walk*. He has worked with numerous authors and poets. His graphic narratives appeared in vols. 5–7 of *Monkey Business*: "Mr. Quote" in vol. 7, "Igor Nocturnov" in vol. 6, and "Variation and Theme," inspired by a Charles Simic poem, in vol. 5.

JON KLASSEN (b. 1981) is an award-winning Canadian writer and illustrator of children's books and an animator. *This Is Not My Hat* (2012) won both the Caldecott Medal and the Kate Greenaway Medal and was a *New York Times* bestseller. Klassen's "hat trilogy," which has been translated into more than twenty languages, includes *I Want My Hat Back* (2011) and *We Found a Hat* (2016). His work has appeared in the Japanese *MONKEY*.

HIROKAZU KOREEDA (b. 1962) is an internationally beloved film director, producer, screenwriter, and editor. His films include *After Life* (1998), *Nobody Knows* (2004), *Still Walking* (2008), and *After the Storm* (2016). Among his prizes are the Jury Prize at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival for *Like Father, Like Son* and the Palme d'Or at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival for *Shoplifters*. He has contributed to the Japanese *MONKEY* twice. His comments on Naoya Shiga's "The Razor" appeared in vol. 9 (June 2016).

SAM MALISSA (b. 1981) holds a PhD in Japanese literature from Yale University. His translations include *Bullet Train* by Kotaro Isaka (Harvill Secker, 2021), *The End of the Moment We Had* by Toshiki Okada (Pushkin Press, 2018), and short fiction by Shun Medoruma, Hideo Furukawa, and Masatsugu Ono.

AOKO MATSUDA (b. 1979) is a writer and translator. In 2013 her debut *Stackable* was nominated for the Mishima Yukio Prize and the Noma Literary New Face Prize. In 2019 her short story "The Woman Dies" (from the collection *The Year of No Wild Flowers*), translated by Polly Barton and published by Granta online, was shortlisted for a Shirley Jackson Award. Her novella *The Girl Who Is Getting Married* was published by Strangers Press in 2016. She has translated work by Karen Russell, Amelia Gray, and Carmen Maria Machado into Japanese. Her stories appeared in vols. 5–7 of *Monkey Business,* translated by Jeffrey Angles.

STEVEN MILLHAUSER (b. 1943) is an American novelist and short story writer. He won the Pulitzer Prize in 1997 for *Martin Dressler,* and the Story Prize in 2012 for *We Others: New & Selected Stories*. Many of his stories have appeared in the *New Yorker*. His work has been translated into fifteen languages.

KUNIKO MUKŌDA (1929–1981) was a novelist, essayist, and screenwriter. A collection of her short stories, *The Name of the Flower,* was translated by Tomone Matsumoto and published by Stone Bridge Press in 1994. Mukōda won the Naoki Prize in 1980. A year later, she died in a plane crash.

HARUKI MURAKAMI (b. 1949) is one of the world's best-known and best-loved novelists. All his major novels—including *Hardboiled Wonderland and the End of the World, The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle,* and *1Q84*—have been translated into dozens of languages. "On Writing Short Stories" in vol. 7 of *Monkey Business* is the second half of his conversation with Motoyuki Shibata, published in vol. 9 (Summer/Fall 2016) of the Japanese *MONKEY*. An interview by Hideo Furukawa appeared in vol. 1 of *Monkey Business*. His essays "The Great Cycle of Storytelling" and "So What Shall I Write About?" appeared in vol. 2 and vol. 5 of *Monkey Business*. Vol. 4 of *Monkey Business* includes an essay by Richard Powers on Murakami's fiction.

LUCY NORTH (b. 1960) is a British translator of Japanese fiction and nonfiction. Her translations include *Toddler Hunting and Other Stories* by Taeko Kōno (New Directions, 1996; 2018) and *Record of a Night Too Brief,* a collection of three stories by Hiromi Kawakami (Pushkin Press, 2017). Her translations have appeared in *Granta, Words Without Borders, The Southern Review,* and in several anthologies, including *Found in Translation: 100 of the Finest Short Stories Ever Translated* (Head of Zeus, 2018). She is now working on a translation of Natsuko Imamura's 2019 Akutagawa Prize–winning *The Woman in the Purple Skirt*.

YŌKO OGAWA (b. 1962) is, with Hiromi Kawakami, one of the most highly regarded novelists in Japan. Translations of her work have appeared in the *New Yorker* and *A Public Space,* among other publications. Four of her books have been translated into English, all by Stephen Snyder, including *The Housekeeper and the Professor* and *Revenge: Eleven Dark Tales*. "The Tale of the House of Physics" and "Boys and Girls," translated by Ted Goossen, appeared in vols. 1 and 6 of *Monkey Business*; "A Peddler of Tears," translated by Sam Bett, appeared in vol. 7.

KANOKO OKAMOTO (1889–1939) was a poet and novelist known for her rich use of language. Influenced by her older brother's classmate Jun'ichirō Tanizaki and the poet Akiko Yosano, she started contributing tanka to magazines when she was seventeen. With Yosano, in 1911 she became one of the first contributors to *Seitō* (*Bluestockings*), an early feminist journal. After publishing four tanka anthologies, she became a novelist, starting with a novella about the last days of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (*Tsuru wa yamiki,* 1936). "Portrait of an Old Geisha" (1938), translated by Cody Poulton, was published in the *Oxford Book of Japanese Short Stories,* edited by Ted Goossen. Her novella *A Riot of Goldfish* (1937) was translated by Keith Vincent.

HIROKO OYAMADA (b. 1983) is one of Japan's most promising young writers. Her novellas *The Factory* and *The Hole* were translated by David Boyd and published by New Directions. Her story "Spider Lily" was translated by Juliet Winters Carpenter and published in the Japan issue of *Granta* (Spring 2014). "Lost in the Zoo" and "Extra Innings," translated by David Boyd, appeared in vols. 6 and 7 of *Monkey Business*.

JAY RUBIN (b. 1941) is professor emeritus of Japanese literature at Harvard University. One of the principal translators of Haruki Murakami, he translated *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle, After the Quake, After Dark, 1Q84* (co-translated with Philip Gabriel), and *Absolutely on Music: Conversations with Seiji Ozawa*. Among his many other translations are *Rashōmon and Seventeen Other Stories* by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa and *The Miner* and *Sanshirō* by Sōseki Natsume. He is the author of *Haruki Murakami and the Music of Words* and the general editor of *The Penguin Book of Japanese Short Stories*.

KYŌHEI SAKAGUCHI (b. 1978) is a writer, artist, and architect. His work explores alternative ways of being, as in his books *Zero Yen House* and *Build Your Own Independent Nation*. His novel *Haikai Taxi* was nominated for the Yukio Mishima Prize in 2014.

TOMOKA SHIBASAKI (b. 1973) is a novelist, short story writer and essayist. Her books include *Awake or Asleep, Viridian,* and *In the City Where I Wasn't.* She won the Akutagawa Prize in 2014 with *Spring Garden,* which has been translated by Polly Barton (Pushkin Press). "The Seaside Road" appeared in vol. 2 of *Monkey Business,* "The Glasses Thief" in vol. 3, "Background Music" in vol. 6, translated by Ted Goossen, and "Peter and Janis" in vol. 7, translated by Christopher Lowy.

MOTOYUKI SHIBATA (b. 1954) translates American literature and runs the Japanese literary journal *MONKEY.* He has translated Paul Auster, Rebecca Brown, Stuart Dybek, Steve Erickson, Brian Evenson, Laird Hunt, Kelly Link, Steven Millhauser, Richard Powers, and Charles Simic, among others. His new translation of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was a bestseller in Japan in 2018. Among his recent translations is Eric McCormack's *Cloud.*

NAOYA SHIGA (1883–1971) was a master stylist closely associated with the development of the "I novel." His short stories, such as "The Razor" (1910) and "Night Fires" (1920), established his reputation. "Night Fires," translated by Ted Goossen, appears in the *Oxford Book of Japanese Short Stories.* The novella *Reconciliation* (*Wakai,* 1917), translated by Ted Goossen, was published by Canongate in 2020. The original Japanese text of "The Razor"(剃刀) is available in the collection『清兵衛と瓢箪・網走まで 改版』(新潮文庫, 1999); "Turtledoves" (山鳩) is available in the collection『白い線 新装改訂版』(大和書房, 2012).

JORDAN A.Y. SMITH (b. 1976) is an associate professor at Josai International University. He has translated poetry by Gōzō Yoshimasu (published in *Alice Iris Red Horse,* New Directions, 2016), Noriko Mizuta (*The Road Home,* 2015; *Sea of Blue Algae,* 2016), Tahi Saihate, and other contemporary poets in Japan. He is editor-in-chief of *Tokyo Poetry Journal* and co-creator of *The New Japanese Poetry,* a BBC Radio 4 series. As a poet, he has co-authored two volumes and published one collection, *Syzygy* (Awai Books, 2020).

MAKOTO TAKAYANAGI (b. 1950) has published numerous books of poetry. His collected works appeared in two volumes in 2016. A third volume was published in 2019. *Aliceland* was his first publication, in 1980; a translation by Michael Emmerich appeared in vol. 7 of *Monkey Business.* The five poems in this issue are taken from his 2014 collection *Living on the Far Side of the Moon.*

HITOMI YOSHIO (b. 1979) is an associate professor at Waseda University. She specializes in modern and contemporary Japanese literature, with a focus on women's writing. Her translations of Mieko Kawakami's works have appeared in *Granta, Freeman's, Denver Quarterly, Monkey Business, Words Without Borders,* and *The Penguin Book of Japanese Short Stories.*

BARRY YOURGRAU (b. 1949) is a writer of very short stories. His collection *Wearing Dad's Head* was reissued in 2016, and *A Man Jumps Out of an Airplane* in 2017. His memoir *Mess: One Man's Struggle to Clean Up His House and His Act* was published in 2015. His stories appeared in vols. 1–3 of *Monkey Business.* "Private Tour," a companion piece to *Mess,* appeared in vol. 7. His work regularly appears in the Japanese *MONKEY,* translated by Motoyuki Shibata.

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MONKEY is full of deep, funny, wild, scary, fabulous, moving, surprising, brilliant work. There is no literary magazine, no magazine period, that I get more excited about reading.

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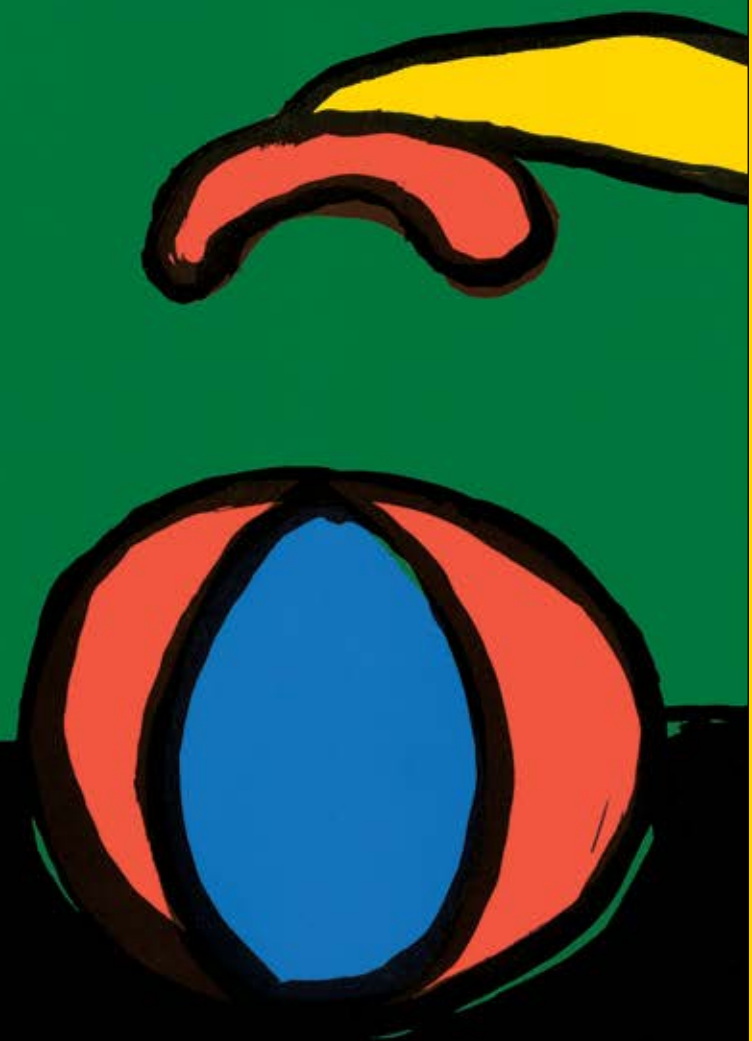

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