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A Translation of Orikuchi Shinobu's *Kuchibue*

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A thesis submitted
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

University of Washington

2015

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:
Asian Languages and Literature

University of Washington

Abstract

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Orikuchi Shinobu's largely autobiographical novel *Kuchibue* (1914) is here translated into English for the first time. This translation is meant to introduce this important example of a well-known, non-heteronormative voice of a modern Japanese figure that has been neglected until now to an English audience.

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ONE

Crisp and refreshing, May came, when the acacia trees behind the schoolhouse bloom and the students take off their cotton shirts.

At times, lately, Yasura had found it very strange that he should feel such extraordinary fatigue. He wanted to stretch his body out on the ground like a lazy dog. Yasura had no name for this feeling, and there was certainly no way he could ask his aunt what it might be called.

Yasura was more than simply careless about himself and his appearance. On the contrary, he had a tendency to pride himself on this incredible nonchalance.

At school, teachers and others had begun to caution him that he must take care not to cut too sloppy a figure, and each time this happened he felt a shiver of some pleasant sensation he could not name. His mother and his aunt were both preoccupied with the shop and had no time to extend their care and attention to Yasura. These factors more or less set the stage for Yasura's mediocre early childhood, and he eventually came to enjoy this sort of patchwork upbringing he had at times.

Yasura continued climbing impatiently up the stone steps that formed the path. The slope was bound by bamboo fences on either side, and beyond each fence were graveyards. In places, bamboo shoots thrust vigorously out of old leaves piled up on the earth. Fixing his eyes on the bright morning light that filtered into the grove, Yasura stopped.

Today, from the time he woke up, the same odd feeling had been pursuing him, as it so often did. He opened his eyes wider and wider, and worked to make sense of that feeling, to clarify it. But then finally, as always, it would run its course and settle into something like a

daze. Remembering that he must get to school, he set out walking without waiting for that to happen.

The top of the slope was where the temples were. From there it was five or six hundred yards to the school.¹ Just as the school came into Yasura's view, the starting bell rang. With redoubled force he hurled himself forward, straight up the stairs to his classroom. He did not see the teacher yet. All of the other students were either in their seats or at the desks of others, clamoring noisily. Seeing Yasura come running in panting, the entire class burst out laughing.

Yasura felt a blush break across his face. Gathering himself narrowly, he sat down at his assigned desk.

"Uruma's head's on fire," yelled one boy, drawing the attention of everyone in the class to Yasura. Yasura's hand moved immediately to his head to feel his soaking wet hair, and he realized that he was steaming with sweat. His posture, his emotions—the moment his hand pressed down on his head made him feel as though he were clownishly miming his own regrets and made him wish even more fiercely to disappear completely. After a short while, a calmer and cooler state of mind returned to him.

The teacher never did turn up for that class hour. The students were in high spirits, and spent the time cavorting or chasing a ball around the wide exercise yard.

Yasura splayed out on the clover, taking the full force of the sun on his back. He watched the white clouds seep into the blue of the sky forever.

The following day it rained.

The warm, wet wind, as if in an effort to remind him of how near to the meadows he was, brought the scent of new baby roses. A fine mist blew in, dampening Yasura's jacket, and he enjoyed the sensation of the wet pressure against his skin. He was a sweater. His sweating was especially intense from the end of April to the beginning of May.

¹Distances are given throughout this work based on real geography, and usually come in traditional units. *Chō* is the unit here roughly represented in English in terms of hundreds of yards. See introduction.

Even when he was able to feign a calm expression, he had often felt the sweat welling up like pure spring water just under the surface of his skin. Because his skin had felt sticky and slack since he left his futon that morning, today he had shown up to class not wearing his usual undershirt.

The teacher, as though enjoying himself, said loudly, “And so here, Fritz was left with no choice other than to strike the wolf against the door with all his strength.” Yasura had felt, from the outset, no interest at all in the content of his textbook. Though he had been interested in the stories of Iwami Jūtarō and Perseus², after second or third year, he had completely abandoned any interest in those.

And yet now, what he had pictured as the outcome of the story was the vibrant blood splashing from Fritz’s white chest onto the softness of the snow. His dreamlike premonition made the story’s predictably calm resolution, meant to evoke the power of humanity, seem tedious to him. When the lecture was over, the other students competed eagerly to ask questions. For Yasura, however, no doubts remained.³

Third hour was physical education. Yasura realized that he had become short of breath.

On the platform in the gymnasium stood the large instructor known as the Toad. He began to unbutton his jacket in a leisurely manner. The students began taking off their jackets. All of the blood in Yasura’s body rushed to his head. Finally, he heard the call to attention.

“Stretches, exercise one, first set!” boomed a deep voice.

²Two legendary heroic figures, the former appearing in *kabuki* and other forms of drama, and the latter from Greek mythology.

³This may come from a German folktale, which is not surprising to have been included in the curriculum at this school. This is the story as received “in German dialect [from] an informant in Henderson, Nebraska:”

On the way home Fritz encountered a wolf. What to do? He had been told that wolves do not attack dead people. And so he lay down absolutely still. The wolf stood over him, and its saliva dropped down on his head. He grabbed the wolf’s front paws and held them so that the wolf could not bite him, and so he walked home, carrying the wolf on his back. When he came home, he banged the wolf against the door and called out: Father, open up, I’ve got a live wolf on my back! Then they turned the wolf and the dogs loose, and they chased the wolf away.

in Schach, Paul. “Russian Wolves In Folktales And Literature Of The Plains: A Question Of Origins” *Great Plains Quarterly*, April 1, 1983. 68.

“The jacket, Uruma.”

No appropriate words came to Yasura. He was aware of all of his pores opening at once. The instructor leapt from the platform.

“Why won’t you take it off?”

The instructor began clawing at the chest of Yasura, who remained bright red and slumped over. The Toad proceeded to undo the first button, then the second, and finally the rest. One button was rent loose and flew.

Suddenly, a cold-blooded look crept across the instructor’s face.

“All right, you, get up there. You’ll be the one to lead the exercises today.”

Yasura trudged toward the platform as if in a trance. His jacket was still in the hands of the instructor.

He appeared up on the platform with not a single stitch on the upper half of his body. His face was wan. The tender curves that ran from his high-set shoulders to his collarbone, the soft, wavering recess that extended from his collarbone to his chest, then from his chest down to his navel: his whiteness like snow under the February moon, in front of all the other students...

He stood weakly on the platform, feeling that snowy whiteness wish it could melt away.

There was one boy in his year who looked at him with his eyes full of pity.

“Stretches, exercise one, first set! Arms up!”

The clarity of his voice penetrated the ears of the other students. Wearing the wry smile of a captive, he came down from the platform.

Going home, the clouds had cleared and the swallows flitted about showing their white underbellies. Feeling renewed and lighter of heart, Yasura trod soil freshly washed by thunderstorms. After five or six hundred yards, the road went into the tea fields.

At the top of the low hill, a stone stupa was bathed in the afternoon sun.

A bird flew up out of the thicket of tea leaves, the sound of its wings loud.

Standing on top of the hill, Yasura watched the bird as it flew away.

He felt something catch deep behind his nose, and his eyes lost focus.

<i>chigiri areba</i>	Fated as I am
<i>naniwa no ura ni</i>	to have come here
<i>utsurikite,</i>	to the bay of Naniwa,
<i>nami no yuuhi o</i>	I look to the setting sun
<i>ogaminuru kana</i>	over the waves for salvation ⁴

The slow, fading rhythm of the words had been called up from somewhere in the deepest recesses of his mind. That same young mind was somehow already beginning to fathom the bleakness of the later years of the poet from the *Shin kokinshū*.⁵ This was the poet whose memorial still stood on the same hill where Yasura was now standing. Just then, he felt something come into contact with his cheek. A single leaf from the thin branches above his head had fallen in front of him.

His eyes upturned, Yasura saw a softly gray, plump pigeon change branches. Saw its heartbreakingly red legs. Saw the eyes of the small bird observing him in the unstable light.

For a week it rained and cleared in turns, all followed by days of sticky humid heat. The purple flowers of the paulownia scattered white.

In one corner of the sports field, there were some forty square yards where Yasura had made furrows and planted his garden. This time of year he had to water it twice every day, morning and evening. Into this garden he lowered his seeds, the product of what he had sown the spring before.

When he transplanted the rows of young plants, dividing them a little bit more each

⁴The death poem (*jisei*) of Fujiwara no Ietaka (1157-1237), here in a version slightly altered by Orikuchi.

⁵Formally *Shin kokin wakashū*, this is the eighth imperially commissioned collection of poetry, containing mostly *waka* and completed in 1205. The above poet was one of the compilers. The memorial in the next line refers to the stone stupa mentioned above, and the poem included here comes from a collection of *setsuwa* (didactic Buddhist tales) called *Kokon chomonjū* completed in 1254. The notes in the Iwanami edition point out that this reflects a Pure Land Buddhist outlook, in which paradise lies always to the west (300). See Dykstra, Yoshiko K. “Notable Tales Old and New: Tachibana Narisues *Kokon Chomonjū*.” *Monumenta Nipponica* 47, no. 4 (December 1, 1992): 469—93.

time, he became aware of the sensation that he was observing himself as he imparted his own strength to the lives of these hundreds of plants.

Many of the plants were already budding. He watered them and kept on watering them, and they continued to quickly soak up what he gave them.

By dashing out after every hour-long class period to work in his garden, Yasura was able to care for it meticulously. Without fail, every morning before the start of classes and after dismissal every afternoon, he bent to his work, pouring his scrupulous attention over every individual seedling. Soon, watering the garden morning and night was not enough to satisfy him. He began giving water to his garden whenever it occurred to him. His natural history instructor told him that the roots would not hold out if he continued to water it so much, but this only hardened the opposition Yasura already felt toward such advice in his juvenile mind.

*The invisible desires of plants and trees manifest themselves in the hearts of their caretakers. When it occurs to me that I should water the garden, it is the plants communicating to me their desire for me to do so.*⁶ Just as he had hoped and expected, all of his plants continued to grow rapidly. Before long he had begun to see reddening, yellow-striped buds appear.

In the now rather slanted light of the sun, Yasura fervently worked his rows, his downturned face smeared with sweat. After about an hour of this, he took a quick, deep breath and stood up straight. Suddenly staggering as if he would fall, he leaned against a nearby fence. When he did, his ears began ringing terribly and his nose stopped up, making it difficult for him to breathe. At the same time, he felt a cold sweat surfacing, carried by indescribable chills. Yasura laid himself down on the grass.

In that position, he tried to take deep, regular breaths to return his breathing to a quieter and easier pace. He thought he felt something like the sensation of ice sliding down the muscles of his back, and just then his sweating suddenly stopped. He could feel the blood

⁶These lines are not set off visually in the source text in any way, but the use of the first person pronoun is enough to know that this is Yasura's internal monologue.

throbbing throughout his entire body.

His cheeks burning red, Yasura returned to where he had been between the rows in his garden.

“Hey, Uruma!”

From the dimly lit hallway that went from the bottom of the stairs to the laboratory, someone called to Yasura, who was the last to leave his classroom on the second floor.

“What?”

“Come down here for just a minute.”

The very instant he heard the voice, he could envision the boy it belonged to. He felt a shiver that gave him the impression that this boy might be about to try to start something.

“Come back again later—there’s some things need doing in the yard here,” he said all at once. Yasura ran straight down the stairs and out into the yard.

“Hey, hold it!”

The boy chased Yasura all the way into the corner of the schoolyard where pines and willows had been planted. His advances made Yasura wither in terror. Still, Yasura didn’t listen to what the boy said. The bell rang. The students flowed like the tide into their classrooms. Yasura turned and ran.

The ferocity of the boy’s voice stayed with him: “Don’t you forget!”

He made no real attempt to run away or hide. So during his lunchtime, Yasura was out in the schoolyard pulling weeds.

Makino, the boy from earlier, had been joined by two others who now circled around the outside of the fence menacingly, red-black eruptions of acne on their faces.

Sunlight wafted over the supple, bright white outline of the shoulder of his summer clothes. It was June.

It was a dry Sunday following five or six days of rain. Yasura left the house around five, and eastward, eastward, he walked. After an hour, he came into an open meadow. Without a glance to either side, he walked straight up the single path through it. He met countless

ox carts headed to town.

The sun shone on the blue and white patterned top kimono he wore, filling his nose with the scent of its fresh indigo.

He came to a more rural part of town. There he bought peaches and apricots and stuffed them into his bag. Turning south from there, he passed graveyards, and came to a village alive with the work songs of women weaving carpets. He passed rivers, he passed huge, thick groves, and he passed more than that, until he had walked a bit more than two miles. The walls of a complex of temples came into view.

He felt as if he could hear the first part of Kazan-in's poem about purple clouds coming from some corner of the inner recesses of the complex: "A visit to Fujii-dera annihilates all desire..."⁷ He began the motions of pulling a fortune, shaking a thin wooden rod out of the metal cylinder. It said twenty-eight. He couldn't see anyone who would give him the associated paper fortune.⁸ Yasura felt as though his eyes had unthinkingly met with the gleaming eyes of the Buddha residing in the dimness behind the thick pillars and heavy curtains steeped in the scents of sandalwood and agar wood, and in his core he began to feel that he wanted nothing more than to throw himself completely on the mercy of that presence.

The chickens went up the stairs over the high enclosure. Some crowed under the lattice-work of the main hall.

Two people who appeared to be father and son on the Shikoku pilgrimage were standing

⁷Can be found in Orikuchis *tanka* collection, Orikuchi Shinobu, ed. Tomioka Taeko. *Shaku Chōkū kashū* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2010), 69, as part of the collection *Umiyama no aida*, a version was also attributed to the retired emperor Kazan when he visited the Shingon temple as part of his journey to re-establish the Shikoku Thirty-three Kannons pilgrimage as depicted in Orikuchi's play *Kazan-in engi*. (see p 301 in ST).

⁸*Omikuji* fortunes work by drawing a stick in the manner described here. Each stick has a number written on it to receive the fortune written on paper, and is given to an attendant (or in some cases the fortunes are simply in drawer marked by these numbers).

near the temple's water stand.⁹ The father was drinking water out of a ladle. The child, who must have been around ten, used his small hands to support a bucket to pour water little by little into the father's ladle. The sight of the two having filled him with pity, Yasura left through the front gate. Vegetables hung to dry from the roof of each of the houses withered in the midday sun. Wind blew through dryly, picking up sand.

Since earlier that day, Yasura had felt his stomach aching in a way that put pressure on his ribs. It soon became unbearable. Bending over on the side of the road where the grass grew thick, he tried pressing on his chest. Suddenly, a bitter liquid rushed up his throat. He spat out something thin and yellow.

Yasura stayed in that position for a short while. A man, wearing a bright white sedge hat and likely on his way home for an afternoon nap after working in the fields, came trudging toward where Yasura was. The man stopped for a brief moment to observe him, and then continued quietly on his way. In that moment Yasura felt a peculiar spasm run through the base of his jaw. It was somehow oppressively heartbreaking, but it also brought about in him a pleasant sensation of comfort.

Yasura rose up. By that time the man's sedge hat was a dim blur in the distance at the far side of the nearly endless barley heavy with grain. He was a man of medium build with a face that was somewhat dark but delicately formed. His rolled-up sleeves revealed two arms that seemed incongruously white and plump. The soft gaze that he had turned sympathetically on Yasura impressed itself upon Yasura's heart.

Making his way to one side of the road, he found a narrower path. Slumped over, he journeyed westward, westward. The haystacks on either side of the path were many and he passed them by as if in a dream. As he was progressing in this fashion he felt his consciousness, which had been completely scattered until he stopped in the shade of one of those haystacks, begin to recollect itself. In front of him one flower of a Chinese milk vetch waved gently in a breeze that seemed barely there.

⁹ *Chōzu*, a stand with running water and ladles for washing hands and mouth before entering sacred places.

The sound of his own breathing was ragged in his ears, and his flushed cheeks were hot to the touch. Once again raising himself up, he focused his eyes intently. Still, all he could see was the sunlight that filled the barley to brimming, and all he could hear was the voices of the larks, drifting towards him on a gentle breeze.

By the time he had clumsily pulled his heavy legs all the way back home, the sun had set completely.

It was hard for him to get to school with a cheerful countenance for any more than two or three days in a row.

Mornings he woke up early. Though he arrived late to school nearly every day, he never missed, under any circumstances. Most days he dragged his frame about listlessly from the time he left his bed.

Evidence of Yasura's devotion, more and more of the rare flowers from the West in the garden bloomed every day. Time and again he found himself standing vaguely, stock-still amid the flowers, his eyes drained of power.

Aizendō was on the way to Yasura's school. Here stood the newly restored Tahōdō pavilion and the Kondō with its darkened vermilion, all before a background of birches, rare for the area.¹⁰ There was an old man who lived on the grounds and maintained the temple compound. In the rays of the morning sun and in the twilight hours again Yasura would see him raising and lowering the lattice shutters here and there. Leaves were always piled up in the clearing. Yasura's path took him over the leaves and out the exit to the side of the grounds.

Once again in June, on a morning late in the month, he turned his face up toward the light filtering through the thin branches, and wondered whether he might in fact be ill in some way.

That day as well, school had already begun by the time he arrived. With an ironic smile,

¹⁰Aizendō is a complex of temple buildings, the two mentioned here being the main ones. The Tahōdō is a two-story pagoda, and the Kondō is the bright red and white central hall. The complex was created by the order of Shōtoku Taishi in the first year of Empress Suiko's reign (593-628), and appears in Ihara Saikaku's 1687 *Nanshoku Ōkagami*, a work centered on tales of male-male affection.

his mathematics instructor upbraided him for his tardiness. Yasura reddened to the ears. His instructor bore down further and further on Yasura, who would not raise his head, and ended by dumping some difficult-to-catch insult on him.

After a number of students had gone up to the platform to solve problems, the bell rang abruptly. The instructor, complained loudly and with a mocking expression, “Thanks to Uruma here, we’ve gotten nowhere this whole hour.”

It was now peak season for fourth- and fifth-year boys to chase after the younger boys who had pale white cheeks and sleek frames. All of the younger boys secretly dreaded the overnight class trip that drew nearer with each passing day.

Yasura did not concern himself with such matters, for his was a path that belonged to him alone. In order to keep his path undisturbed, he kept his true thoughts quiet at school.

It was the last day of the nearly weeklong stretch of final examinations. Summer break dangled just before the students’ eyes.

His body soaked in sweat and drained of all life, Yasura left for home. Leaving the schoolyard, an unexpected cool breeze brushed his cheek. Houses stood quietly on one side of the road, on the other side were tea fields. The bright noon sun shone glistening on the white sand.

A large, colorful beetle flew out in front of him. Keeping just two or three paces ahead, it flew, then stopped, then flew again, as if to lead the way.

He suddenly felt someone’s breath on the nape of his neck. All at once, Yasura was caught in the flushed embrace of a body that seemed on the verge of igniting.

Gasping, he felt sweat stream down the lines of his back like a waterfall.

It was a boy in fifth year, about eighteen or nineteen, with a somewhat swarthy and stern look about him, and bristly black hair. He was known as a tennis ace and a model student.

“Say, Uruma. Why don’t you come round my place on your way home. Come on, there’s something I need to let you in on. It’s just there. What’s the matter—if you don’t want to then come meet me at old Aizendō,” he said.

His voice had a wild edge to it, but it also had a certain ring of intimacy that seemed to somehow draw one in, and quiver.

Yasura could not harden his heart against that voice.

Crunching through old fallen leaves of the birches and oaks, Yasura climbed up to the base of the two-storied Tahōdō, Okazawa fluttering along behind him. Yasura drifted into a sinking, hopeless frame of mind. Feeling the reddened eyes of Okazawa staring at his forehead when they faced each other, he dropped his eyes.

“Uruma! Why’s your house so far? My place isn’t two hundred yards from here. Since you’ve already come this far, there’s no reason for you to go home and then come back again.”

This boy Okazawa had tailed him on purpose. Yasura merely slumped.

“So, the thing I needed to talk to you about: you know Kurokawa in our class, right? Well, he’s got it out for you. Has had for some time. But then what did that Umeno try to do to you lately? Well, so—right, do you recall two weeks ago, we had that tennis match? And when it was down to just the players, as usual, Makioka and that damned Umeno were trying to start a fight over you. So naturally I got between them, saying that this was not something that could be settled by arguing—and that whichever makes it first will have bragging rights. I told them it’s got to be a real competition between them. When I think about it now, I really did a rotten thing to you there. Really, you never quite know what those two imbeciles might try and now with exams coming up I kept thinking I had to tell you, I just had to tell you, but then here it is today already, and I thought they might set to you once the exams are through. So that’s why I realized that I needed to let you know right away, today, and that’s why I followed you. People are starting to say some rather strange things about me, you know. Ever since all that happened, they’ve started to talk about how ‘that damned Okazawa is crazy over Uruma.’”

He added this last part as if it were particularly odious to him.

In that moment, however, the expression on Okazawa’s face betrayed his words, and Yasura’s stolen glance showed him this.

His hot breath, his bloodshot eyes, the sensation of his close, squeezing presence. Yasura looked carefully around him.

Not a soul passed by the midday forest.

“I’ll be going now, Okazawa. Thank you. I’ll be as careful as I can. Good-bye.”

In a dream-like state, he stepped out of the shadow of the pagoda.

“Uruma—will you read this? Just read it, and if you’re moved to write back, then please do.” Yasura could not look the other boy in the face.

After setting off in a clumsy run to the front gate, Yasura leaned on the trunk of a mast-straight tree, and as he looked back at the lonesome hunched shoulders of the boy who had watched him go, he felt a sadness for that boy well up within him.

TWO

Several times, as Yasura was about to open the letter the upperclassman had just handed to him, he hesitated. His mind was in turmoil, racked by a desolate melancholy mixed with abundant expectations of the pleasure about to be his. He stopped at the threshold of his house, feeling as though he were bringing home some stolen goods. Guilt and paranoia made him wary of eyes that he imagined were fixed on him from every dark corner in the house. He climbed steadily up to the second floor of the storehouse. In the dim light that came through the screen door, his eyes followed the hurried scrawl across the pages.

Once again in this state of mind he had no name for, he stood staring for a while. The large leaves of the phoenix tree in front of the screen door, gave off a gloomy light as the sun shone through them.

Pulling the shutter to, he descended the dark ladder.

THREE

Giving in to the lethargic state of mind in which he had found himself since April or May, Yasura did not do a single thing all day, starting first thing every morning. Loathing the light and seeking a space with less of it, he even moved his desk. Then, once the sun had set, like a bat he would go out to the front of the shop. There under the electric light, he would catch every boy he could of those visiting the shop, and talk to him in a loud and interested-sounding voice.

On the night people said was to be the hottest of the summer, he was sitting there on the stoop at the side of the shop, legs dangling off the edge, watching the people in the streets.

Though inside the house it had already been dark for an hour, outside the sun had yet to set completely. In the west, the pale white of the sky brought to mind the frozen skies of February.

“Yasu. Yasu.”

It was his aunt calling him from inside the house.

“Heard there’ll be some *jōruri* on down at Miya’s place tonight. Why don’t you go?”¹¹

“Amateurs?”

“Amateurs.”

“Must be Mura Dayū. Seems like a hassle on such a hot night.”

“Don’t you be like that, now. I’m telling you because I wanted you to go see it. It’s no Mura Dayū. It’s Kihō and Kijaku and the rest. Still don’t want to go? Fine, then you can stay here and look after the shop proper.”

Having put on a yukata that seemed starchy and stiffly angular for nighttime, his aunt

¹¹ *Jōruri* is a type of dramatic narrative performance, often put on in conjunction with *bunraku* puppets. Here no puppets are mentioned, so this likely does not involve that element. The art form was created and matured in the Kyoto and Osaka areas in the Edo period, but was still very active in the time of this story..

went out, taking the serving girl along with her.

“Hold on there, now. I’m coming.”

“Well, we have to go now—you come along whenever you can.”

Yasura jumped into his geta and took off. He was wearing only a thin, short-sleeved cotton kimono that barely went past his knees.

Enveloped in the stifling sweat and steam of all those gathered under the poor, sluggish light of the lamps, everyone worked their fans in the same way.

At one end of the place, they laid out the cushions they had had the serving girl bring.

Each successive act brought one star after another out in front of the audience. Yasura’s ears rapidly cleared, leaving him able to focus as soon as the young man, called *Rikishi*, gently began to tell his story in his soft, manly voice.

The story was the Juraku-machi act of one of those Ume no Yoshibei the Swindler stories, from something called *The Hidden Well of Nonaka*.¹² This was the first time Yasura had seen this play. In it, Chōkichi’s sister tips him off to the fact that Yoshibei had begun to steal money from his master; Yasura intuitively began to feel sad as Chōkichi’s guileless plotting goes on falling apart. When it came to the part where Chōkichi goes off to boil the water, Yasura watched his back intently as he left toward the kitchen until it pained his heart.

Chōkichi was eventually killed by his brother-in-law. The moment it finally happened, Yasura let out a breath of relief, feeling somehow as though he had also accomplished something necessary.

Chōkichi’s feelings at the moment that the sword came down on him entered and melded with Yasura’s own heart.

When the scene came where Chōkichi searches for somewhere to die and looks down into the well in the meadow, a feeling like being doused with water passed through Yasura’s head.

“My lands, he’s a handsome young lad from one of those good southern households. Heavens, he is good. He’ll be the one to take over after Kihō. None of those *bunraku* and

¹²*The Hidden Well of Nonaka* (*Azanezome nonaka no komori ido*—glossed in ST as *kakurei*) is a *jōruri* text dating from the Edo period. A later version can be found in ***

horie young'uns can tell a story like that!"

Surrounded by such noisy praise, Yasura found himself alone, peering at his own reflection in the bottom of that well in the meadow.

Only two old, white-haired story-tellers told abbreviated versions of stories, and then the one they called Kihō took the stage. He told *Horikawa* in voice as fresh and endearing as it was frank.¹³

Some men shouted things like, "Not even Koshiji can top him!"

Finally, everyone was shouting something.

"The leading man of Suō-machi!"

"The best in Japan!"

"The *bunraku* champ!"

Met with praise like this, Kihō, the headliner that night, launched into *Terakoya*.¹⁴ Yojūrō and Oshun, and even Genzō and Matsuō and the rest, all elicited the feeling of fragile, futile, tears.

Yasura left the venue holding his heart as though it might shatter at any moment. The long thin clouds stretched out straight and up in front of the misty early summer moon.

Though he always fell into a deep sleep right after he went into his room at night, on this night he had many dreams.

¹³*Horikawa* is short for *Horikawa nami no tsudzumi*, a *jōruri* piece by Chikamatsu Monzaemon first performed in 1707.

¹⁴*Terakoya* was a form of public education that became widespread in the early Edo period, but here refers to the fourth act of *Sugawara denju tenarai kagami* (first performed in Ōsaka in 1746) based on legends of Sugawara no Michizane, as well as Chikamatsu Monzaemon's play *Tenjinki*.

FOUR

To Yasura's eyes, still sticky with sweat from sleeping, the wet colors of the morning glories were cool and refreshing.

Because today was the day the commencement ceremony was to be held at his school, Yasura left the house in great haste. As he stepped onto the road that went up and in front of Aizendō, he realized abruptly what the day would mean.

So no the day had come. It was not that he had forgotten about Okazawa and his feelings, but it had not had any intention of writing a response to the letter he had received. And yet, he thought of that forlorn expression overtaking that manly countenance, as though seeking pity.

Treading spring grasses in the marshes made of melted snow, wrapping his unquiet thoughts beneath them, Yasura was able to enjoy a sunkenly relaxed state of mind until he all at once snapped out of his dream-like state and suddenly saw that he was doomed. He had truly no purpose or direction at all concerning what he should do.

Breathing heavily between the trees, he dragged his listless feet and sank into his thoughts.

What came to his mind was a verse he had seen somewhere, that went: "Are you keeping your thoughts to yourself then, toad?"¹⁵ Yasura tore a sheet from his notebook and scrawled this across it in purple pencil.

¹⁵A haiku by Suganuma Kyokusui (1659-1717). This is perhaps the most well-known by this poet.

FIVE

Swimming started. Yasura took the road there at high noon, walking the entire three and a half miles to the Ōkawa River.

His face darkened with exposure to the sun with each passing day. The lukewarm water was always slightly turbid. Directly after a rain it would flow yellow. Although he had come every day throughout the summers of his second and third years, his body still wouldn't even consider floating. He had spent three summers practicing using his legs to tread water, grasping the bamboo poles stuck in the riverbed.

The water at times rippled a disgusting silver color and then dove below Yasura's armpits, flowing and flowing. He would, at other times, release his hands from the bamboo and try sinking to the bottom of the river. When he stood up again, however, he would find that the water came to only his chest.

There were also times when he would narrow his eyes and stand stock-still to feel the intimate lapping of the thick, slow-moving water under an inflamed sky.

He dove under the rope, and then set out at a sprint to where the others were doing a hundred-meter swim. After three or four steps he found that the river became suddenly much deeper. When he pulled back in surprise the water undulated deeply and flowed into the treacherous depth at his feet as though he were being scooped downward. At last he reached the edge, and clinging to the border rope, breathed a sigh of relief.

Then, ten or fifteen yards from him, Yasura detected a strange motion in the surface of the water. As he watched, that motion shot toward him like an arrow leaving a bowstring.

He stood cowering. The movement in the water came to a stop directly in front of him, and at that same moment he felt tepid palms grab hold of his feet. A head appeared slowly from the surface of the water, which had just then turned to foam. It was Okazawa.

Okazawa looked around and behind him, and then used his hands to pull hard. His waist no longer fully free, the rope stayed slack, trailing loosely a foot or two behind him. The riverbed there dropped off sharply. Yasura's body, being noisily upset in its position, was tightly cradled in Okazawa's strong, masculine arms. He felt the well-developed muscles of Okazawa's chest against his back. All of a sudden, he heard the loud sound of lips on his cheek.

Drifting over to a shallower part of the river, he let out a tortured breath. He felt as though his rampant pulse might tear his heart apart.

"Hm? I'd no thought to hurt you. Try to control yourself. Thought you were a goner. That really was close," Okazawa said in a hushed voice.

"And what you wrote back the day before yesterday—I really couldn't get a word of it. I worked at it for two days, but then I know nothing about literature."

Just at that moment, the bell that meant it was time to get back on dry land rang out noisily across the surface of the water.

To reduce the boredom of the road, just about every block, he circled once around the intersection. Today he felt that he had much he needed to think about, so he broke away from his usual crew of friends and walked slumped under the sun high above, which seemed to scorch the glistening sweat that seeped from his fresh and untroubled skin. Right now his heart was filled with soft utterances and velvety sensations.

Okazawa's nearness to him and his daring behavior in front of so many others made Yasura tremble. Yasura felt like giving himself a sound thrashing for not being able to escape from a boy like that, even if only for a moment.

It was just as he had said himself. Okazawa knew nothing of literature. Still, everyone said that he was a good student. Nevertheless, because of what he got up to with Makioka, Umeno, and others like them, Yasura couldn't help but feel that somewhere in Okazawa's nature, deep in his heart, he was something of a brute. Since he was a child, Yasura had always had certain prejudices about other people. He had never understood the reasons behind those, but for the first time today, it occurred to him: he was most attracted to

people with a certain sophistication and delicacy of heart. Yasura felt that this was lacking in Okazawa. But then why was he so taken with him in spite of that? When he examined the depths of his own heart, which he had thought beautiful, he started to believe that such sordid episodes, which he had previously known nothing of, had begun to soil it. This stirred everything inside of him around until he was dizzy.

Every time he heard Okazawa's name, a spasm that recalled that strange sensation of excitement he once felt ran through the base of his jaw.

He thought his heart would spill over. Everything pure and good in the world and everything vile and depraved in the world swirled like fire inside his small head. Lifting his eyes, he saw the wild blue of the clear and gaping sky threatening to suck him in, and the light of the setting sun swayed gently.

He grew dizzy.

"Watch out!"

A cart struck his elbow with terrible force, catching him off guard, and then passed him by.

The awnings of the buildings that lined the narrow street were pulled across to one another, creating a rather effective makeshift shade for a number of blocks.

He came to the front of the large Hachiman shrine surrounded by houses. Feeling a desire to pray, he stood in front of the shrine, gathered his thoughts, and bowed his head. And yet, he had no idea for what he should pray.

The desolate, sultry days continued.

The road, freshly watered and turned, sent up waves of heat like a mirage, and sun glittered on the broad, copper-red back of a fisherman carrying the fish caught in the first part of the day to market. Along the rows of houses, here and there one could see the flowerpots lined up with pride where large morning glories bloomed each morning.

Way out where the road was entirely deserted, he could hear people dressed in white,

people on the Shikoku pilgrimage,¹⁶ filling a cup with cold barley tea from a jug set out next to the lattice of an old house, draining it, and filling it up again, here and there clucking their tongues at the heat. He thought he heard the rumbling of a cart coming to pick up beef from the slaughterhouse set back from the road. Then indeed the heavy cart passed him by with a terrific shaking of the ground. A thin sun shade of white and pale yellow stripes fluttered now and then as if it had just remembered the wind.

Yasura had learned something of the negative effects that naps could have while he was in elementary school. It had left a deep impression in his mind, and now, he was able to think about the practice of napping as having a moral dimension.

His late father had had the custom of going into the storehouse after finishing his noontime meal, and sleeping through the day on a rattan chair there. Then, after four, once the sun had fallen to a degree, he came out of the storehouse. Yasura and his older brother quarreled on a practically daily basis. Him being a crybaby and his brother being mean, he cried plenty. When Yasura would let out a wail, the lacquered door would slide open and their father would appear before the boys. After standing and glaring at the two brothers from inside the door, he would back into the house after his nap had been disturbed. On such days they could be certain that he was in a bad temper. Even now when he thought of him at times like that, he couldn't help but recall his father's bloodshot eyes.

His mother was, in comparison to the average person, corpulent in the extreme. When the radiant, scorching afternoon sun came around, she would have Yasura mind the shop, and saying, "All right, I've had it," she would run back into the private part of the house and go to sleep. After lying down for no more than twenty minutes, she would come back out looking fully rested.

His father's naps transcended Yasura's moral critique. His father was a scholar who had amassed piles of books from Chinese people with difficult names like Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming.¹⁷ His mother had gone to a women's college, and the two of them together wore

¹⁶*

¹⁷Neo-confucian thinkers that had been influential in Japan since the late Tokugawa period.

their educations beautifully. Owing to his father's strict discipline, Yasura never at any time bared his shoulders to wipe his sweat and cool off.

Yasura was leaning against the register at the store, staring into the street out front, his eyes gleaming as if dazzled.

“Well hello, little one. Haven't you gotten big!”

Her Kyoto accent sounded smooth and fluid to his dozing ears. Lifting his face, he saw that it was the woman who had been his nanny, who had left for Kyoto to be married some four or five years ago. Flustered and confused, the right words did not come to his lips.

“Where is everyone else?”

Before she finished saying it, she had made her way through the shop to the entrance to the house.¹⁸ Eagerly he yelled, “Auntie from Saikyō is here!”¹⁹

From the interior, he could hear the sound of his nanny's voice as she talked excitedly for a while, the laughter that came to him somehow tangible.

“Well I wondered what you would say, ma'am. I'm telling you, there is nobody out there had worse luck than me. After all this worrying, I'll end up getting it in my blood vessels and my lungs and I'm sure I'll die. And now, my boy, you tell me that you are already in your third year of junior high? Oh, time just rushes by!” He shut his eyes and listened to her speak.

She told Yasura presently how his nanny's family was among the oldest in Kawachi; she told him stories of the depths of feeling of the great lover Narihira,²⁰ which he had heard many times, and the story of Shuntokumaru's karmic retribution, and other stories one after the other came rushing back to him, making him feel as though he were an infant folded into her warm bosom, pawing her soft breasts again.

Just when he began to feel that way, he suddenly saw the cavernous, empty house in front

¹⁸In typical home-industry style, the main entrance to the private residence is accessed through the shop.

¹⁹This word used in the Kansai region refers to Kyōto, the western capital (relative to Tōkyō) after Tōkyō became the capital city.

²⁰Probably referring to a *waka* poem by Ariwara no Narihira (825-880), featured in the *Ogura Hyakunin Isshū*, originally taken from the *Gosenshū* (Vol. 11, Love poems 3, 776)

of him. Its tall beams shone black with soot. He could clearly see the yellowed charm on one of the rafters. He examined it, concluding that it must be to stop fires. Directly above that raised frame along the floor near the entrance and looking down over the spacious room, was a lowered floor of six mats' area, with a large hearth in the middle of the seats.

In the next room, with no shōji or fusuma, a dim light spilled in from the horizontal window. On the front wall of that room was a tall Buddhist altar. At first when he got there, he was severely excited, but once he had calmed down, he saw that there was a woman lying on her side with her back to him, her hair done in a new style called “new butterflies.” Yasura thought that it was his nanny. A white-haired old woman spun thread on the other side of the hearth. Yasura felt a great deal of interest in her as the woman who had been the nanny to his nanny. In her small face browned by the sun, her eyes were wide open and her mouth was drawn up tight. She worked the spinning wheel gently without saying a thing to Yasura. Her *asagi*²¹ kimono pulled down to free one shoulder, he could see her loose, wrinkled skin. Her reticence allowed Yasura to reach a relaxed state of mind in her presence. His legs folded under him with his knees tidily arranged, he began to doze.

The old woman was absorbed in the creaking wheel she was spinning. From time to time she took up her scissors and snapped them across the thread. His nanny didn't get up, even after he had waited quite a long time. A feeling like being left alone on some deserted island welled up in him. First twenty minutes, then thirty, and then forty passed in this manner. The old woman raised her eyes from time to time to glance at him. This caught him off guard every time it happened. Then he became aware that he could hear the distant crowing of a cock. He could tell by what he saw when he arrived at her house that there were no other houses near within half a block of it. It reminded him of the stage in one of the cheap productions that his nanny had taken him to over at Sennichimae. It was set, after all, in a house in the middle of an open field like this one, where an elderly woman lived. A dashing young samurai and a beautiful woman come seeking lodging for a night. Then

²¹A type of pale blue. <http://www.colordic.org/colors/sample/2093.html>

the samurai suddenly remembers something he had forgotten completely, so he leaves the woman and heads intently down the *hanamichi*.²² The young woman is pregnant. After a short while, the old woman who had led them inside reappears and begins sharpening a large kitchen cleaver on a grindstone. At last, as the old woman grips the sharpened knife in one hand and peers into the interior room with a grin, cat ears appear on the top of her grey head.

The moment that the old woman dashes into the other room, a cry rings out, and the young woman comes running out, hair flailing, her *juban*²³ halfway pulled off, leaving a thick trail of blood. The old woman comes out after her, pulling at her obi. The obi unwinds, spinning the young woman. Gravely injured, the young woman collapses where she stands. The old woman bends to one knee at the younger woman's side, and begins slashing at her belly. The young woman's limbs twitch a few times. A smile festers on the old woman's face as she pulls the baby, covered in blood, from its mother's body. He could see it all happening so vividly.

There was a ferocious fire burning in the hearth. The ends of thick fire tongs jutted out of the ash pile. His nanny was still sleeping, curled up like the murdered woman. The old woman spun her thread as before, her hands never stopping. The handful of hairs that stuck forlornly out of her head reminded him of cat ears. One after another, the stories of Kurodzuka, the kaidan of Hitotsuya, and stories like Arima and Nabeshima that made all of the hair on his body stand on end floated through his mind.²⁴ He tried closing his eyes. From time to time he timidly peeked through his eyelids to look at the old woman. He realized that at any moment now she could come tearing after him, which made his heart beat faster. Why wouldn't his nanny get up? He felt sure that by the time she had gotten

²²Part of a noh stage similar a catwalk, extending into the audience area.

²³Quilted winter kimono.

²⁴*Note on page 302 of Iwanami 2010: Stories with structures derived from the basic narrative of fatigued travelers seeking a nights lodging at a house standing by itself on an open plain, leading to violence against the travelers by the owner of the house (an old woman/female demon). ... Both Arima and Nabeshima are horror stories featuring monstrous or shape-shifting cats.

thirty more minutes of rest, he would be reduced to nothing but bones. Real tears welled up in his eyes. He listened with his entire being in order to make sure he didn't miss any of the old woman's movements. Whenever he raised his eyes, they met squarely with those of the old woman, giving him a chill. Yasura's fear mounted. Unable to stand being in the room any longer, he began to consider his options for escape.

Just outside the doors, which were open to the width of the room, a scarlet flower trembled.

And yet he couldn't help but see her claws sinking into his back just the instant that he tried to leave that place. Even for his youth, as if to appeal to any shred of sympathy she might have, he worked to be as still and pitiful as he could manage, and his figure as he sat there idly was remarkable. He felt that sitting in such a way was the only hope he had. A brittle cold as if he had embraced a block of ice came over him and stayed there for more than an hour.

When at long last the nanny spread her arms and legs out as far as they would go and rose up, Yasura's terror had already reached its climax. As soon as he began to relax, the sadness that he had been holding inside came spilling forth at once, and he began to sob. His nanny came running over to him in surprise.

It was the year just before his nanny went to Kyōto to get married. He had once gone back with her overnight to her hometown. His memory of that hectic time was as fresh as if everything had happened just yesterday.

"You just take it easy this evening, now, and then you can take Yasu for a nice stroll on the Dōtonbori and the Sennichimae and all that.²⁵ I'll bet you'd like to see one of those plays at Fukuen that you liked so much!" He heard his mother's voice.

"What a way to be talked to! Don't be absurd. I'll have you know that I have not been to one play yet since moving up there. Everything since moving there has been an

²⁵Lively streets in Ōsaka that were centers for theaters, movie houses, and eateries.

abject tragedy in any case, and I never even make it down to Fourth Avenue,²⁶ we're left there working with all this dust from morning to night, and you know that my husband has trouble with his lungs. And on top of that my step son does nothing but get into trouble with the weavers, and he's only eighteen. I tell you he just chases those weaver girls around, no way to stop him.

Her voice was strong, but somber nevertheless.

"But you know, the world isn't exactly something that's meant to be enjoyed for its entertainment value," his aunt said as if in consolation.

"You said it. We come to this life only to suffer, and I think I'll suffer as much as I need to now to be saved in the next life. Lately when I have the time I often go pay a visit to Rokujō-san.²⁷ Early in the morning when I am standing there in the wide, silent expanse of its grounds, something really gets into me, and I start invoking the name of the Buddha without thinking or even knowing I'm doing it."

"That really does sound like something."

The voice of his grandmother, who should have been in her own room detached from the house, was also among them.

"You know—the head of the temple said the same thing. It's only after that point that you can get started. And you can't let that get away from you. You've got to strive in order to hang onto it, is what he says. Oh yes, had I told you that the year before last I took my vows there? Now they call me the nun Myōjun. Can you imagine, people actually calling me that like a real serious nun? Ah, now I've worn myself out jabbering on. I'd like a little hot water, please."

"I'll tell you we just barely made it with the one-year anniversary of my husband's death, things were so busy.²⁸ I was thinking you could perhaps write down his posthumous Buddhist name in the temple's death registry for me. Owing to him being such a man of learning, it's

²⁶*where the playhouses are?

²⁷*

²⁸*In terms of making proper offerings.

hard for me to even remember it.”

“It’s true, at the time it was just me and my sister here, and we didn’t have the first clue about what we should do. Even when the first forty-nine days of mourning were up and we had to send around gifts, there were some nights that even after the day was over, instead of shutting the store, the two of us sat there and stared at each other. We’d sit there all night. Didn’t we, sis?”

“We did, we did. That definitely happened. Back then I felt like even when I ate, it would just stick in my throat. You know I had simply no idea how I would go about raising five boys, I was just scared to death even thinking about it. I don’t know how many times I spent the night gnashing my teeth and crying in the bedroom. Oyana, you know, that was all because of our Oiku here staying on instead of going and getting married.”

His mother offered, “Why don’t you take off your jacket and come up into the house and tell us some stories from Kyoto.”

“Thank you kindly.” The old woman she had brought with her stood there. This was her nanny as a child.

Yasura was partly obscured by shadow on the other side of the glass door, staring at the front of the shop that stuck out into the street.

Clenching her eyelids tightly, his mother said, “Oh well even when he was seven or eight, whenever he would play with the kids and Osumi from along the river there, when they would come too close to him he would start yelling and carrying on about how they were ‘icky’ just like you did when you were a toddler, too. Are you ever going to start liking girls, little Yasu?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Yasura became angry, his face reddening. Then he went quietly up the stairs to the second floor. He went out onto the balcony that was now covered in dew, and wallowed in his wish to simply crawl into a hole and disappear.

SIX

When the summer break began, Yasura went to the school to water his garden only the first two days, and then could not even work up the ambition to go to work on it at all. At first, he would think of it every two or three days. He was able to see the plants drying out and getting nearer to death with every second, but finding himself at a complete loss, he merely fumed in his futon. The real issue, however, was that he couldn't bring himself to go to the school. After four or five days, he no longer felt concerned with it. But then, one morning, he saw a bracing vision in his mind of the way the dew glinted on the white sand with the grass grown long on the sports yard. All at once, he felt the desire to stand in the center of the still schoolyard, so he left the house before the main gate had even been opened. Just as he had pictured, two homeless dogs ran around the perfectly silent schoolyard. He went into a building to take out the gardening tools.

There was no sign of anyone in the living space attached to the shop. Water boiled insistently. The scent of brick clay imparted an indescribable nostalgia to the interior of the building. Looking around, he put his hands softly onto the floor of the corridor, and lying flat on his belly, breathed in scents he had never before known. He began to think that he was hearing a succession of sounds such as might accompany someone approaching from afar. Yasura stood up. He had only imagined the sounds. Nevertheless, he could feel that his face had turned red. After half an hour, he found himself standing idly again amid the dried up flowering plants in the garden.

A few streaks of green still clung to the stems among the leaves here and there. The strawflowers alone had retained their color, but they made a dry noise when his fingers touched them. Wretched feelings of shame and regret welled up in his mind. *These honest, hardworking flowers have all died and dried up while I was burning with filthy thoughts and*

desires. His beautiful, fragile heart withered and died with those flowers. He could see the distinct footprints of a youth leading a dissipated existence over the top of the brown and trampled plants.

His view grew clouded, and his eyelids were unable to contain them any longer. Tears splashed down onto the leaves of the flowers.

Yasura had been given a space on the second floor as his own room. This was little more than a storage space that had been tidied just enough to make room to put Yasura's desk there.

Not to mention there were bags of citrus peels, heartleaf, and other strong herbal ingredients piled up there to be sold in the shop, so that their fragrances penetrated the stillness of the place.²⁹

To one side of Yasura's desk stood his aunt's large vanity. The women of the house, consumed with the family business to the point that they had no time to bother excessively with their appearance, had left this mirror on the second floor. From time to time, however, his mother, for example, would come up to where the mirror was, holding her hair like a bird's nest in one hand, saying she was going out to pick something up. Loathing the sight of her dandruff flying, whenever this happened, Yasura would go out onto the balcony. When about ten minutes had passed and he felt it was likely that she had finished, he would come creeping warily back into the room. There were even times when Yasura, sitting and reading a book, would stare enchanted at his own face reflected in the mirror. Then he would hear someone come thumping up the stairs, and, flustered, Yasura would drop his eyes to the pages of his book, pretending to be reading any random line. The mirror reflected nearly his entire upper body. Even at night, the second-floor drawing room with its low ceiling and southern exposure was stuffy and humid.

Two of his older brothers had gone away to school, one to the northern provinces and the other down to Kyūshū, meaning that aside from Yasura and his younger brothers, twins

²⁹The family operates a drug store/apothecary, and a portion of the inventory is kept here.

who had just turned seven, there were no men in the house. This allowed Yasura to enjoy the same treatment a full-grown man might expect in his home. The serving girl readied the bath every day throughout the summer, and he always went in first. After him his aunt bathed, and then his mother.

Yasura had already been steeping in the bath for a short while, remaining almost motionless as he enjoyed the soft bathwater play against his skin. When he opened up the small vent for light, chilled air came rushing in as if to revive him.

From the space between the house and the storehouse, he could see the clear blue sky.

During that time Yasura's thoughts brushed against Okazawa. It appeared to him lately as though everything he thought and everything he did were somehow linked to Okazawa. Yasura felt that this was something to despise.

"Yasu, what *could* you be doing? Have you melted?"

When he heard his aunt call from the house Yasura recoiled, as if his sinful thoughts had been suspected. Making only a hurried reply, he flew out of the tub and up the stairs.

Long shafts of light from the summer sun shone down low from the propped-open windows, gently warming the fragrance of the tatami.

Sweat ran in beads across Yasura's skin. He opened the windows and the shōji. The leaves of the varnish tree shook, and then the wind blew in all at once. Looking behind him, he saw that he was there, reflected in the sloping mirror waving up and down. The sunlight shone right through his skin, smooth as marble. Lately he would spend time staring with feigned disinterest at his shoulders, which had started to become thicker and more muscular, and at the soft curves of his chest.

He raised his arms slightly and brought them together near the nape of his neck. Around his two slight arms snow plumply bundled. He felt his heart fill and stretch with curiosity, as though he had found something mysterious hidden within himself. Adjusting the mirror to face down onto himself, he struck a pose with one leg thrust straight out and the other inward. The curves of his ample midsection folded together a number of tense lines and ran

down to his calves. Facing backward, trying to see himself from behind over his shoulder, he struck a number of poses. Each one showed him the pulsing of his various muscles through his skin, and he was enraptured by the feeling of an indescribable pleasure.

All at once an emotion that he could neither describe as sad nor happy cut across his heart. Unmoving, (text missing)

His grandfather had come from a family in Yamato that had been involved in official religious ceremonies. He had died twenty years ago already, but his name still came up often where he had lived, and people spoke highly of him, saying he was broad-natured as the sea in spring, telling any number of anecdotes full of compassion.

Around that time his grandfather's brother was running the main house and all of the family's affairs in Yamato, and this brother's wife was a wicked person who often offended Yasura's great grandmother. Yasura's grandfather, growing worried, tried to work in various ways toward reconciliations between the two, but the hearts of the people in the now two families continued to grow apart. Then in the summer of Meiji 18,³⁰ there was an epidemic of cholera. Yasura's grandfather was a doctor, and so he spent his time doing everything he could for the people in the area, working through every night. By the time autumn arrived, the disease had lost much of its momentum. It was just then that the doctor himself, once he began to have some reprieve from the hardest part of his work, contracted the illness that ended up taking his life. This person, once so full of compassion, ended his life writhing in agony, throwing the covers off no matter how many times they were put back on him. When people heard that he had died, wailing could be heard ringing out from the eaves of the nearby Eta village.

Many people lamented his death, saying "Now that the doctor is dead, there won't be anyone to look after folks like us when we get sick."

When Yasura's grandfather died, Yasura's willful father took his place. Coming from a rural but respectable and relatively well-to-do family, his father, never one to bow down to

³⁰1885.

anyone, was not interested in troubling himself with the burdensome travails of socializing with his new adopted family.³¹ This led to him eventually fall completely out of contact with his own father's main house.

Meanwhile, on the other end, his father's aunt, his father's elder brother, and then his father's nephews all died, leaving few with blood ties to Yasura's grandfather. Then in the Uruma family, his father had succumbed to a heart attack three years before. This meant that on both sides, there were only women left, along with a number of children.

As soon as Yasura was old enough to understand what was going on around him, he had heard that he had such relatives in Yamato, and had wondered why he did not also get to go anywhere like other children did on holidays, and why no one came to visit them from his father's, be it Bon or New Year, or even a memorial day for someone in the family. Both his grandfather and his father had composed poetry, and had been rather well versed in the classics, so much so that the stories of past ages, Yamato, Nara, and more, began to excite him to no small degree, though Yasura himself knew nothing of them. In Asuka, in Takechi, Yamato province—that ancient country, that ancient home—lay his ancient family line, with its two thousand years of history. That was where Yasura's grandfather was from. When he thought about this, he became aware of his entire body ringing, spreading a mysterious power outward from the tips of his fingernails and the ends of his hair. Up until then he had never been allowed to take any kind of overnight trip by himself. Last year and the year before as well, during spring or late summer vacation he entreated his aunt and his mother, but they refused, saying it was too dangerous. This summer, however, he would finally be allowed to go. When he was asked where he would go, “To Yamato” was his unhesitating reply. Then they asked who he would go with, and that was when he knew he was trapped. Betraying nothing of this in his reply, however, he answered: “With Saitō.” He felt sweat seep outward from his armpits. Saitō was a boy he had known since elementary school, and now they also went to the same junior high. This was how he finally received reluctant

³¹Yasura's father has probably married into his wife's family.

permission for one night away from home. Yasura felt like he could float straight into the sky. He climbed the stairs to his room. After a short while, however, that pleasant feeling began to flag, as though caught on something, and he became more and more dissatisfied. He turned sad, wondering what had possessed him to lie. He could see his own face as he looked his aunt in the eye and said, “With Saitō.” No matter how he abused and reviled himself for having made his face into a mask of sincerity to deceive his aunt and look polite while he told her an obvious lie, it was not enough.

That was it. There was one, only one way that he could make up for the lie he had told: to be sure to compel Saitō to accompany him on this trip. As soon as he thought this, he felt as though all the tension left his shoulders at once.

He dashed the thousand yards over to Saitō’s.

“Is Itchan around?”

Saitō’s older sister, forming package after package of miso in bamboo skin packages as she talked with a customer, turned toward the house and said, “Itchan, Yasu is here to see you!”

“Oh yeah?”

Even though he was in the same year as Yasura, Saitō was taller than the average adult. At all times, he had snot down to his upper lip. Now and then he would make a stopped-up slurping sound. That’s the type of boy he was. Yasura pulled him just out into the front of the house and whispered to him to play along.

“I really would love to, but my mother’s so awful sick, they have my sister and all of us stay up and take care of her through every night.”

“So you really can’t go?”

“I do want to, but if I ask now everybody’ll get mad at me.”

“I see. Sure. In that case, I suppose I’ll have to go by myself.”

“I do wish I could go with you. Send me a postcard, will you?”

“You bet.”

Yasura wanted to cry.

“Uruma, I’ll bet you don’t have a map of Yamato, do you? Take this with you.”

After Yasura had walked no more than a hundred yards away, Saitō came chasing after him, and with those words handed him a map dingy from handling.

SEVEN

It had been a steamy, hot day since morning. Putting on his stark white, wide-brimmed straw hat, Yasura rushed to the train platform. Nevertheless, his mood was dark and gloomy. His mother and his aunt were satisfied, since he would be going with Saitō. Owing to the tremulous excitement in his heart, he had not slept a wink the night before.

Now and then clouds overtook the excitement and anticipation he felt about his first trip alone, which he had been holding so dearly. Once day broke, however, the thing that had kept him occupied with worry the whole night through seemed like nothing more than a dream. Then when he left the house, though, he ended up feeling trapped by an intractable anxiety. He was caught off guard by the realization that he might be heading towards some dreadful fate awaiting him as punishment for deceiving his mother and his aunt. The locomotive pulled through the meadow, trailing streaks of layered summer mist. At last he suddenly realized that he was now beyond the reach of his aunt, his mother, and all the rest, and finally got a taste of what it is to be at ease and have no obligations.

Not being with Saitō, he began to worry seriously that someone at home might find out that he had gone alone. He tried to envision various scenarios in which someone from Saitō's place and someone from his own house might encounter one another. This put him in a solitary, agitated state. He prayed silently that no such scenario would arise between today and when he would return tomorrow. He wondered if any god would answer such a sinful prayer. Regardless, he still asked that no one at home would find out.

After two hours, the train stopped at a station. Where the road ended at the edge of this country town, there was a large stone well spout, scattered with willow leaves. Next to it, a decorative canna stood withered. A red dragonfly flew dizzily through the low sky.

He came out on the bank of a dry river that was deep and wide. From the thickly grown

new bamboo, from time to time he heard the sound of vibrating wings.

The three Yamato mountains stood facing one another at some distance³² with Yasura standing between them. They seemed to command him to recall romantic competitions of the age of the gods. This spring he had gotten someone to buy him his first copy of *Man'yōshū*,³³ and in the beginning he only felt somewhat uncomfortable at the competition between the two poets Naka Oine and Ōkama, but now he had become more able to recognize the legitimacy of the feelings of the princes.³⁴

When he moved his eyes away, the lush green, rounded curves of Miminashiyama, the swaggering, masculine figure of Unebiyama's shoulders, and Kaguyama in the shape of a woman past her prime, stirred up an indescribable feeling of pathos within him.³⁵

The green fields extended far out from the completely silent meadow, and the sun burned slowly. From time to time the wind stirred dust up under the noontime sun. He came to a place where there was a large gutter for collecting rain. A large, old hackberry tree cast a wide shadow over it. Lately Yasura had begun to feel somehow that he was beginning to see the world so clearly that it was terrifying. Just then, he found himself enchanted by his own visions of a terrific power that grew and spread throughout dead grass now come to life, that power of life rushing through it like water swirling down all at once through a full rain gutter the moment it becomes unclogged.

The sun had burnt off the clouds, and the deep blue void stretched on forever.

He climbed down onto the gravelly bank of the river and urinated freely to his heart's content. The light shone directly on his white lower abdomen, making it shine. In that instant, he felt an extraordinary power well up within him.

He ran like mad over the riverbed in a short straight line.

³²*three yamato mountains

³³* The first imperially commissioned poetry collection, and the oldest collection of poetry written in Japanese (as opposed to Classical Chinese), finished in around 782. This most likely refers to *what poems?*. Yasura later recites (a version of) a poem from this same collection.

³⁴*.

³⁵*The names of the three mountains of Yamato above.

<i>saho kawa no</i>	I would they left
<i>kishi no tsukasa no</i>	the brush uncut
<i>kaya no nakarisone</i>	high on the Sahos banks
<i>aritsutsu mo</i>	so that in it
<i>kimi to futari ga</i>	we two can hide
<i>tachikakuru gane</i>	from people's prying eyes

He strained his voice to sing a *sedōka* with such force it seemed he would rip apart.³⁶ A little further down was an Eta village.³⁷ Looking at roof of the temple, which was large for the village, from where he stood on the stone bridge, he saw the hides of four or five dogs spread out on the rather wide riverbed. On the veranda of a small house that had been left open, a young man wearing only a *fundoshi* was sleeping. The veranda faced a thicket. In front of the house the level on a mortar hung its head in a lonesome-looking way.³⁸

Near the ruins of the Toyura Palace and the temple where the stone tablet is kept,³⁹ the rocks fell sharply, forming a natural promontory in one place. When he came to that area, water babbled as it ran over the rock. Under the promontory, there were two boys—one sixteen or seventeen, and the other perhaps eleven or twelve, catching little fish with a net-like basket.

³⁶This poem is based on a *sedōka* from the fourth volume of the *Man'yōshū* mentioned earlier. *Sedōka* is one of the least common forms found in the collection, longer than *tanka* and more open than *chōka*, but still features a 5-7-7-5-7-7 meter. This one has been modified by Yasura (apparently on purpose—it does not appear to be a “misremembering” as in other places). These are some of the older and poems in the *Man'yōshū*, regarded as folk-y, and can also be found in *Kojiki* and *Nihongi*, making it one of the oldest forms of poetry written down in Japanese that still exists today. The original poem goes: *saho kawa no / kishi no tsukasa no / shiba nakarisone / aritsutsu mo / haru shi kitaraba / tachikakuru gane*. Yasura's version rewrites the penultimate *ku* (*haru shi kitaraba*—because spring is now here) as *kimi to futari ga* (together with you).

³⁷This refers to a section of town or a completely separate community traditionally considered ritually unclean (originally due to occupational associations) that leads to discrimination against such communities up to the present day. Here this village seems to be something of a curiosity for Yasura.

³⁸**kara-usu*. A mortar, in the original modified by the adverbial phrase “as if it were lonely” (*samishisōni*).

³⁹A palace used by Empress Suiko, the third empress, who later governed as the regent when Prince Shōtoku was on the throne. <http://www.bell.jp/pancho/travel/taisiseki/miyadokoro/toyuranomiya.htm>.

Sensing that someone was standing up on the embankment, the bigger one looked up at him.

The edges of his hair, grown out to just under a centimeter, showed clear and pale on his round white face.

Lifting his cool eyes, he stared at Yasura.

Yasura felt as if he had been suspected in some way, and his face began to burn. He hurried away, feeling the eyes of the children watching him as he walked quickly.

The road followed the flow of a stream that cut across the lower part of the mountains.

He knew that he had seen that face somewhere before. It seemed like it must have been someone he had seen all the time, but lately had not seen for a while. He tried the face this way and that in his mind. And yet he felt that this was not a face he had ever seen before since he had been born. It was a face he had first seen in a past far more distant than that. Or could it be the effect of the eyes of that child dreaming wide awake? He wondered. When he realized where he was, he could see a small hill piled up in the middle of the fields about two hundred yards in the direction of the mountain. Looking at the map, he found that it was probably where his grandfather's shrine was. The village during nap time was completely still like the middle of the night. From somewhere came the smell of rice bran being roasted. Cedar sprigs gathered into a large *sakabayashi* hung from the eaves of one house.⁴⁰

He heard footsteps come running up behind him noisily. When he looked back he saw the smaller boy carrying a net running up behind the older boy, who had a fish basket on his shoulder. Both of the boys had their hems tucked up high in their belts, treading barefoot on the hot earth. The bigger of the two stared at Yasura as they passed him by.

The mountains he had seen earlier revealed a stone stairway that went some thirty steps up from the eastern end of the village. At the foot of the mountain stood a house surrounded

⁴⁰The spherical evergreen wreath known as a *sakabayashi* typically indicates that the building belongs to a brewer of sake.

by a crumbling white wall. He could just vaguely make out the surname, the same as the name of the village, written on the plate at the front gate. Yasura stepped cautiously over the threshold. He walked tensely across the stone floor between the gate and the entrance.

“Hello?”

When he was finally able to call this out, the feeling that his voice box might be of use to him led him to believe that the most critical part of his ordeal was over. Once he became calmer he was able to make out more of the house’s appearance. This feeling, however, was scarcely different from the vague feeling he had had before of what was to come. It didn’t seem that anyone would appear.

“Hello? Is anyone here?”

This time his voice came out with ease. He heard steps on a wooden floor from far away, and someone came.

“Who is it?”

A woman of some fifty years opened the badly-fitted shōji to reveal her face.

EIGHT

The imposing grand shrine that constantly dominated the classics was now an old shack in the middle of a field, leaning in a way that made one think of the end of the older Shintō ways. Behind it, the mountains connected to Tōnomine extended toward the south.⁴¹ The soft curves of the green mountains drifted across the meadow that shimmered with the heat of the sun, lying out to the side. He crouched down and closed his eyes in front of the shrine of his ancestral deity. As he was doing that, the mind of that deity melted warmly into his. *The things you do now are the same things that we have always done. None of those things can be deemed a sin before me.* He felt as if a voice were whispering to him that what he had to do was in fact right in front of his very eyes.

What he must do. But what could that be? He considered it as he went down the stone steps. Far below, he could see chickens scratching in the yard of the house where his grandfather was raised. He could see it as clearly as if he might grasp it in his hand. That's it, he realized. It occurred to him that he must restore the ties between the two ends of his family, which had been growing farther apart, to what they had formerly been. He ran swiftly down the steps. When he arrived once again in front of the gate, Yasura froze. The old woman who had appeared before must be his aunt. Why didn't he just tell her who he was then? He couldn't help regretting that when she asked where he came from, he had said Ōsaka and left it at that, only to receive a blessing and run away. What could he possibly say at this point to her to get her to let him in? And who knows what terrifying sorts of people might be there in addition to the first old woman he had seen. Just imagining what it might be like to have a conversation with and explain himself to people like these, people he had never met before, was agony for him.

⁴¹*the shrine/shintō, Tōnomine.

Hearing the patter of someone come running out, he pulled back in surprise. After walking about half a block, he looked back and saw that the bigger boy from before had his eyes fixed on Yasura as he went.

When he came out of the village to the south side and went across the fields, he found a temple called Ango-in. Yasura peered at what was behind the lattice. A mosquito flew at him from out of the darkness and brushed against his eyelashes. His eyes gradually grew accustomed to the darkness, and he began to be able to see the appearance of the inside of the hall little by little. Only the eyes of the large, jet-black Buddha glinted with a golden light. The egg-shaped stone marker of Soga no Iruka's grave stood on the built-up division between tobacco fields. He looked around himself, in front and behind. Then he kicked his legs up high. His *Satsuma* geta made a thick wooden sound.⁴² The sun shone red, and the earth looked as if it were withering yellow. He could see frayed and tangled-looking bamboo thickets here and there. The few small shacks that stood in the meadow seemed about to collapse, dizzy with exhaustion. He came to the river. On the riverbank the green grasses had fallen over and the bindweed flowers bloomed faintly white.

After visiting Tachibanadera and Okadera,⁴³ Yasura climbed up toward Tōnomine. His back dripped sweat.

The voices of the *aburasemi* fell quiet in the ends of the tree branches, and the *higurashi* began with their cries like striking a bell.⁴⁴

“How does one get to Hase from here?”

He asked an old monk standing in a grove of cedars, the sun shining fairly slanted through it.

“Take the main road down for five hundred yards to get to a place called Kurahashi, and then from there you'll want to cross over to a village called Ossaka. The sun will set before you get there unless you really get a move on.”

⁴²These geta are rounded and probably lower to the ground than most.

⁴³Two temples.

⁴⁴*Aburasemi* and *higurashi* are two types of cicadas with distinct calls.

When he left for Ossaka it was twilight, and people's faces became less distinct. The last light of the sun hit some peak he did not know the name of, and the children of the village were throwing stones and chasing each other. Purple smoke from a fire for the bath rose from one house. The smell of green wood burning reminded him painfully of the loneliness of his journey. An hour later, when he arrived at Hase, the sun had already sunk below the horizon. A number of times he went up and down the street where the eaves of the inns stood in a row. At long last, he took the plunge and went into one of them. It made him sweat to go into one of these in a town so deep in the mountains. He left the room full of the odor of oil smoke and climbed up toward the main hall of Hasedera.⁴⁵ The long corridor leading up to it wound and wound up the steep incline. When he got to the stage, the misty moon dropped its light hazily on its floorboards. From the time he had come up the mountain until he had arrived at where he was now, he hadn't met a single person. Going over to lean on the railing, he looked down over the town. No sound at all could be heard from the town, where many houses were still awake. He closed his eyes and soon found himself enraptured.

He was experiencing feelings much like those a woman coming to stay at this temple on a pilgrimage from the Heian court would have experienced. When he opened his eyes just slightly, he saw that the moon had come out from behind the clouds, vividly illuminating the folds in the side of the mountains. The sound of his geta on the floorboards echoed across the peaks and valleys. The night quietly grew late. Round pillars stood here and there, creating dim corners. Yasura walked reverently around the hall without making a sound. He circled around it once and returned to the stage. Looking back, he saw a white figure glide toward the hall's heavy lattice shutters. Yasura fixed his eyes on it and did not move a muscle. Cautiously, Yasura drew closer. The outline of the white figure melted away and disappeared like a dream. On the mountain to the back of the temple a shrill bird cried.

The road gradually climbed higher and higher. Beneath him he could see the mountains, the rivers, and the forests, all sleeping. The sun shone brightly. The morning was quiet—not

⁴⁵A temple at Hase associated with bodhisattva Kannon.

a single insect stirred. At the end of the road far to the south behind the mountain, he continued up a steep slope until he came to a flat area where he could see another steep slope up ahead. There were various small groves and stands of trees on either side of the slope. Where the trees were thinner he could see through to a small mound. As he stepped up onto that mound, he froze where he stood. His hair stood on end as he broke out in a cold sweat. It was a snake. He felt fear surge up within himself. In the next instant, however, his calm had returned to him. Yasura fixed his eyes directly on the snake. The thin pink cord was stretched out there atop the grass. His heart was still racing. He stood uneasily and watched the long, thin, pink cord flow peacefully into a dewy clump of overgrown grass. His eyes burned with hatred for it.

The crickets began to cry, and the weather turned ill-tempered as it had done the day before. The path divided into two. One went up to the pines above the far-off tail of the mountain. The other went straight down to the dwellings that could be seen at the foot of the mountain. Looking around, Yasura saw that just ahead a bit, there was a shack in the middle of the mikan orchards. He walked cautiously toward it. Peeking inside the raised shutter, what he saw startled him enough to knock him back two or three steps. From within the shack, a sturdy-looking man of about twenty was looking back at him with a lewd grin filling his dull-looking countenance, crawling toward the door on his hands and knees as though surprised.

Time and again Yasura looked behind him. He even crouched down and tried to prick up his ears. He couldn't hear the sound of anyone in the depths of this cypress forest. When he closed his eyes, he could see vividly the ruddy pink snake tangled round the naked arms and thighs of the man keeping watch over the mountain.

When the afternoon grew later, he found himself standing at the entrance of the grounds of the Miwa shrine, where a huge cedar cast its shadow down over the burning white sand. The wind from the top of the mountain blew down from the peak that he had just come over.

He traveled along the far-reaching paths through the fields, as he ruminated on the love

story of Odamaki-dzuka Sugisakaya. Just about the time the lights began to be lit, he took his exhausted body over toward a bench near a railway station. Twilight hung blue. All of a sudden a young man walked up beside him.

“You come from Ōsaka?”

“Yes.”

“Whereabouts?”

“The south.”

“You go to school?”

“Kudara Middle School.”

“You know somebody named Atsumi there at your school?”

Atsumi, Atsumi... he felt as though he were being dragged to waking from the depths of a deep sleep.

“Atsumi, yes, there’s an Atsumi.”

“You know him?”

“We’re in the same class.”

“Well that’s something—truth is, he’s a relative of mine. A cousin. We haven’t seen each other for a long time, though. Can I ask what year you’re in?”

“Third.”

This started to give him a choking feeling.

“You still got a little time. How bout we step out? It’s so hot I can’t stand it in here.”

The young man cut across the middle of the field and continued out toward the bank he could see fifty yards out in front of him. The moon came fluttering up. The stream, thinner from the dryness of summer, flowed past the dry ground he stood on, only a yard or so across. The bush clover bloomed subtly, and the two were enveloped in its exciting fragrance. The young man sat down on the dry riverbed.

“Oh, the cicadas! You know that one? It’s called an *umaoui*. And then that one coming

from way over there—that’s a *matsumushi*. Well then, there’s a *suzumushi*, too!⁴⁶ Boy, don’t they sound nice? You try bringing a little lantern out here where they are—that’s really something to see. They all jump right onto it!”

Yasura thought he needed to try to make some kind of response. The more he thought about it, though, the more his chest tightened up, and he couldn’t get a single word out. When he heard the name Atsumi, he had felt a strange quaking in his heart. The fact that he had met Atsumi’s older cousin in a place like this brought an indescribable feeling into his heart.

“I’m going to the First Higher School,⁴⁷ but you know I haven’t seen him for three years already. I’ll bet he’s grown a lot, right? How’s he doing with his grades?”

“Seems he does all right. He always makes the honor roll.”

The bush clover swayed, glimmering in the tender light of the moon, and to his eyes in the dark somehow resembled Atsumi’s face.

The young man took a watch out of his obi. The glint of it penetrated his eyes in the nighttime fog.

“Let’s go on back. The train for Nara will be here in no time. And if you see Atsumi, you tell him that studying is important, but that he needs to make sure to get some exercise, too. You tell him that Yanagita in Tamba said that.”

The train came. The young man came to the window and said “Farewell, then!” and then he walked out, dragging his walking stick along the platform.

The young man had an angular, diamond-shaped face.

When he returned home, it was as if nothing had happened. His aunt, mother, and everyone else seemed to want to hear stories from his trip. They pressed him with questions about how was Tōnomine and was Hase nice and so on, making him feel as if he were being examined in great detail. Thinking that some question about Saitō would arise at any

⁴⁶Again distinguishing between different types of cicadas by their calls.

⁴⁷A school established in Tōkyō in 1874, meant to educate the future elite of the new Meiji state. Originally a foreign language school.

moment, he felt cold and rubbed his chest like he had nothing to say.

“We were really worried about you, though, you know how you’re so careless all the time, and you took off to visit those shrines.” Thinking he had at last perhaps found a way out, he began talking about visiting his father’s family’s shrine, detailing everything from the completely dilapidated condition of the shrine to the appearance of his father’s family home, talking so much that it seemed odd even to him.

“Right, I almost forgot—I brought back a charm.”

He brought it out of his bag and handed it to his aunt.

That night, all alone in the large mosquito net, he lay still, but irritable. He could still see the pink snake, softly glinting as it slithered through the dewy fields of grass right in front of him. He fanned himself as if he had just remembered the existence of his fan, but that did not stop sweat from soaking his pajamas. He crawled out of the mosquito net and tried sitting in a chair on one end of the veranda. He heard the night shift pounding beans in the mortar at the tofu maker next door. The wind began to howl. Feeling rather refreshed, he rolled into his bedding on the floor. He put the comforter over his head, and shut his eyes tight underneath it. Full of steam under the covers, he sucked his own upper arms, staying perfectly still as though he were coagulating. Enveloped in this steamy, sweaty warm air, he fell into a deep sleep.

NINE

Because in this town they held Tanabata and Urabon celebrations according to the old lunar calendar, the Milky Way flowed white across the sky.⁴⁸ When the sun went down, he would come out onto the balcony carrying his bedding nearly every day. He would lie on his back to sleep and count each of the stars born in the blue sky above—it made him feel like flying away just like that.

“Well my boy, the balcony’s already cooled off, hain’t it? I was thinking I’d probably better lay off, but when it’s time for the bats to come out I end up getting wound up and coming out here with a bottle of sake.” The person here talking to him as if he were an adult was Nisaburō, the eel-monger next door to the east, a lively man of fifty or so. He was shirtless, sitting at a small table drinking and snacking on chilled tofu.

“Boy-o, you’ll be called up before too long, won’t you? How old are you this year?”

“Fifteen.”

“Huh, fifteen, I thought you must’ve been all of seventeen!”

He let out an exaggerated moan.

“Well how about you climb over the roofs to me here. This geezer’ll teach you a real nice thing or two.”

He had known Nisaburō well since he was small enough to be carried around on his nurse’s back. His nurse took him with her like that to go visiting at Nisaburō’s all the time—so often in fact that they established something of a reputation. Though Nisaburō had rather begun to decline, to Yasura, he still appeared as he did then when he was in the prime of his manhood, seeming more youthful than he actually was.

The moon rose up large from the soot-smearred eastern sky.

“I tell you boy-o, you know when us old-timers was your age, when Bon came around you just couldn’t keep us indoors. We’d put on yukatas and go chase the girls around. Yessir, that was all we thought of once we turned fourteen or fifteen. You all must think that’s really something crazy, huh? But that’s fine you know, after all you’re real sharp when it comes to book learning. The bottom line is, you’ve got to do your studies. You’ve got to be sure to watch out—even a boy like you, you can blunder just once and it might throw everything off—that’s why I’m telling you that where you start out is important. You just remember that and keep yourself in line. But what do you think? If you want I could find somebody for you.”

He cackled and talked on and on like a buffoon.

“Ah, he’s just giving you a hard time. Your aunt and them would sure get mad,” said Nisaburō’s wife said suddenly. “Oh, Yasu, what’s that, you mad at him? See how filthy he is. You can see the kind of sorrow a lack of schooling brings. But really though, what do you do out there so long? Don’t you think you’ll catch a cold being naked? Old Minamoto from Naniwa is here saying he wants to talk about the *aobiri* he bought earlier today. You can head on out. That’s all for now, my boy.”

She sent Nisaburō downstairs, and then she cleared the table where he was sitting and went down after him. When Yasura put his back against the nighttime cold that had settled on the boards and shut his eyes, he felt his body and mind were settled and clear. He heard the chattering of the people coming and going by the front. The stars were in places drowned out by the light of the moon, but the zodiacal light made the sky glow ever so faintly. The leaves of a varnish tree reached toward the balcony, and in the darkness looked blue.

The next day he stayed in the upstairs room all day, slung across his desk, eyes closed, not moving. Every day, between one to three, the wind stopped completely. The daytime moon could be seen vaguely in the depths of the burning, wide-open sky.

The foundation stone of the old temple and the huge stone doors that seemed to be looking upward glittered in front of his enraptured eyes. Soon, groups of five or ten people

began to come down from the mountain using the red fans they had gotten at their lodging in Yoshino somewhere, and pass him by as they gossiped in loud voices about the fields back at home. His body was completely exhausted, and his senses were nearly entirely asleep. His heart alone, however, was awake within his shut-up body, and observing things with full clarity. A clock struck three, making a sound like an old-fashioned oil press being worked. On his desk, a typeset edition of *Sankashū* was open.⁴⁹ His late father had known a bit about haiku. From about the time that he moved from nursery school to primary school, his father was sure to call him—Yasura, Yasura—to his bed when it was still dim outside. He would go running clumsily through the two rooms separating his father’s bed and his own. His father would pull him into the comforter and teach him the one about the old pond, and the one about the withered branch, and have Yasura memorize them by repeating.⁵⁰ From that time on, a vaguely bright, unknown country shone its light on his immature mind. And even now there were likely a couple dozen that he had memorized with less-than-perfect grammar. More and more, Yasura felt that in his heart was a world that he could become more fully intimate with than he could with his family.

Tell me of the sadness of this mountain, old yam digger⁵¹

The lines of poetry that came back to him one after the other only brought tears to his eyes. When he dropped his eyes to the text, he saw the *tanka* that starts “As I go into the mountains in Yoshino with no intention of coming back...” Lately he had begun to be able to see very vividly in front of him the worlds that poets like Saigyō and Bashō had inhabited. Often, he felt that it made no sense for this to be the case, however. The world at such times looked altogether too fragile and illusory. Sometimes he felt like he wanted to hide from all of his friends and burst out from somewhere to startle them. The path that poets like Saigyō

⁴⁹A collection of *tanka* by the monk-poet Saigyō (1118-1190).

⁵⁰Both of these refer to well-known haiku by Bashō.

⁵¹Bashō <http://www2.yamanashi-ken.ac.jp/itoyo/basho/oinokobumi/oino17.htm>ku not exactly the same though

and Bashō had walked now lay unmistakably before him. Whenever Yasura attempted to take this road, a pink snake would come slithering from nowhere and block his route. He writhed with frustration. It made him so frantic that he wanted to pull out each and every hair on his head.

“Yasu, you’ve got letters.”

When he glanced over, rather than coming all the way up the ladder, his mother was standing there, holding the envelopes up to him.

“How ’bout that.”

There were two.

One was a picture postcard. Over the printed photograph of lines of pines standing in front of a large Mount Fuji read:

Will be climbing Fuji soon. Will share details upon return to Ōsaka. Begging
your affection more than ever.

20 August

Tōmon

This was without a doubt the work of Okazawa.⁵² Yasura burst out laughing. He couldn’t help but laugh at a level of self-interest that would prompt a young man to write something like “begging your affection more than ever.” He felt a sort of vague satisfaction with the idea that he had finally been able to free himself from Okazawa, who had held him captive for so long. He worked hard to hold back the urge to mock his own frivolity, and looked at the back of the envelope. He glimpsed the name Taizō Atsumi, in the mountains west of Kyōto. All at once he felt like he wanted to dig himself into a hole, and he felt his face grow red. His mind was full of grand hopes. And yet here he was with this letter, unable to make his mind up to open it. He paced anxiously around the room. He wanted to read the

⁵²The letter is signed with a cryptic name meaning “East gate,” probably a reference to the earlier encounter between Yasura and Okazawa near the eastern entrance of Aizendō.

letter from Atsumi. He thought that it would be best for him to approach it with the same frame of mind he did whenever they talked. In his mind, he tried to imagine places where there would be no confounding noise to read the letter. Stifling the sound of his footfalls, he held onto this feeling with the utmost care as he descended the ladder. There was a space that led to the outhouse in the shadow of the storehouse. The amaranth here had grown to a considerable height, but had withered all day in the heat of the sun. Yasura put his geta on in the garden and went around to the back. He was afraid to even touch a letter written by a person as pure as Atsumi, having a mind as soiled as his own. He broke the seal on the letter with trepidation.

.....While it is lonely to lie alone here in this quiet study on the mountain, it gives me a deep taste of what it feels like to be apart from the world. I want with all of my heart for you to come here, but at the same time I feel that you should pay no attention to that, because even if you were to come I would be unable to tell you even one ten-thousandth of what I am thinking about. So I shall write it here after all. How can I tell you what has befallen me? When I am talking with you I get like this, and I can't seem to stop my mind from racing. Even as I write this here now I can't help but feel the utmost impatience with this letter. What am I to do? I cannot ask you to come here. Because I've already written all of this here. Nevertheless, if you do not come I cannot say for certain that I will not resent you very much. I am no longer capable of making any decision, so there is nothing I can do but go with my heart. I will treat your decision on this matter as my own. I am certain that you must think me a very strange person to write such incomprehensible things.....

When Yasura felt about to launch into flight like this, it was hard for him to get his feelings under control. And yet, just then, he became aware of a faint feeling of resentment against Atsumi brush against his mind.

He read the letter over and over again. No matter how many times he did, however, there was something in this letter that somehow stuck in his craw. Then the feeling he had when he talked with Atsumi came back to him. His bright and cheerful words that called to mind chewing on a jelly ear—how could a person who could say things like that with clear eyes write a letter like this?⁵³ “When I am talking with you I get like this, and I can’t seem to stop my mind from racing.” The truth was that Yasura always felt the same way when he was talking with Atsumi. It was a feeling akin to being tickled, some vague insinuation, but Atsumi didn’t seem the type to do something so mean as that. Why did he get this feeling then? Why was Atsumi able to talk about things like that so casually? Since the time they were in first year, whenever he heard Atsumi’s name, he would feel a pleasing sensation like being caressed with soft fluff. Even Yasura himself had no idea why that always happened to him. He tried having a long, hard think on it in the train coming back the day before. He had realized, however, that no matter how he looked at it, it wasn’t so different from his feelings toward Okazawa, and was trapped by this uncomfortable thought. He felt vaguely that for him to visit a pure person like Atsumi with a heart rooted in such unclean soil as this would be to sully Atsumi somehow. It was impossible for him to believe that Atsumi could have felt the same way that he did. He thought that if he would go to that temple in the mountains to the west, everything would at last be resolved. As he had just come back from his trip yesterday, however, he would be shot down as soon as he asked. To him, Atsumi appeared difficult to come close to. He thought of himself as much more like Okazawa, who would do something like “begging your affection more than ever,” and became sad. In the quiet afternoon, the way he looked squatting here where no one would see him, sweating, absorbed in his own miserable sadness made him appear to himself somehow like a beast curled up in a ball in some kind of cave. He began to feel the pounding of the mill on the back street as its reverberations came plodding nearer and then went through him. Around the foundation of the storehouse bloomed two clumps of heartleaf with pallid flowers. Yasura stretched out

⁵³Jelly ear: a type of edible fungus similar to a toadstool.

his hand to pluck one. A strange smell like moldering, rotten flesh struck his nose. He flung the flower against the ground.

Then he stepped on it and twisted it into the ground until he felt satisfied. The smell of the flower clung to his fingers forever and ever.

TEN

The twisted-up path went across the valley and then doubled back. Once it became a slope again, he saw the top of a large gate between the trees that had grown thick, covering the remaining hundred-yard stretch cliff. Rather than being relieved, he grew more impatient about that hundred yard stretch, feeling like he was walking up a steep grade for the entirety of it.

When he arrived at the foot of the gate and sat himself down on the tiles under it, he felt his consciousness, which had been focused, suddenly dissolve and release him into a state of mindless rapture. At last he caught sight of the light of sunset hitting the pines at the top of the mountain, parched from the summer, as if it had been hung from the eaves of this gate. Thinking that he had probably come near enough to see the white walls of the monks' quarters that might hold Atsumi, he set out walking with the feeling that he was being chased.

When crows flew so low in the sky over Yasura he thought they might drag across his head making a loud noise with their flapping wings, he was already trudging up the path to the tower to his left that looked out over the ornamental ridge tiles of the main hall. Through the low gate of the main monks' quarters he saw the black outlines of the large comb-shaped windows in the white walls of the building inside. The yard, where one summer chrysanthemum swayed in the breeze unspectacularly, consisted of packed clay. The earthen storehouse in one corner of the yard and the evening mist that began to envelop it made for a quiet nightfall.

It seemed that Atsumi had been taken around along the peaks all the way to the temple of flowers by his uncle Kazunao.⁵⁴ The monk on duty, with his head as blue as if it had been

painted, showed Yasura into the study.

The mere fact that this was the place that had been mentioned in the letter was enough to induce a feeling of nostalgia for it.

The mountains would be completely dark soon, and were already completely silent. He thought he could hear the faint noise of twilight from the port town that broke the peaceful air.⁵⁵ He had in fact only imagined this noise.

As he had been invited to have a bath by the monk, he went around the long veranda and went into the bathhouse. The thin buzzing of a mosquito could be heard from the shadow of the dim tub.

A pipe of green bamboo pulled water into the tub. Thinking about how that water had probably come from up that mountain now wrapped in the evening fog, he poured the hot water over himself in cascades. At times he stopped his hand, looking over his eyes fixed on the darkish color of the water falling behind him into the tub.

No matter how he tried, he simply could not recall what path he had come here by, and how he had traveled it. He had no memory of having received permission to leave from his aunt or mother or anyone else. A light anxiety passed by him at a close distance. As he was reflecting upon a number of different things, his thoughts fell upon Atsumi. If Atsumi stayed at this place, wouldn't he end up being made a monk? What if he came back from the flower temple with his head all shaved like the first monk he had seen on duty there? As soon as he started to consider it in this fashion, he began to think that Atsumi, with the perfectly quiet attitude he always had, may indeed have been born to such a fate.

When the sun had set the sound of the wind that blew across the blackening thickets of bamboo below him reached his ears. Yasura sat down at the small table, enjoying the pleasure of the cold air on his freshly bathed skin.

Once it was nighttime, alone at his desk with a large lamp that brought out the moths, he could hear the far-off sound of voices in the kitchen and the sound of brushwood crackling

⁵⁵*explain?

in the fire distinctly.

As the fatigue of noon came on and he began to doze, he felt the signs of something, and opened his eyes. When he looked over, he saw Atsumi's slight figure as he shut the sliding door without making a sound.

Caught off guard, as Yasura straightened his posture, Atsumi gently prevented him, then sat down gracefully.

"I am glad you came."

"Sure."

"Did you get my letter?"

"Yes, thanks."

These words didn't strike Yasura as anything other than what Atsumi would normally say. His peaceful and casual tone were completely different from what he had expected *to sound like when he saw him. And what about him, now—how could he be so flustered—he couldn't even look up once he realized it. He stared down at the new tatami mats.

"My uncle is the principal here. So whenever I have any time off of school I come here. You can see how quiet it is here now—this is how it always is. And nary a mosquito to be seen, mind you."

As the other boy spoke, Yasura raised his eyes furtively to steal a look at his face.

Yasura knows that Atsumi has a habit of getting thinner in the summer, was not surprised when he felt loneliness in Atsumi's pale, sunken cheeks. And yet, as Yasura dropped his eyes to Atsumi's pitiful knobby knees lined up so properly. Yasura thought he saw them shaking faintly, but could not tell.

"Uruma, you know sometimes I think about how I might like to come here and try being a monk."

Could this possibly be the same person that wrote the letter he had received? A letter like that? He began to feel somehow that he had been tricked.

"How old are you going to be this year? Oh that's right, you'll be fifteen—I'm a year

older.”

Then Atsumi ceased talking. When Yasura cautiously lifted his eyes, he saw Atsumi’s thin-looking chest.

Yasura had let Atsumi keep talking by himself, responding from time to time merely by nodding or saying, “Uh-huh.” It occurred to him that this must be terribly unsatisfying for Atsumi, but the more he thought about it, the more he felt himself evading the heart of the conversation.

He was full the desire to somehow let Atsumi know that his words had indeed penetrated into the depths of him. Once he began to wonder how in the world a person like Atsumi could think about something so deep as that, he felt somehow as if his body were closing up.

They heard the sound of footsteps on the boards of the veranda that wrapped around the outside of the building. Someone was approaching, coughing dryly all the while.

“Oh, here comes my uncle,” he whispered.

“Well, what’s this? A visitor? First time we’ve had one of those! It’s good that you and Taizō here are pals. You can stay as long as you like, and then the two of you can go back together when you go back. Oh, I tell you it is lonely in a temple, so even one visitor for even a little while really does liven things up so much.”

Without forcing any response from Yasura, who only nodded his head limply, the man made himself comfortable, sitting cross-legged on the floor. He went on to talk for some time with the boys about gossip from Ōsaka, and as far as he thought children might understand, told them stories about himself when he was in a smaller temple on the grounds of Tennōji some fifteen years ago, and having Atsumi pat him firmly on the back when he coughed, all the while stroking his white eyebrows with the outside of his index finger.⁵⁶ After an hour of this, he stood up.

“Tai, you ought to go on to bed. Make up a place for your friend to sleep, too. I’m going to turn in as well. Today we went all the way to the flower temple, and boy am I wore out.”

⁵⁶*

A young boy monk quite a bit smaller than Yasura appeared and began to noisily pull the shutters to.

“Kōkyo, it’s a bit hot tonight, so why don’t you leave them open just a hair.”

“Very well.”

The boy left off with the shutters and sat near the threshold, and placed his hands on the tatami.

Saying goodnight, the boy bowed his head, showing the deep dents in it, and then went off toward the kitchen.

“Shall we go to sleep?”

“Yes.”

Yasura curled up in the bedding that Atsumi had laid out for him, stiff, unmoving. When the lamp was blown out and the room became darker, he felt his mind suddenly start to settle into calm.

“Uruma?”

“Yes?”

“You know how grown-ups are always talking about how to not die, but you know, to me, I don’t feel that dying is anything special. Dying is nothing. But I do think that if there were even one person who would know about my death, and cherish me as worthy of pity forever, I would be willing to die in front of that person right now. Without that, it does seem like it would be a bit lonely, no matter how you look at it.”

After this he fell silent for a short time. He was waiting for Yasura’s response. Atsumi’s words weighed down upon Yasura’s heart with terrific force. He had just barely been able to stop the words that had risen to his lips from coming out. It was then that an inspired thought swept through his mind.

He had intuited that Atsumi was really simply trying to get him to say: *I’ll die with you*. Nevertheless, the thought that he might be wrong about it weighed down on his tongue and prevented him from opening his mouth. His lips trembled with a sad spasm.

When he opened his eyes, the shutters that had been left open let the blue light of the

moon through to illuminate the shōji. The chilly mountain air pressed against his skin. He heard a sound like running water, and thinking it might be rain he listened closer. It was the sound of the river far away in the valley. Atsumi was sleeping, snoring faintly like shaking a thread. Turning over, he could see the light of the moon shining white, clearly, right onto his forehead.

In Kawachi as well,⁵⁷ going north from there were three houses belonging to relatives of his on his father's side. His father's birth home was now practically connected to the homes of his father's two younger sisters, so that he had an aunt, an uncle, and more in each of those houses. Older than any of the five boys was their eldest sister, who went to be married in the town their father was raised in. Whenever he and his older brothers got some time off, they would go see her, all three of them piling into a two-person rickshaw and heading out. There, they would spend even a month at a time, spending the days fishing and swimming in the river, their eyes shining from the outdoors and activity. Even with his two brothers gone away to study, Yasura never lost his shy streak, and did not want to think about spending a summer at the house of his aunt and uncle. The next day after he came back from Yamato, though, his aunt was finally able to convince him to go, as long as it was only for ten days, and he spent a little less than two hours being tumbled through meadows full of ascending larks. Using the map, he had reckoned that the temple where Atsumi was would be to the left, but then he realized that in fact he could even see it. He was working on a terrible scheme. He was well aware of the fact that he was making his way toward a far more deeply-rooted sin than that of having deceived his aunt and mother when he had gone to Yamato. In spite of that, his mind was mysteriously calm. After three days at his sister's house, Yasura suddenly announced that he would return to Ōsaka, and there was nothing anyone could say to stop him.

Going further up the road toward the old capital to northward, he crossed three rivers and once he was on the, and once he had gotten off of the main path to a smaller one, he

⁵⁷*where Yasura is from

set his eyes on the mountain and strayed no more from the path toward it.

His eyes were open wide inside his bedding. Just as he began to think that he would soon grow more and more used to doing bad things like this, and would eventually fall into an abyss from he could no longer be saved, his mind was full of the vivid image of that fateful day when his depravity would be complete. He became sad, feeling as though it would not be enough even to flagellate himself in front of this person like a Buddha. He broke into tears, aware that he was alone in the world, with no refuge to cling to in all of heaven and earth.

“Atsumi.”

He tried calling to him softly, but was startled by the sound of his own voice. Atsumi, who he thought had just been asleep, was awake after all.

“What, can’t you sleep?”

He felt as though somehow Atsumi had been able to read him completely. He wanted to disappear.

ELEVEN

The next day, he announced suddenly that he was going home. He was once again drawn in by Atsumi's pleading eyes, rendering him incapable of leaving. Throwing all caution to the wind, he decided to stay one more day. Anxiety flitted across his heart ceaselessly. At noon the three of them grilled *yuba* and ate together.⁵⁸ Its light, simple flavor gave Yasura an unparalleled sense of nostalgia.

"Tai, what do you say you take Yasura down the valley?" said Kazunao, holding his chopsticks.

"Yes—what do you say, Uruma?"

"Oh yes."

The two boys put on their straw hats and set out. Once they got about 200 yards down the slope, they were in the valley. The two split up to strip off their clothes, as if they were each ashamed of the other seeing them nude. Then in the water, the boys kept a distance of ten yards between them.⁵⁹ Yasura pretended not to look at Atsumi standing over there with only his head above water. Not knowing how to swim, Yasura lamented the blue light that played on the flowing water from his knees in the shallows. As he stared at the redness mounting on the excited flesh of his arms as he rubbed them, covered in goose bumps, he began to feel unreasonably alone. When he looked up to see what Atsumi was doing, he saw that he was trying to crawl up onto a large rock. The rock stuck out a yard above the water, and the water was still and deep around it. His friend now stood on the rock, watching the surface of the water strangely. To Yasura, Atsumi's expression evoked the image of a cluster of wisteria flowers crawling weakly across the earth.

⁵⁸*tofu skin.

⁵⁹*Four or five *kan*, equivalent to 1.97 meters in rural areas.

“Should we go to the temple?”

This woke him from his dream-like state.

Now clothed again, Atsumi sat down next to Yasura, both of them looking out over the deep pool. This friend who had since morning said very little to him sat slumped over and trembling sadly, his pale cheek supported by a hand, looked at the color of the deep pool as though it drew his gaze to itself. He shivered with sadness. His eyes were clouded as if with the blue light of the moon. Now and again he lifted them toward the sky. The sky just barely showed through the ends of the pine branches.

He suddenly began to feel abnormally agitated, and he looked at his friend. Tears were streaming down Atsumi’s down-turned face.

“Let’s go then.”

The sight of Atsumi going up the steep slope from behind moved him to tears. They left from a different direction than the one by which they had come. The mountain roads between the mountains to the west of Kyōto and Anao-dera in Tanba followed the rustling of the leaves on the trees, climbing narrowly up and up.⁶⁰

Between the mountains jutting out on either side, the tall peaks dissolved into reddish brown in the afternoon light.

“Shakagatake—’swhat that one’s called.”⁶¹

He stopped and pointed.

“I wonder if it takes awfully long to get there from here?”

“There was a monk a little older than Kōkyō, called Kōchō, now he’s at *something university, but he went up there with somebody once. Said it wasn’t too bad.”

Even in the temple with its very few inhabitants, he was unsatisfied that the two of them could not be alone together.

“If that’s the case, how about we climb it?”

60*

61*

He was startled by these words from Atsumi, the meaning of which had become terribly clear to him.

Between the cedar trees that made up the forest he could see gaps in the underbrush that looked like paths. Atsumi continued to climb upward the rolling slope with careful steps. They went some distance further into the woods, their footsteps echoing loudly as they walked through the striped bamboo bushes. He thought he could hear the heavy breathing and palpitations of his friend, walking just two yards ahead of him.⁶²

When the boys came out of the forest, the blue sky was vivid and clear. The road kept going up to higher places. It went around the edge of the mountain. He heard the sound of something rustling toward them through the field of pampas grass. Imagining a ferocious beast, he became terrified. In the next instant, however, decided that they were together, and so even if the two of them were killed and eaten right there he would have no regrets. Once he had made that decision, he began to wish that terrible death would come to them as soon as possible. What came through the grass at them just then was a middle-aged man wearing the white clothes of a pilgrim, his face streaked with purple.

“Is this the way to get to Yoshimine?” he asked.

“Thankye kindly.”

He went down the path that Atsumi had shown him. The two stood there for some time watching him go. The road continued on like the sharp edge of an axe.⁶³ Yasura climbed up the steep slope with ragged breath. Atsumi stopped and pointed wordlessly to a grassy plain through an open space in the undergrowth. Yasura crumbled to the ground and sat there. He felt his violent pulse against the palm of his hand, felling as though it would tear right through his ribs and out. He decided that his heart was bad. He could clearly see in his mind the pale face of his dead father in his coffin. He quietly put his hand to his chest, and in his heart he felt a longing for the hand of a friend that would rub his chest in his pain and sadness. Then out of nowhere he heard Atsumi’s voice.

62* .

63* .

“You’re having palpitations? Let me give you a rub.”

This surprised Yasura all the more. He bared his chest, wet with sweat, and allowed Atsumi to do what he would, offering no resistance. At last the darkening sky cleared to reveal a striking blue and the sun’s light faded. The white, delicate fingers of Atsumi’s slightly large hand fluttered over his chest.

“I’m better now. Let’s get up to the pinnacle.”

With that, they set off walking again, Atsumi walking ahead and looking back from time to time with concern at Yasura. Each time Yasura seemed about to collapse, Atsumi would take his hand and the two would climb further. Yasura thought it likely now that his aunt and mother and them knew about these two walking here together like this. The cold light that glinted from the eyes of his family struck him through the heart. He felt that at this moment was what everything depended on, the thing that could upturn heaven and earth, the power to return the world to what it was at the beginning. It appeared to them as if the young pines continued on into the limitless depths of the sky. Neither Atsumi nor Yasura said a word. They weaved in and out of the pines unsteadily, seeking the peak. Atsumi tripped on the root of a tree and fell—Yasura got right down by his side. The boys stayed perfectly still. Yasura felt as though all of the blood in his body had turned to sweat and left him. He could no longer support his swimming head.

By now, however, a force invisible to the two boys had overtaken them, allowing no room for resistance. The two drifted forward slowly. When they made it to the peak, they stared hard at each other’s exhausted faces. The dim blue wind of twilight howled.

He buried his head in Atsumi’s chest as the two held each other tightly. Atsumi stood straight up. Then, he crossed the grassy plain as if carried by the wind that seemed to make his thin heels fly. Yasura followed after him until the two stood at the edge of a precipice.

The cedar woods sloped down to the far-away floor of the valley. The white rocks showed their skin here and there, visible to the two boys. The valley winds rose up around them, and the clothes of the two boys seemed about to fly off of them and away.

“Uruma.”

“Atsumi.”

Both of their voices sounded shaken.

The idea that they would in fact die created an enormous excitement in both of their hearts. The colors of sunset had sunk beyond the horizon. The valley fell dizzyingly below their eyes, and as soon as they thought they might be able to step out into it, melancholy struck them hard again. The palms of their hands were bound tightly together, as if they contained strength that would never allow them to be pulled apart.

A violent shudder shook both of the boys through their entire bodies. A spiral of flame like ice ran over them, and they ran full force, each groaning from the core of his body. They took their first step out off of the corner of rock.