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BOSTON UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Thesis

YEARNING IS: AND OTHER STORIES

by

DREW RICHARD

B.F.A., Goddard College, 2010

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

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Approved by

First Reader

Ha Jin, Ph.D.
Professor of English

Second Reader

Sigrid Nunez, M.F.A.
Lecturer in Creative Writing

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(part 1)

Even the brain tumor was cultural. I had settled into a business class seat on an outbound flight from Tokyo to Shenzhen. The ethnically indistinct stewardess had placed my glass of bourbon on the tray table in front of me. I was in the aisle seat, and the woman next to me in the window seat (it could have been a man—now I don't remember the face) raised her window shade. Sunlight struck my glass of bourbon, which winked at me with an eye concealed somewhere in the amber. That's how it felt. That was the sensation. I could say I thought of my mother, but it wouldn't be true. I thought of the machines that medical laboratories use to spin vials of blood. It's an image related to my mother. She was a nurse and a lab technician. But it had appeared in my mind without a trace of her, and I felt three vials fall into the machine, already spinning. Not vials, really. Words. 波旁酒. バーボン. *Bourbon*.

I've been a writer for a long time now. Or at least I've been a university professor whose writing is sufficiently acclaimed to avoid committee work and inspire jealousy. I'm American. I write in Japanese—fiction yes, but about identity, about language. In the twenty years I've done this, I've never had to write, for example, a scene in which a gun

is fired. Or a trip down a hospital hallway—brightly, fluorescently lit—lying on a gurney, while voices and symbols flash at the periphery of my vision. When they wheeled me off of the plane, I thought *Oh, good. This will happen in Japanese, too.* I was detached, surprisingly so.

They wheeled me into the hospital slowly. No slamming doors or flashing lights. As I recall, they paused for the automatic doors. They paused for the elevators. One of the attendants hummed an old Korean protest song, and I searched my mind for the words. *I hike the morning hill and learn a little a smile. Casting off all sorrow, I shall now go.*

My room in the hospital had a window, and my bed was next to it. The window looked out onto the ferroconcrete wall of an adjacent building. Nothing else was visible. Beginning in the afternoon, I could guess the time of day by following the sunlight's progress across the wall. A few times a day, a crow would fly into the space between the two buildings. Failing to find a suitable perch, it would fly away. I don't know if this was the same crow every day, hoping a new perch had materialized, but it was only ever a single crow. I thought the bird looked small, which is to say that I thought it looked like an American crow, not the tropical crows indigenous to Japan. I knew that wasn't possible, and I worried that whatever had happened to my brain had made it more difficult to control my affectations.

My doctors didn't know what to do with me, I think. It was as if I had arrived from a distant planet, and they were reluctant to diagnose or treat me until my anatomy had been properly schematized. Did I know I was badly overweight? Well, I explained,

badly—as adverbs go—is culturally contingent, isn't it? In America I'd be *moderately* overweight (I used the English words; they hadn't, and this confused them). About how many cigarettes did I smoke in a day? Was I aware of the health risks? Tired of their prodding, I explained to them what I'll now explain to you: I write. Really, that's all I do. When I eat, it's a bag full of junk food from the convenience store on the corner. When I dress myself in the morning, it's in a fresh shirt and pair of underwear bought at the same convenience store the night before. The old clothes, the old food wrappers, the coffee grounds, cigarette butts and the wine bottles: I drop or toss them. Once every month, a cleaning company sends a four-woman crew to my house and I pay them handsomely to have the whole mess cleared. If this is difficult for you to understand, then it's probably also difficult for you to understand what is required to write literature in a language you did not encounter until you were fifteen years old, and which bears no resemblance to your mother tongue. You may also not understand what it is like to find yourself, at age twenty-five, seated in a New Jersey diner, trying to determine how to praise the 9th-century emperor of Japan in contemporary English, since that is what your dissertation demands. You may not understand why, at a moment like that, the thought occurs that if a pill existed which could make you a Japanese person, you would take it. And you may not understand why that feeling thereafter persists for decades. Unless you'd lived the life I've lived, you wouldn't.

Having been thus enlightened, the doctors worked in earnest. Not because they understood my self-righteous hectoring, but because they decided my Japanese fluency

was a distraction from the obvious truth—so obvious, no doubt, they faulted themselves for not seeing it to begin with: I was a foreigner, who understood nothing and presumed his ignorance made him free. This was my initial impression of my doctors. It was only partly accurate.

On the third day, a man arrived to occupy the other bed in my room. He walked in under his own steam, accompanied by a nurse, and began to arrange a small collection of classical and modern Japanese poetry books on the ledge beside his bed. He looked at me for the first time, then addressed himself to the nurse: “What’s the *gaijin* doing here?” he said.

“*Misuta Rewitsukii* is also our patient. Please be kind to him,” the nurse said, giving my name—or the closest she could manage—in English.

“You get out of here,” the man said. He was looking at the nurse. I presumed he was talking about me, so I began to stir (though I didn’t want to; that morning I’d convinced myself I was gradually going color blind). Not to leave, but to rise, reluctantly, to the full height of my indignation, even if that only meant sitting up in bed.

The nurse had made the same presumption. “I’m so sorry, but *Misuta Rewitsukii* will also be—”

“I wasn’t talking about him,” the man said. “I was talking about you. I’m fine by myself. Move it.”

Move it – *doke*. When I’d first encountered Japanese as a teenager, I had been amused to learn that this particular command, roughly equivalent to ‘get out of my way’

in English, was ruder than most Japanese profanities—words to start a fight with. I'd learned it from my first Japanese employer, the manager of a 24-hour *kissaten* in the red light district, where the ejection of undesirables from the premises was often accompanied by this command, and the hopeful, twitching expectation that a fight would follow. Now I watched this man chase the nurse out as if he was shooing a stray animal, and realized he was probably as old as I was; I'd never grown accustomed to middle age in Japan, which extends into one's 60s, physical appearance included. I felt older because I looked older.

The man sat on his bed. "I saw you on a talk show once," he said. "You write in Japanese."

"Yes. I write novels."

"But they're all true."

"Depends what you mean by true."

"They're about your life. About speaking Japanese."

"Loosely. Have you read one?"

"Why would I?"

"Good question."

"Listen, you should really write about this hospital."

"Why?" I said.

"Because you shouldn't be here." He began to laugh. He was sitting cross-legged now, and he rocked on his legs. He had about him the kind of languorous physical grace

one finds in the Japanese countryside among farmers and artisans; in English we would describe them as people who work with their hands. “It’s just the kind of thing you’d write about,” he continued. “It’s a big mistake. It’s very funny.”

“I’m a permanent resident of Japan. I have national healthcare.”

“You don’t understand. Do you know where you are?”

“You mean the name of the hospital?”

“I mean the neighborhood.”

I didn’t have an answer; it hadn’t occurred to me to ask.

“How long have you been here?” the man said.

“Two days, three days.”

“Didn’t you need to tell anyone to come visit you? Your wife?”

My stepmother occurred to me. Had she waited for my plane in Shenzhen?

Should I try to reach her? No, let her wait. She probably knew. She probably knew, but hadn’t bothered to find me, hadn’t bothered to call. “I don’t have anyone like that,” I said.

“I see. Well, you’re in Shin-Okubo.”

The Korean neighborhood. “So?”

“So this is where they take Koreans. There aren’t any Japanese here. And there aren’t any Americans.”

“You’re Japanese,” I said.

“I am. But I have a Korean name—and my own reasons for using this hospital. You—they brought you here by mistake. Someone didn’t know what to do with you.”

“They still don’t.”

“No, no. I’m sure the doctors are just confused. I’m sure they don’t care if you’re white or yellow or purple.”

“Isn’t it illegal? Sending people to particular hospitals because of their ethnicity? Wouldn’t the newspapers hear about it?”

“I don’t think Korean people mind. Some of the doctors here speak Korean. Most of the nurses are Korean. Have you noticed? It’s a good hospital. It’s just in a bad location. Don’t let that fool you. People take good care of each other here.”

“You seem very energetic.”

“Don’t let me fool you either. I have ALS. It’s more common in your country, but we have it here. Twice this week I couldn’t chew and swallow my food. Maybe they can change my treatment a little bit to slow the disease down. Maybe not.”

“I hope they can,” I said.

“Thank you,” the man said, and bowed where he sat. “Say, you’re an expert on the *Manyoshu*, aren’t you?”

“I translated it into English when I was very young. I won an award.”

“So you’re an expert on *haiku* and *tanka*.”

“Hitomaro was my favorite. He was the first Japanese lyricist. Or that’s how I think of him.”

“Who do you like better? Bashō or Shiki?”

“They’re very different.”

“Shiki hated Bashō, didn’t he?”

“Bashō wasn’t alive for Shiki to hate. Shiki wanted to revolutionize the form. The form *was* Bashō, so to speak.”

“I used to love Bashō. When my first wife died, I took a year off work to travel around the country and see all the places Bashō wrote about in his *haikai*. But I was in Matsuyama last year, and I went to the Shiki museum, and I learned about Shiki’s life. Did you know he had spinal tuberculosis for so many years? Did you know he died—in agony—trying to write one last poem on a dishrag? So I thought: if this kind of person says Bashō isn’t any good, maybe I have to reconsider.”

“You have their books with you, Bashō and Shiki both.”

“I want to decide what kind of poet I would have been: Bashō or Shiki. Maybe in the next life, I’ll be a poet. You can help me.”

“Oh, no. Giants like those, I stand on their shoulders. I can’t adjudge.”

“I see. Why are you in the hospital?”

“Something happened to my brain.”

“They don’t know what?”

“I was sitting on a plane, on the runway, and I fainted onto my glass of bourbon, and when I woke up, I was in a stranger’s lap, and she was screaming.”

“She thought you died!” He laughed again, almost in a fit, pounding the bed with his fists. “She thought this fat *gaijin* died in her lap!” He gathered himself. “No offense. Or maybe she just thought you were drunk.”

“I know I’m fat.”

“So what is it? Stroke? You seem fine, for a stroke patient. Maybe you were lucky. Maybe it’s nothing. Overwork syndrome.”

“I had an EEG, a CAT scan, an MRI. I’ll see the doctor today.”

“Are you Christian?”

“Culturally, I’m Jewish. By heritage, I mean.”

“I was going to offer to pray, but I’m not sure I know how to pray Jewish.”

“If you pray to your God, I’m sure he’ll consult mine.”

The man made a face like he’d been spit on. “We don’t have any gods worth praying to. Just an emperor, and only a fool would pray to him.” I must have looked surprised. “My parents were communists. And my grandparents,” the man explained. “You’re not a—what do they call them?”

“Republican? I don’t follow American politics.”

“And in Japan?”

“I work at a university. There’s a leftist student movement there. The politics are charged. It’s better if I don’t take sides.”

“But if you had to.”

“I sympathize with the students.”

The man clapped his hands. “I knew it. *I rike you velly much, Misuta Renitsukii.*” It was a credible imitation of the nurse. “I’m Mr. Son. Takaaki Son.”

Now I bowed, lowering my face toward the bed, and found myself startled by the smell of detergent on my bedsheets. At home, I slept on the bare tatami. I hadn’t done my own laundry in years. To me, it was an American smell. I admit it made me want to sleep precisely because it reminded me of the bedsheets of my childhood, although my childhood had occurred as much outside America as in it. I’d likely developed this sense memory of laundered linen during my time abroad, when my sheets were washed every night, not by my parents, but by people who had never been (and would never go) to America.

A favorite Japanese expression of mine, used to indicate the passage of time, contains the ideograms for road, embrace, and disappearance. I sometimes translate it, “Nothing stays in its place; nothing had a place to begin with.” I’ve seen it written, “Touch and go and vanish.”

Maybe I looked as tired as I felt and Takaai noticed it. He turned back to his books and took one off the shelf to read. I laid down and closed my eyes. “Hey,” I heard him say. “That’s a hell of a view.”

I met with the doctor that afternoon, in an exam room. He shut the door behind me and turned off the overhead light before switching the lightboard on, so the room was bathed in the light that shined through the white areas of the negatives: my brain, my

spine, my skull. What I could see of the doctor's face looked Korean. He squinted on and off while he pinned my scans up. Not as if he was nearsighted, but in an expressive way. For a moment, in the enclosed space of the room, in that particular light—the kind of the light that hovers between a film projector and a screen—I felt comfortable. I don't often feel that way.

“It's definitely a tumor,” the doctor said. “But it's small.”

“What kind of tumor?” I said.

“Look where it is.” He pointed to a spot near the base of my skull. “Definitely pituitary. Most pituitary tumors are benign.”

“Most?”

“I'm reluctant to biopsy when it probably isn't necessary.”

“What happened to me on the plane?”

“If this tumor were to swell, you might experience the symptoms you described. It may have been swollen at the time. Right now it's not swollen.”

“What happens if it swells again?”

“For now we can run other tests. Sometimes this gives us enough information. Particular varieties of pituitary tumor release chemicals into the bloodstream, and some of them can be treated. We can shrink them with medication.”

“But what happens if it swells again?”

“It really depends, Mr. Levitsky.”

“On what? What if it isn't benign?”

“Try to relax. We’ll take blood and urine tonight to check your endocrine levels. Barring anything unforeseen, we’ll discharge you tomorrow morning.”

“It’s hard to relax. I don’t have much information.”

“I understand. We don’t have much information, either. I don’t want to withhold what I know, but I also don’t want to make you think I have any answers yet. By the time you leave tomorrow, we’ll have a treatment plan.”

I was sitting on the exam table. It was upholstered in synthetic leather, which was cold on my legs. My legs were mostly exposed because my gown was too short. Tomorrow I’d be in my study again. No gown. No table. Maybe a bottle of pills, which would be the only item in my study I’d take care not to lose. A part of me, the doctor hoped, would shrink, and nothing further would be necessary.

“Forgive me,” I said. “I’m trying to think if there’s anything else. Since it happened, I feel a little interrupted.”

“I’m sure you’ve been very busy,” the doctor said. “An interruption can be good for the mind.”

I looked at the doctor. I couldn’t tell if he’d meant what he’d said in perfunctory way, or if he knew who I was. He was smiling now. It was a practiced smile, a courteous doctor’s smile. He squinted, and the overall expression on his face was that of someone trying to understand what had just been said.

“I hope you won’t mind my asking,” the doctor said. “But do you ever feel Korean?”

I had to think for a moment about what he meant. “You’re talking about my books.”

“I’m just talking about speaking Japanese like it’s your only language. When Japan is your home. But nobody treats you like a Japanese. I have another American friend, he was born in Okinawa. He has lived here his whole life. He tells me sometimes he feels like a *zainichi*.”

“Scholars say that about me sometimes. Critics. They say the best way to understand my writing is to think of me as a kind of *zainichi* writer. They say I have the same concerns, the same ideas.”

“So it’s true. It’s the same.”

“Maybe. I mean, I’ll take it. It’s better than being accused of Orientalism, or of ‘going native,’ isn’t it? But I’m not sure I know what it means to feel Korean.”

“I could tell you.” He made a small nodding gesture, apologetic, and averted his eyes. “But maybe you didn’t mean to ask.”

“Please.”

He inhaled. He squinted again, which made his eyebrows knit. He’d been so matter-of-fact about the tumor. He seemed deliberate now, by comparison. “When I speak Japanese, or even when I’m just doing the normal things I do with my day—shopping, riding the train—I feel like it’s not always me who’s doing it. If I let my mind be quiet, I realize there’s a small boy inside it. Maybe he’s five years old. And he’s the one speaking Japanese, or acting like he’s in Japan. My tongue just imitates what he’s doing.

My body imitates him. And you see, it's very easy to imitate him, so I don't mind. But for the boy, speaking this language and living in this place can be very difficult."

I wasn't sure what to say. The doctor's voice had softened, and what he'd said seemed very solemn.

"I'm sorry," the doctor said. "That must sound strange to you. I spend too much time thinking about this kind of thing."

"It's not strange. I was fifteen when I came to this country the first time."

"I was born here. But I still think of it this way."

"When you put it like that, I suppose that, yes, I feel Korean all the time."

"Like a child."

"Not exactly. You know, I learned Japanese in Kabuki-cho. I would run away from the consulate after my father went to bed and work all night in a *kissaten* there. Sometimes when I'm—you know the English word, *autopilot*?—well, sometimes when I'm on autopilot in Japanese, lights flash in my mind. Colored lights. There's an intense desire, right away—a doctor might call it autonomic—to arrange the lights in a pattern. But I can't. I can focus all I want, but the lights still seem random. It's my fifteen-year-old self, staring at the neon signs in Kabuki-cho, not knowing what any of the characters mean."

"Or maybe you've had this brain tumor longer than you think," the doctor said. We both laughed, the doctor with his whole upper body. While he laughed, his face moved in and out of the light.

*

Visiting hours had begun when I returned to my room. Takaaki's wife was there, with three children. I stopped short in the doorway. His wife wasn't Japanese. She wasn't Asian.

She looked at me—caught me looking at her. “You're white too, you know,” she said, in accented English. “In case you've forgotten.” This second part was in fluent Japanese, if a little staccato. “I'm Swiss.”

“It's nice to meet you,” I said. “I'm Henry. Korean.” The slip—if you could call it that—had barely left my tongue, but the whole family laughed. “American. I'm American,” I said.

“See,” said Takaaki. “I thought he was in the wrong place, but he's right where he belongs.” Now he balanced his dinner tray on his head and steeped his hands against his chest. We were meant to understand that he was imitating a Buddhist monk. A dribble of tempura sauce descended from the tray onto his forehead. His youngest—the only daughter and, so far as I could tell, the only bi-ethnic child of the three—laughed and pointed. “*Sōsu!*” she said. Takaaki wiped his brow, put his thumb in his mouth and sucked. An exaggerated expression of surprise played over his face. “*Umai!*” he said.

Takaaki took the tray off his head. He held it aloft like a monk's *damaru* and began to beat on the bottom. He chanted: “*Uchujin, gaijin / onaji desu yo! / Murasaki hada, kiiro hada / Ningen: nani o?*” He began to repeat it, and now his daughter and the younger

of the two sons (a teenager) had joined in. The daughter stood up and danced in the style of a Buddhist retinue.

“Old man,” his wife said. “You’re dirtying the sheets.”

In response, Takaaki beat the tray harder. More bits of food and sauce flew onto the bed and floor. “White woman is jealous / of my special dirty sheets!” he chanted. “Wishes she were in them, too / lying next to me!”

At this, his wife, who couldn’t have been much younger than Takaaki, stood and grabbed hold of his arms. The tray fell to the floor. He pulled his wife into bed and they struggled with each other. “Help!” Takaaki yelled. “It’s a hate crime! It’s genocide!” The two younger children were on the floor now, laughing. The oldest, who looked college-aged, was impassive. He’d been that way since I entered the room.

Takaaki and his wife extracted themselves. “This is my wife, Lana,” he said. “These are our children: Yūko, Hiroshi and Kansuke.” Kansuke was the oldest, the one who hadn’t laughed. “Kansuke doesn’t think I’m very funny,” Takaaki said. “He’s outgrown me.”

“Maybe he’s the only one who remembers where we are,” Lana said.

“That’s right,” Takaaki said. “My family is always reminding me that I’m the only person alive who’s going to die.”

“But you’re going to die *soon*,” Kansuke said. “It’s not a joke.” This was said in the way—half-apologetic, half-angry, in a pleading cadence—that such things are said by Japanese children to Japanese adults. I wondered if this child might be the only one who

knew what it was like to be raised by two Japanese parents, before his mother died. The other boy might have been very young. Takaaki had a Korean name; maybe he didn't know either.

"I understand," I said. "My father died when I was young." It wasn't true. I'd been forty-three. But I'd only moved to Japan permanently two years earlier. I hadn't published in Japanese. It felt as though it had happened before I'd begun to live a life that belonged to me. Of course, if I was running from anyone, it was probably my father. But nothing is ever that simple, and I also wanted to become what my father had failed to. Like so many American diplomats in Asia, he thought he wanted a double life, and understood too late that what he really wanted was a very average life, only it had to be altogether different from the one he'd been given. He was the first person who understood what was at stake for me in Japan; maybe the only person. The only time he visited me in Tokyo before he died, he said, "You've always thought in Japanese, haven't you? Since you were a teenager. When you speak English, you're translating yourself." It wasn't true; we both knew it wasn't true. But he knew what it would mean for me to hear it, and how long I'd been waiting for someone to see me as I wished to be seen.

"Be cheerful," Takaaki said now. "This man is a famous author. He might write about us. Henry: you have to take good care of Kansuke when I'm gone. He wants to be a writer, too."

"Not writer. Journalist," Kansuke said.

“He’s going to graduate school for it,” Takaaki said. “In America. He starts next month.”

“Congratulations,” I said.

Kansuke shrugged. “We don’t have many graduate programs in journalism here.” I understood him to mean that he would rather have stayed in Japan.

Yūko was whining now, and tugging on Lana’s leg, the way children get when they sense a conversation growing adult.

“Hiroshi,” Takaaki said, “Go with Yūko for some ice cream at the FamilyMart. Yūko: We’re going to teach you a lesson. If you think you’re restless now, just wait until we get some sugar in you!” Takaaki handed over a 1000 yen bill, and we watched them leave, hand-in-hand. We heard Hiroshi in the hallway, addressing himself to someone at the nurse’s station, asking for directions to the nearest convenience store.

“Any news?” Takaaki said.

“News?” I knew what he meant. I wasn’t certain I wanted to talk about my tumor with Takaaki’s son and wife. But I wasn’t surprised he’d asked.

“Your scans,” he said.

“It’s a brain tumor,” I said.

Lana took a breath, “That’s awful,” she said. Kansuke shifted in his seat, at first to face a little away from me, and then—perhaps he’d realized what was called for—to face me directly.

“I guess it is,” I said. “But the doctor wasn’t very worried. It’s pituitary, so it’s probably not malignant. They might be able to shrink it with medication. I’ll know tomorrow.”

“Which doctor was it?” Takaaki said.

“He was Korean. Yi.”

Takaaki smirked. “He’s no doctor,” he said. “Well, he’s a doctor. But he’s also chief of surgery. He’s a neurosurgeon. He’s famous. Almost as famous as you.”

I smiled. I thought about what the doctor had said, about imitating the five-year-old in his head, and I thought about what neurosurgery looks like, what it requires. “His hands,” I said. I’d thought aloud without meaning to.

“What?” Takaaki said.

“Nothing,” I said. “Just something he talked about.”

Takaaki blew out a long sigh. “So it’s nothing to worry about, is it?” He leaned back against the wall behind his bed and looked up at the ceiling for a moment.

Lana took his hand. “Tell him,” she said. “He might not know.”

“I’m sure he knows. He knows all about Japan. He’s not really a foreigner. Not like other foreigners.”

“Then you can tell him anyway, and it won’t matter,” Lana said.

Takaaki looked at Kansuke. I did, too. He was stoic, or wanted us to think he was. I knew that expression, had worn it when I was younger, had since fooled myself on

more than one occasion into believing I'd stopped wearing it, when all I'd really done was learned to adorn it with subtler distortions.

“You know in Japan, doctors aren't always honest with their patients,” Takaaki said.

“Of course I know.” I did. Japanese doctors sometimes withheld diagnoses from terminal patients. It was hardly a revelation.

Takaaki nodded. “Good. You know. But she also wants me to tell you that this sort of thing happens at this hospital.” His eyes wandered the room for a moment. “We know it does.”

“They tried not to tell you,” I said.

“In a manner of speaking,” Takaaki said.

“What did they say when you brought it up?” I said.

Kansuke shifted abruptly in his chair. It scraped the floor loudly.

“I didn't,” Takaaki said.

“Didn't?”

“He never told them he knew his real condition. His real prognosis,” Lana said.

“That's why I come to this hospital,” Takaaki said. “To just let it alone.”

“But you know what you have,” I said. “That doesn't make sense.”

“The same condition killed my father,” Takaaki said. “Even at the very beginning, when I was barely symptomatic, I knew what it was. I met Lana at a support group.”

“My brother,” Lana said.

“We decided—together—there wasn’t any point prolonging it. I take a little bit of medicine; I’m not in despair. The doctors aren’t cruel, you know; just dishonest. Lana and I decided to have a child—we had Yūko.” Takaaki paused here. He was mid-gesture, both hands in front of him, as if cradling something—something that would explain it. “Dignity means something different to each of us,” he said.

I thought it was brave. I thought Kansuke must be very angry. How angry, I couldn’t be sure. How long could someone live with Takaaki’s condition if they treated it aggressively? I thought about the way my father died. He, too, had been full of laughter in his final days. But it didn’t seem to free him. He’d been laughing at his own expense all along, and had found out—too late to change—that he deserved more of his own sympathy.

Kansuke stood now, and spoke up to excuse himself. Literally translated, what he said means “Sorry to leave you alone.” It’s a perfunctory expression. One says it when he leaves a taxi, or after he’s paid for his groceries, before leaving the store. The way Kansuke used it—or the way the moment compelled him to—reminded me of its richness; how much better it was than “pardon me” or its other English equivalents. From what little of Takaaki I’d seen, I could imagine him saying the same thing in his last moments. It would be wry enough. “Sorry to leave you alone.” Like stepping out of an elevator.

Kansuke stopped at the door and looked down the hallway outside. Then Hiroshi and Yūko were at either of his knees, displaying their prizes. “I didn’t want ice cream,”

Hiroshi said. “I bought *anpan* from a pushcart.” He had one of the bean-filled cakes in each fist. “I’m going to share them with everyone.”

“Look,” said Yūko, and she held up an ice cream bar, still in its brightly-colored wrapper. “Help me,” she said. *Tasukete*. A girl with two Japanese parents would just say *onagai*—please. Yūko didn’t know what *tasukete* could mean. If someone fell and hurt themselves, they’d say it. Or if, in acknowledgment of a deep shortcoming, they reached out to a lover or family member for help. In Hiroshima and Nagasaki, this word had been used by people trapped in burning buildings. Only a little girl raised in two languages would use it to ask her brother to unwrap her ice cream bar. Only a little girl who was translating herself, and probably always would be.

Kansuke lowered himself onto one knee, so he could show her how to unwrap it. He put each of her hands into one of his. “When your hands are stronger,” he said, “you can just do it like this,” and he tore open the wrapper. “See?”

Yūko removed the ice cream. It was in the shape of a panda.

“A panda!” Kansuke said, still kneeling. “You can’t eat that! Pandas are endangered.” He reached out, as if to take the ice cream away from her.

Yūko stuck out her tongue, and, defiant, put the panda’s ear into her mouth.

I looked at Takaaki. His eyes had misted while he watched them. “Dignity means something different to each of us,” I said. “But we know it when we see it.”

Takaaki only nodded, and then we both watched—watched Kansuke pick Yūko up and carry her to the bed, watched Yūko eat, watched Hiroshi split up the *anpan* so

everyone would have some. And I caught Takaaki watching, with an impassive expression not unlike the one Kansuke had worn only a few minutes earlier, the sun's progress on the wall outside my window.

When I woke the next morning and saw that my luggage (still tagged for Shenzhen) had been placed next to my bed, I understood how I'd felt in the hospital. Everything had been hushed, as if the walls were very thin, as if walls, as a rule, were always thin. I would miss feeling that way. In the wider world I was about to return to, I would have interpreted behavior like Takaaki's as a performance: impeccably polished, a fine reflection of the humanity it meant to represent, but not at all the original item. I wouldn't have been able to help it; it was the way I'd come to think of myself.

A different doctor visited me that morning, younger, and Japanese. He explained that my prolactin levels were elevated, suggesting my tumor was responsible. This kind of tumor could be treated with medication, and my prescription was waiting for me at the pharmacy downstairs. Prolactin levels regulate sleep and fatigue; I should be careful not to operate heavy machinery until I knew how I tended to react to the medication, because it was possible I would fall asleep without feeling drowsy. If, on the other hand, I found myself struggling to get enough sleep, I should call the hospital and tell them.

From behind the curtain that separated our beds, Takaaki interrupted. "I hear that medication can make you a sex fiend!" he said. "I'd better give you some privacy to talk about it." And he left the room.

Through his mildly stunned expression, the doctor chuckled a little, and I raised my eyebrows to indicate my curiosity. But I knew, of course, why Takaaki had left the room, and what he expected me to ask.

“The medication he’s probably thinking of is used to treat Parkinson’s. It has the same effect. It lowers prolactin levels. But its chemical mechanism is different, so it has a number of other effects—intended effects and side effects. Including a loss of inhibition in some patients. Compulsive behavior. So it has a bad reputation. The media sensationalized it a few years ago. Technically, yes, this medication could increase your sex drive. But only because elevated prolactin levels, which you have, can lower sex drive. So you would find yourself back where you would normally be.”

“Are you telling me the truth about my tumor?”

The doctor had been grinding the top knuckle of his index finger into the pad of his thumb while he spoke. He stopped, but kept his hand aloft, thumb and forefinger together near his lips. His expression had been pensive. Now it was quizzical. “The truth?”

“In America—for Americans—it’s considered very important that a patient know everything about his condition as soon as the information is available, even if it might be difficult for him to hear.”

The doctor rustled the papers on his clipboard. It wasn’t clear if he was reading anything, even searching for something, or if it was only a gesture.

“You have a pituitary tumor,” the doctor said. “It’s releasing prolactin. The medication should help. Did you discuss this with Doctor Yi?”

“Maybe I should speak with him.”

“He’s away at a conference in Yokohama. I’ll schedule an appointment.”

“How do you feel about it?” I’d said *anata*. I’d meant the intimacy of the second person to seem sudden, inappropriate. Feint, then thrust; I felt like I was fencing. I often felt that way when I used Japanese: with publishers, my agent, my neighbors, but hadn’t felt it in the last three days, with Takaaki, or the nurses, or with Doctor Yi.

“About what?” The doctor said. He didn’t seem confused by how I’d addressed him. I wasn’t a native speaker, after all—that’s probably what he thought.

“My diagnosis.”

Now he paused, and was very still. Maybe he held his breath. I felt studied, and I felt his body close to mine; I had less space to myself than an American doctor would have given. I remembered a time when a very angry, very intelligent student of mine had said—in front of a seminar—that I probably still went to see foreign doctors, and then named the very clinic. I hadn’t known whether to feel frightened at the possibility my student had been following me, or naked in the glare of his perspicacity. Then, too, I’d been terribly aware of my body. I think everyone remembers from childhood, and it makes them fear the equivalent moments in their adult lives, the sudden, intense vulnerability—giddy, even adrenal—of having been found in your special hiding place.

“I haven’t seen the scans,” the doctor said. “I only have Doctor Yi’s notes here. Mr. Levitsky, you see, I don’t want you to think, for example, that we’ve promised you a good outcome. We’re not giving you this medication because we believe it’s the ultimate solution. It’s possible you’ll still need to be operated on. But this medication is always the first line treatment for tumors of this type, and most people respond well, particularly when there isn’t much swelling to begin with. Some pituitary tumors aren’t operable because of their position or their proximity to the gland, and we couldn’t even tell you if surgery would be an option, in the event it became necessary, until we know how you’ve responded to the medication.”

The volume of his words passed over me. It wasn’t the kind of Japanese I was accustomed to hearing: all these particles and modifiers at the end of each sentence, a single syllable each, hard and arrhythmic, rendering whatever words had been spoken before them somehow atonal in retrospect. One heard it in television advertisements when an actor playing a doctor explained the medical principles underpinning a skin-lightening cream. One heard it from a car salesman describing the improvements to this year’s model. One heard it spewing from the sound trucks that streamed through Tokyo for weeks before every municipal election. Or one avoided it, if one could, this sound, like a thousand ceramic tiles clicking into place alongside each other, one after another. One especially avoided it if he wanted to write anything in a kind of Japanese worth reading.

When I was young, my father was stationed in Taiwan, and one of the old men who worked in the garden at the consulate would put me on his back; he'd carry me around the garden in circles, singing the same song to me in Hokkien—at least I thought he was singing. I was four years old, then five, and then we left Taiwan. When I was nine, I told my father I missed Chen-ho's song. "That wasn't singing," my father said. "He was talking, telling you about his family. It was different every time." But I was certain I remembered a particular melody, which I decided to keep secret from my father. In my adult life now, I reach for Chen-ho's song—the song I believed he sang for me—when I hear the colorless kind of Japanese the doctor used, and I crave tonality, and that insulates me somehow.

It wasn't that I had time to think all that while the doctor spoke. No, it was a short strain of Chen-ho's song, and then a moment where I watched the doctor's mouth move while he finished speaking, and then I answered back, right away.

"Do you speak Korean?" I said. I'd almost cut him off.

The doctor's head jerked back a little and he narrowed his eyes. Then he laughed, or at least let out a puff of air, like the beginning of laughter. He looked at me for a moment, then clipped his pen to his collar and stood up to leave. When he reached the room's doorway, he turned.

"Do *you*?" he said. *Anata mo?* And he left.

Takaaki wouldn't let me leave without eating lunch with him, and had the nurses bring an extra tray: cold soba, tofu with chives and soy sauce, a few pieces of vegetable tempura. It wasn't very good. I knew that. But it was better—or at least better for me—than what I fed myself, and three days of it had made me feel light and vital. I explained as much to Takaaki. Armed with this excuse, he turned his tray over to me and—against the protestations of the nurses—ordered takeout curry from a chain restaurant across the street. This was brought to him in a great assortment of cardboard boxes. He sat against the wall, his legs under the sheet, and spread the boxes out in front of him.

“What will you do when you get home?” he said.

“Write,” I said.

“Are you working on something?”

“I'm trying to write about America.”

“What about it?”

“About New York City. About my experiences there in the late '60s, the early '70s.”

“Is that where you're from?”

“No,” I said. I thought about whether that was enough of an answer—honest enough. “Sometimes I tell people I'm from New York, actually. But it isn't true.”

“Where, then?”

“Washington, DC.”

“That’s an important city, too.”

“Well, Arlington, actually. In Virginia. Just outside the city. Wealthy people live there now, young people. But when I was young, it was a poor town, and we lived next to the railroad tracks.”

“Wasn’t your father a diplomat?”

“He divorced my mother when I was five. I stayed with her when I was in America. He wasn’t always able—or willing, really—to take me with him.”

“So what’s the point in writing about New York?”

“I went to college in New Jersey. I spent a lot of weekends in New York.”

“I spend a lot of weekends playing pachinko. I wouldn’t write a book about it.”

“It was a vibrant place, you know. At that time. Writers were there. Things were happening. You could be gay. You could be black. You could be who you were.”

“You met these writers? You were involved in the literary scene?”

“No, no. I was young. I was studying Japanese at college. I didn’t realize I’d be a writer. I thought I just wanted to read a lot of Japanese books. I thought I’d be a professor. To tell you the truth, I really liked Mishima.”

“Mishima’s harmless,” Takaaki said. “Only a very lukewarm liberal would feel threatened by Mishima. But don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone.”

“It’s a known fact. A magazine once photographed me in my study. His complete works were on the shelf. Certain critics felt it necessary to take up the matter.”

“No friends of yours, huh?” Takaaki said. He pointed at me with his chopsticks.

“Don’t write about New York,” he said.

“Oh?”

“It’s bullshit. It’s got nothing to do with you.”

“What should I write about?”

“Write about Washington, DC. Write about your mother.”

“I haven’t been there in years.”

“Where do you go when you’re there?”

“Georgetown, I guess. A historic neighborhood, by the water. Old houses.

They’re the most expensive in the city now, but you can still see what it was like—because they’re also very well-preserved—to be a kind of middle-class person in that city when the nation was still young, when that was still a new capital. I don’t know how you feel when you see an old Edo castle, but I feel that way about Georgetown. If America were a feeling—a sensation.”

“That’s intriguing. Write about that, and write about your mother.”

“I’m not sure literature has a place for her.”

“What a dumb thing to say,” he said. “I don’t even know what it means.”

“She’s a Republican,” I said.

“Of course.”

“Of course?”

“Your father was a liberal, right? The government he worked for was the liberal party?”

“Yes.”

“She had to become a Republican after the divorce. That was her way.”

It was true. She’d never bothered with politics before that. “What else do you know about my mother?”

“She probably smoked.”

“Yes.”

“Wore makeup. Plenty of makeup.”

“Yes.”

Takaaki put his elbow on his knee and leaned his chin on his palm. His gaze seemed to drift out to the near distance, toward something he was imagining. “A woman like that, I always think of her smell. Cigarettes, makeup, little air fresheners around the house and in the cupboards. I bet she subscribed to catalogues. They came all the time, maybe a few every day. So the house smells like fresh magazine paper, cigarette butts, the makeup powder, the air fresheners. Probably, she kept the curtains drawn all the time, all around the house, and the smell gets trapped there. The curtains would always smell that way. When I think of a woman like that, I think of the smell of her curtains.”

It was such an evocative way of speaking, and he’d done it—somehow—without pretense. Not all of it was accurate, but it was very close. The curtains in her home were always drawn.

“I see you’re about to cry,” Takaaki said. He was right. But I didn’t. I didn’t let it go that far.

“A woman like what?” I said.

“Yes?”

“You said a ‘woman like that.’ ”

Takaaki’s eyes widened and his posture straightened, as if he’d come, very abruptly, to an obvious conclusion.

“Like you,” he said.

I made an effort not to feel too deeply about what he’d said. Or maybe it makes better sense to say that my mind made the effort. My thoughts lurched, first to whether or not the crow had come by my window today, and whether I had missed it while I’d been having lunch with Takaaki, and then to the matter of my house cleaners, who I’d scheduled for the day after my flight, and who had probably waited outside my house, in their smocks and aprons and surgical masks, holding their power washers and specialized tatami mat scrubbing devices, wondering how to resolve my absence. But I could only distract myself to an extent. In matters concerning my heart (and here I use the English word self-consciously, so meager and maudlin compared to its Japanese counterpart) it has always been true that every road sooner or later leads me home. My next thought was about Robert David, the very famous and narcissistic translator of Japanese literature—perhaps he was the only person who ever made this vocation seem suitable for Hollywood—who had been my mentor in college. It had first occurred to me that

one might be able to write in Japanese even if he were not, himself, of that nation, when I'd read an inscription that a prominent Japanese author (recently the recipient of the Nobel Prize) had written on the inside cover of a book he'd given to Robert, suggesting his talents were wasted on translation, and on English. I told Robert about it, and I made it clear that if he wasn't going to do it, I would, if only he'd teach me how. Robert had been amused in his condescending way, a way meant to suggest that he'd emerged from the womb with the cultural vocabulary and stiletto wit of an Andover boy. "Hank," he'd said (he knew I hated this diminutive; he was the only person in my life who ever used it) "I'd weep for you if I wasn't *certain* you already weep for yourself. That's just the kind of shit very smart, very famous, people *always* say to each other. A little aw-shucks, a little tap on the egg-shell ego. If you'd take that seriously, every part of you must be vulnerable. You're a walking wound." In remembering this, I had to contend with the present moment, because the two moments had a great deal in common—they vibrated each other and became very loud. They had in common *akogare*, which I can't translate. Scholars call it 'yearning' or 'longing' and I don't fault them. But one can long for a lucky lottery ticket. For brief, meaningless physical intimacy. One can yearn for a drink of water, yearn to visit a city they once lived in. The Japanese word is different; it is haunted by the specter of impossibility. A peasant's gaze alights on a princess, and he is never the same again. A father dreams of speaking with his only son, who died in a battle a year ago. These are the stories one tells with *akogare*, the sensations the word describes. A very dear friend of mine—maybe the dearest—once instructed me that this idea is the

fundament of the Japanese experience, bursting forth into language. It's much simpler than that. It is the space that separates individuals, which is very thin, but also very wide. It is also the quantity of need which presses up behind us, and we hold it there. If we didn't, it would carry us through that space—farther, perhaps, than we are ready to go.

I'd been quiet a while, and Takaaki let me. Eventually he said, "We haven't had such different lives." I wasn't sure how much time had passed. He went on. "I'd like if you came back to visit me. Then I could tell you about it."

I managed a nod, I think.

We were interrupted by the nurse, who entered to let me know I'd been given an appointment with Doctor Yi in ten days. She said Doctor Yi sent his regards from Yokohama, and that he'd asked for a small favor. The nurse handed over a shopping bag, from a bookstore. A copy of one of my books was inside. "The doctor wanted me to ask if you'd mind signing it," she said. I said I didn't. She left the book and went back to the nurse's station.

It made sense this was the book the store kept in stock—*Chiji ni kudakete. Broken Into a Thousand Pieces*. It had sold well. Cram schools taught an excerpt. But I felt self-conscious removing it from the bag. It would strike Takaaki, I thought, as another slice of the proverbial cow pie. It was, whatever one's estimation of its merit, the least subtle dramatization of my pet themes: A Jewish American author of Japanese language novels visits home, and happens to be on a side trip to Ontario when the World Trade Center is destroyed, leaving him stranded in a hotel room north of the newly-shut border. Of

course, the book includes a subtle exploration of the event's effect on the expatriate psyche in a time of crisis, separated from its culture of origin as well as its culture of choice. I could even credit myself with a gripping depiction of border bureaucracy's internecine intrigue. But a cynic would point out that the book is mostly about a man who is very, very upset that he can only order room service in English.

Takaaki, anyway, had used this break in conversation to begin eating with gusto. Not in the Japanese style, concentrating on one element of his meal, but by choosing bits from each of the Styrofoam containers, sometimes mixing them together.

“What a shame,” he said between mouthfuls. “I don’t own any of your books. But my wife left her fashion magazine here, if you want to sign something for me.”

Thirty years after Robert David had described me as a walking wound, he gave a revised recounting of that afternoon to a journalist. In the new version, he continued to describe me as wide-eyed and vulnerable, but in recalling the moment when he’d disparaged me, he fabricated a very noble sense of determination on my behalf. “He looked right at me,” Robert told the interviewer, “And said: *Muko wo baru.* ‘I will surpass you.’ And he has. I’m proud of him.” Now I opened Doctor Yi’s copy of my book and wrote on the inside cover. *For Doctor Yi: May he remain unsurpassed.*

I handed the book to Takaaki, since I did not want to disturb our last minutes together by calling the nurse. “I’ll sign one of your poetry books,” I said.

“Only,” he replied, chewing a slice of pork as he spoke, “if you tell me who’s the better poet.”

I was thinking of how to answer. When I remember it, I remember the quiver in the corner of his mouth, and the inhale along with it, not quite intact. There wasn't time to recognize what this meant. Takaaki choked—or tried to, and made a watery sound in his throat. His knees jerked—he was trying to get up, but the tucked sheets kept him sitting—and disturbed the boxes of food, some of which overturned onto the sheets, and the rest fell on the floor. Takaaki held up a hand. The hand shook. His breath rattled.

I got up and stood next to the bed. I laid my hands on his shoulders to keep him steady, and he stopped laboring so much. I lifted one of my hands up to his mouth. I put my index and middle fingers inside. He almost bit, then relaxed. I tried to reach into his throat, but his tongue stopped me. I had to wrap a finger around it and press it down. I kept it suppressed like that. I slid my fingers along it, farther back. I'd never felt another person's tongue. I'd felt other tongues with mine; I'd felt tongues on my body. But not with my fingertips, which is what people mean when they say it—like a fingertip is almost as good as an eye. His tongue kept pressing up and back, trying to curl in on itself. It was wide and flat and rough. The valleys in it rubbed the pads of my fingers. My brother has a geographic tongue. It felt the way that looks.

The nurse had come in now, after hearing the noise. I felt her hand on my arm, trying to pull me off. Then I felt what was stuck in there, the pork he'd been eating. It felt like another tongue, but small and thin. It got between my fingers, so I crossed them, the way you do for good luck. I jerked my wrist back and it came loose. Takaaki leaned forward. He bit my hand. He made a sound halfway between a sneeze and a wretch.

Drool flowed out of his mouth, down his shirt. And that was it. My hand was out. There were two nurses. They were laying him down. They were asking him questions.

One of the nurses said, “Mr. Son needs to rest. We’ll bring your bags downstairs.”

“What’s going on here?” Takaaki said. “Can’t a man disapprove of his food without provoking a medical intervention?” But he wasn’t smiling, and the little effort he made to sit up, he quickly abandoned.

“I’ll visit,” I said. “Soon.”

Takaaki nodded.

“Take the bed by the window,” I said. “They say if you rise with the sun every morning, it increases your life expectancy.”

He smiled now, and gestured at his throat, which I understood: not to send me away, but to show he would have laughed if he’d been able. I bowed and turned to leave.

“Wait,” he said. He pulled a book down from the shelf and withdrew a piece of *genko* paper. “When you come back, you can tell me what you think. Write your own poem on the other side if you want.”

I went back to the bed and took the paper. I bowed again and left.

An attendant brought my bags downstairs. Through his white linen hospital uniform, I could make out the t-shirt he was wearing, of a man with purple hair and bulging muscles, launching a bolt of energy at a scaly mutant. The attendant was twenty, maybe. He had a streak of purple in his own hair, down the side. He’d drawn an elaborate doodle pattern on the webbing between his left thumb and forefinger, in blue

pen ink. I'd known Japanese college students who drew on themselves when they were nervous. "I'll call a cab for you," he said.

"I'm going to walk to the train," I said. "I'm just thinking about where I am."

"Which line do you need?"

"JR."

"Shin-Okubo station is five blocks east." He gestured toward a bank of windows to our right. Then he lingered, looking hesitant.

"Just say it."

"Well, if you're walking, and you've been hospitalized, it's a policy that I take you as far as the station in a wheelchair."

"Can't you see I'm a foreigner?"

"I'm very sorry. So sorry," the attendant said, bowing and backpedaling.

I felt wrong for having been short. "I like your shirt," I said.

He stopped. He was a few yards away, and we just looked at each other.

"My nephew wears the same one," I said. I don't have any nephews.

This produced a smile, and another bow, which I returned. "*Surei shimasu*," I said. Sorry to leave you alone.

I went outside. It was hot and overcast. July had become August while I'd been inside. Tokyo had decamped for O-Bon, and the streets were mostly empty. I felt like I'd emerged from a short, bright tunnel into the daylight. Daylight, but dull, metallic.

I unfolded the sheet of *genko*. Takaaki had written a *tanka*. I read it. It went:

The leaves descend,

brittle and frail in the fall.

The lonely branches.

The cold, white sun. But now: spring.

Now the world—and I—will bloom.

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(part 3)

Besides my brother Lennie, with whom I share both parents, and my sister Tina, with whom I share neither, I have a half-sister, Indra, who is my father's only daughter. She is a professor at Stanford, married to another woman who is also a professor at Stanford. Her books—there are two of them—are very carefully written character assassinations of male authors who write primarily about men. Once, at a writing conference in Tokyo, one of her colleagues from another university told me he admired my half-sister's impeccable sense of 'historicity.' I replied: "I admire her willingness to tolerate flatulent encomia." Americans—and English—extract a kind of bitterness from me I thought I'd long abandoned.

When I arrived at my hotel just outside Georgetown, the orange light on my room's telephone was already blinking, and Indra had left a message. "Tak," she said, "I was at Columbia. I saw the advance praise copy of *Natsu no kikon*. They blurbed you the first 'white man' to write in Japanese. Aren't you tired of being white? I certainly am. Anyway—thought you should know." Indra's mother was Chinese, but Indra looked less Asian (or less the way Americans imagine Asian people to look) as she aged. The sallow

girl with slender fingers and sickle moon eyebrows persisted only in my memory. Or perhaps she looked precisely like herself, but I, on the other hand, had learned something about looking, and no longer saw her the way my father had seen her, which was the way he'd seen her mother: fragile, beautiful—more like a cloud than a person.

I *was* tired of being white. Hadn't that been a reason for leaving? But whenever I came back I could always tell, or I was always reminded, that I wasn't nearly as tired of it as everyone here, in America. I saw it—one saw it, if they looked—in the trains and in the buses; in the terrible, cavernous grocery stores and in the rat-infested bodegas; in the grandeur of the monuments and federal buildings, and in the brown streaks of rust on the only bridge into the poor part of town, the dangerous part of town. And on that bridge those streaks of rust began at the tips of the trusses and continued down from there. One saw that, if one looked. And it gave one the sense that these trusses were like eyes. A great many things were like eyes. These people, my countrymen, were the most watched people in the world. Worst of all: It was not that they watched each other. They watched themselves. They had to. They did not trust anyone else enough to let them do it.

So I felt this way, sitting alone in the hotel room, and I placed the phone back in its cradle. Then I looked out the window, and up the hill was the place where the Russians had built their new embassy during the Cold War, presumably because the elevated spot was perfect for the clandestine interception of radio signals. But the building had never become an embassy, not after the Russians discovered nearly a

thousand listening devices had been planted in the walls by American intelligence agents posing as construction workers. But what did that have to do with me? I was amused to find myself thinking that Indra's colleague had been right about what made hers a special intellect. I remembered telling her once that my favorite memories of America were memories of attending Vietnam war protests, and I didn't know why they were so pleasant to recall, since I'd never been a member of any anti-war group. "It's easier to think about history than it is to think about people," she'd said.

There was an odor from the bathroom, sweet and antiseptic. The small refrigerator in the corner rumbled and began to sigh rhythmically. I perched somewhere between relief and despair, aware that I'd lose my balance if I thought about it much, since thought inevitably leads to language, and language isn't like the heart; language only knows a few songs—a few old songs.

The phone rang. I hoped it might be Indra. But it was a man's voice, from the front desk.

"Mister, uh, mister—I don't want to mispronounce this."

"Levitsky. I'm sorry, I put my first name last. That's how we do it in—where I come from."

"Oh. Just Levitsky? All right. There's a woman down here, she wants to see you."

I checked the alarm clock on the nightstand. I wasn't expecting anyone until eight.

"Send her up."

"You don't want to know—"

“Is there a problem?”

“Well, she says she’s your sister.”

“She is.”

“Well, sir, I don’t know how to—OK, it’s just. She’s bla—she’s African American, sir, and I remembered—”

“You must be very tired of being white,” I said. Somehow I felt less alone than I had a moment ago, saying it to him.

“Sir?”

“She’s my sister. She’s early, but she’s my sister. Send her up.”

“Yes, sir. And sir?”

“Yes?”

“I’m very sorry, sir. I didn’t mean to—it’s just we’ve had some problems with vagrants before, sir, and—”

“You’re absolved.”

I hung up. I wasn’t really offended. If anything, I was amused. Caution and apology. Like I’d never left Japan. Why, then, did I feel very strongly reminded of where I was?

There was a knock, and I opened the door.

“Yoga clothes,” Tina explained. I could see why the front desk had troubled me. She was dressed too heavily for the weather, in a sweatshirt and thick tights. The

sweatshirt was ripped and paint-stained. She always wore her hair wild, but at least curled a little. Today, it was in an afro.

“I took the week off. I had so much vacation time saved, I had to use it or lose it.”

“Don’t people wear shorts to exercise? T-shirts?”

She went by me into the bathroom. She picked through the complimentary soaps and lotions. “Hot yoga. You gotta sweat. Anyway, everything was in the laundry except my turban. I figured they’d let a nigger in before a terrorist.”

I sat down on the bed. “Is it too late? Dinner’s on me if you wear the turban.”

“Dinner’s on you anyway, Steinbeck. Speaking of: we still going to see Lennie tomorrow? My boyfriend’s got a play on at some big-ass theater. 14th Street. You know about the *new* 14th Street? I need to get free by evening.”

“Find another country.”

“What?”

“This is America. If you need to be *free* by tomorrow night—board a plane.”

“America, huh? I must’ve got lost. I thought this was DC. I ain’t vote for no Congressman. No, suh!”

“What about 14th Street?”

“Motherfucker.”

“Me?”

“No—this lotion bottle. I go to fix myself and break a fingernail.”

“They grow back.”

“They’re fake, love. 14th Street, too.”

“We called it Black Broadway when I was a kid.”

“No black, no Broadway. All condos, down to Florida Avenue. Hasn’t been a mugging on U Street in weeks. That’s how you know. There goes the neighborhood.”

“I don’t remember people getting mugged on 14th. You didn’t go there if you were pale, but it was safe. Then, anyway. Before white flight.”

“Love, I just put my earrings in. I can’t fight with my earrings in. You do me a favor and don’t use those words.”

“Which words?”

“Weren’t no angels, flying away on a bright, white light. If they could fly, they wouldn’t put granny in the backseat next to the Magnavox. Call it something else.”

“White slither,” I said.

“Tell it, Brother Henry.”

“Let them eat Levittown.”

“Levittown?”

“The birthplace of tract housing. The home of the free.”

“All right. Nowadays, freedom is a Big Mac, isn’t it? You got Big Macs in Japan?”

“We do.”

“My boss, you know, Mr. Terry. I told you about him. He’s a big man. Real fat. I’m like a underwear model, next to him. The other the day the secretary calls in sick so Mr. Terry told me go get his lunch. He said he wants two Big Macs. I say, ‘Mr. Terry,

you're pre-diabetic. And I met your wife. I know how she feels about it.' He said, 'Maybe it's bad for me, but I got the right. This is America and I want two Big Macs.' He was serious. And I knew just what he meant. About America. I thought to myself: That's your whole problem, Tina. You know just what he means."

"Well you do a good job with it—making it *their* problem. Just now you made the concierge feel like a Klan member."

She laughed. I couldn't see her from the bed, but the way it echoed, it sounded like she'd laughed into the sink. She ran the water, then turned it off. "I do appreciate you, Henry. I can't talk about this kind of shit with nobody else."

"I didn't know you wanted to."

"No sense in wishing. What's the plan for tomorrow? You coming with me to the play? I can get you a ticket. It's sold out, but my man did all the light for it. I didn't know that was so important, but I saw what they paid him—just for setting up the lights?—and Lord, well, he must be *somebody* to those people."

"Actors live for good lighting. It's the only way to make people see them the way they see themselves. That and makeup. You can paint your own face. You can't run your own lights." Did I want to go? I would never have seen a movie in America, not in a theater, not in that most intimate, most alienated and atomized space, not with these transfixed people, alone together in the dark. But I might see a play. There were American plays I wished I could have seen in Japan, and once I tried to see one—*Blues for Mister Charlie*—but I couldn't bear to see it, couldn't bear to listen to the broken

Japanese that had been scripted to make sense of American Negro speech, nor the uninterrogated irony of placing it in the mouths of dark-skinned Chinese actors who certainly knew better, and who were not being paid very well to pretend they didn't. "I think that's maybe the one thing I *would* like to do, culturally, while I'm here," I said. "See a play."

"And what about Lennie? What time do we leave?"

"Anytime you want. You like to stay out there all day. Not me."

"You serious?"

"I think I am. Why?"

"It might take some time. For Lennie. For the two of you. Some alone time." She came out of the bathroom and leaned against the doorframe. Now she had red lipstick on, still in her exercise clothes. She meant it to look ridiculous. A walking confrontation.

I had to look out the window to order my thoughts. M Street was a knot of traffic. Pigeons roosted on the power lines, from the hotel all the way to the end of the block, where the wires disappeared underground. Each pigeon seemed uniformly equidistant from the next. Tina went back to the bathroom. Still, I felt watched. She started humming. Then she half-sang it: *Sometimes I feel—*

"Stop," I said. "Please."

"Henry. Steinbeck. Writer-man. If you didn't think about it until today, I forgive you. But tonight, you think about it. You think about Lennie, and how you can *tell* him."

Lennie lived in the Henryton Home for developmentally handicapped adults, two hours south of DC, in central Virginia. The home was on a campus of dilapidated Neo-Georgian buildings, formerly a tuberculosis sanitarium. I'd once watched Lennie play Biff Loman in a one-act adaptation of *Death of a Salesman*, in the sanitarium's old theater building, where the walls were painted turquoise and the curtains—even drawn all the way to the side—hung in moth-eaten tatters. The next time I came back to visit, the theater building was gone. Tina told me it had burned down. Probably teenagers. Broke in overnight, hung around drinking, left a cigarette butt in a wastebasket. When it burned, everyone at the home—staff, residents—had come out onto the lawn in front of the dormitory and watched. After a while, the staff noticed my brother had laid himself down and gone to sleep on the grass, so Tina stayed with him a little while there, sat next to him and watched the fire until he stirred and she woke him to go inside.

Tina isn't my sister except in name and intention. Before she got laid off and found her new job, she was the in-house social worker at Henryton. I met her the first time I went to visit my brother there, in the early days of mother's ill health, when it became clear my mother could no longer care for him and care for herself. He was, like me, in his 40s then, but seemed so young; like age itself hadn't properly developed in him, either. Later, it seemed as if he became an old man overnight; the years he'd cheated had caught him alone somewhere and forced him to stoop. But that first time, I found him outside in the little courtyard in front of the home's administration building, standing on a step-ladder, filling a birdfeeder from a bag of sunflower seeds. See, my brother never

had trouble with his coordination; he could have climbed a ladder every time my parents weren't watching and we wouldn't have known it. But when he was still young and we were still a family, we presumed that the same misfortune that had made him slow to recognize a song from its words, which had made him take tomatoes and onions from the refrigerator and bite them, thinking they were apples, which had made him hug my mother and father suddenly from behind, his arms around their waists (even when he was grown) like a lover—we presumed this had also made him feeble bodily, and so we loved him primarily with fear. Our fear that he would kill himself somehow, and that we, upon reflection, would turn out to be murderers. When I saw him on the step-ladder, with the heavy sack, it was the only love I'd been taught—to imagine his body buckled on the ground at the foot of the ladder, and the birdseed spilled everywhere. That's when I met Tina, who happened by and saw me, and might have known what I was thinking, because she said, "He does this every afternoon. He insists." And she introduced herself. When Lennie finished and came down from the ladder, he said. "Sister, sister." Then he explained. "This is my sister." Tina looked at me and said that meant she'd have to be my sister, too. Can I be your sister? She asked me that. Or was it: Will you be my brother? Somehow, she asked. I remember the sun was behind her. I had to put my hand to my forehead to really see her. I'm not sure I can say what I saw. She was tall. She was black—or that's what people probably called her. Her hair hung wild around her head, curled in tiny, tight ringlets, hundreds of them, partly dyed blond in an intricate pattern, like they had been woven from leopard's fur. She was large around the middle, and her

weight seemed to tug her forward, away from herself, as if she was always on the verge of taking another step. And yet, I didn't see any of that. I didn't see that she was, as an American might economically put it, a fat black woman with a hairdo. That is not how one looks at another person, if one really looks. Perhaps all I can say is that I saw her very clearly, and it was very comfortable, seeing her like that.

Now she came out of the bathroom again and sat next to me on the bed. She put her arm around my shoulder and pulled my head against hers. "Motherless child," she said. Looking at her from so close, her face seemed to wrap around my vision and drift toward me, like a moving object's shadow. I felt the same way I'd felt when we'd met—that this was a form of kindness, this holding still where I could see her.

"You trust that song," I said. I didn't want to cry, but I knew I might. I wanted to talk. About my mother, sure. And about Lennie. And about the way time seems to pass at a different rate for different parts of you. It might help—help? Is that the word?—to talk. But I didn't trust the impulse, the sensation, which felt like trying to climb up into a funnel.

"I trust the ones who sang it."

"You can't really *say* emotions, can you? You can't sing them, either. But you can get very close. Like that song."

"Go on." She meant: I'm going to be patient with you.

"They're different things, what you sing about and the singing you do. I could say, 'I am sad.' But it's not literature. It's nothing."

“You could sing it, too.”

“I could, but it wouldn’t be a song. Not right away. Not by itself.”

“Who’s to say?”

“Well, there’s a woman in Japan—she’s Japanese, but she writes in Hungarian—and she gave a talk once. I went to it—” I was going to explain how this woman thought about language: that she’d been thrust into it, at birth, like a cat into a sack. But I wasn’t able to explain, because Tina leaned into me with her lips and forced her tongue into my mouth. It surprised me, and then again it didn’t. We’d always been easy with each other’s bodies. It was part of the joke we shared—that we weren’t the kind of people the world wanted to imagine naked. Really, I reacted to the kiss the way any teenager would: I felt ugly. I felt I smelled bad. I felt that if the kissing proceeded to touching, my body would reveal a very unhappy secret, and the resulting glare would make apparent how little affection I was really worth. I don’t mean to give the impression that I wasn’t living a sexual life in Tokyo. I was. But only with other men, and only in circumstances of mutual—mostly transactional—comprehension. Now Tina seemed to be pushing her tongue into me as far as it would go, in a motion that would have made a clucking sound if my own tongue hadn’t prevented it. Then she pulled away.

“Well,” I said.

“You needed it.” She looked at me and she laughed. Then she lifted a hand to her lips, where her lipstick had smeared.

“I’m not sure.” I examined my reflection in the chrome features of the lamp on the nightstand, where my face was distorted and enormous.

“I know you don’t play with women. But sometimes it just seems like all you ever do with that mouth is talk. You talk with it. We all do. It’s the only way we know. But Lord, you talk *about* it. And that’s where you carry your suffering, Henry. Sometimes I think if I could see inside that mouth, you’d be all hunched over inside there, like somebody was about hit you—hit you on your tongue.”

It was my tendency (learned to the point it had become natural) to interpret, to translate. To think that, in a moment like this one, I needed to reflect what Tina was saying in the words and notions most familiar to me. So I said: “Some indigenous people think of their tongues as wounds that never heal. It’s—”

Tina lifted a hand to stop me. “You still up in your head, like you locked inside it.” She made a gesture with her hands, like the drawing open of a bolt. “Try it that way,” she said.

The food at dinner wasn’t good. We walked down the street to a tavern-style restaurant, the highbrow kind frequented by Capitol Hill workers. Everything was rich and overpriced, and if it wasn’t steak, it was soaked in *au jus* anyway. All over the restaurant, TVs in the ceiling and walls were set to CNN. An anchor said something about terrorists, and Tina—who was three brandy stingers into her meal—yelled at the screen. “Terrorist my titty. They got names. Real people names.” We drew a few stares, which I guess

wasn't enough for Tina, because she paid for our meal with her credit card, signed it *Infidel* and called her card issuer on the way back to my hotel to report the card stolen.

I looked forward to Tina's company. I didn't think she was funny, at least not in the way she tried so hard to be, but I thought she was very human.

We slept at my hotel, in the same twin bed, holding each other now and again through the night. Neither of us were in our clothes, and we'd both had too much to drink. I'd press my nose against her neck or burrow my lips into her armpit. She did smell. Like exercise. Like clean sweat, but it was a strong odor. I was aroused—physically—but didn't want to do anything about it. Not with a woman. She held parts of me. My face, of course. Also my stomach, which was large and round—I weighed more than I'd ever thought I would. She held my hands, and then my feet. She rubbed my hips and my shoulders. She said, "Henry, you'd have been pretty. If you wanted to be. But you wanted to be something else." Then we slept.

We woke with the sun the next morning (we'd forgotten to draw the blinds). Tina showered and wore my clothes—just a pair of slacks and a white undershirt—until we stopped by her house, where she ran inside to change while I waited in the passenger seat of her car. It was clear out, and it wasn't humid. Not at all like late summer in Washington, though it was both of those things. I couldn't remember a day I'd gone to visit Lennie when the weather hadn't been nice—when I hadn't looked forward to the long drive out to Rappahannock County, taking the county roads all the way from Washington, watching the gleaming steel and glass of the office parks inside the Beltway,

then the beige uniformity of exurban subdivisions and on-post housing until Quantico, after which Virginia farmland appeared and we would pass through historic downtowns full of Reconstruction-era buildings, half of them condemned. If I really thought about it, I knew it wasn't the weather I looked forward to, or even the pleasant and meaningless—pleasant *because* it was meaningless—glimpse of my country's social arrangements through the car window. It was my brother. Henryton was not an easy place to see. Any place like that is full of hardship, and many of the people most deeply invested in it (staff, residents' families) try so absurdly to invest hardship with dignity that their attempts become the most vulgar thing about the place. But I loved my brother. When I was leaving America, my only hesitation was leaving him. Then I found that he had followed me, and was always in my mind. I found that when I wrote, even about myself, it was in my brother's voice. It took me a long time to realize this, and until I did I only knew the voice in my writing wasn't very often my own. I thought of my brother when I wrote, but I also thought it couldn't have been him I was imitating, because he hardly ever spoke, and, when he did, it wasn't in the manner of prose, nor anything like prose. It was only on a particular day a few years ago, on a visit like this one, that something he said struck me—for its evenness and emptiness, as if by speaking the words he'd let go of a pebble, and it had dropped somewhere inside me. Before that day, he'd said other wonderful things. I kept a little book of them: "My eyes are naked, but I won't put on glasses." "Turn on the TV. I want to lie down and go." "Everyone I know is late for the train." But when he spoke to me on that particular day, the last of three

we'd spent together, just as I was about to leave him alone in his room, I understood it was him I was speaking for, and always would be. I'd already turned to go, and my mind had left ahead of me, because I was thinking about what time it was in Tokyo, and I was thinking whether it was too late to call my agent at home and see if he would want to pitch a book about tuberculosis sanitariums in pre-War Japan, places which extracted great sympathy from contemporary Japan's collective, historical imaginary, sympathy I could frustrate by writing about the conscripted Korean labor that made the sanitariums possible. You see, I was gone. I wasn't in the room with Lennie at all. Not until he spoke. "Go home for me," he said. I had the doorknob in my hand, but I didn't remember reaching for it. I turned around. Lennie had turned on the TV, and he was watching it. He didn't look away from the TV, but he closed his eyes. "Henry," he said. Then he said it again. "Go home for me."

I had dozed off in the passenger seat by the time Tina finished changing. We drove to Henryton. Near the campus there's a little town, if you can call it that. Just a handful of buildings on either side of the state road, and just beyond the town, on the western side of the road, at a railway crossing, the land drops off into a valley on the border of Chatocin State Park. A county road cuts through the parkland in a long arc, leading to a bridge over a stream, and to the front gate of the Henryton campus. Tina parked at the gravel trailhead next to the rail crossing, where a signboard held a map of the park and its hiking trails.

I asked why she'd stopped there.

“Haven’t you wanted to see it sometimes?” she said, and turned off the car.

“See what?”

“Go up through the park. Through the tunnel there. Come up the back way onto campus.”

“Tunnel?”

“You’ve never seen it? You can see it, just past those trees.”

I looked. I thought maybe I could see the edge of a stone wall. “I’ve never seen it,” I said.

“It’s an old rail tunnel. 1853.”

“How far would we walk?”

“Not far. A few minutes. I used to do it in the mornings if I had time. To get centered, you know? I know you know. You on the outside, too, trying to get in. The tunnel is special, though. It’s curved, sharp. You ever been in a tunnel like that?”

“I might have. I can’t remember for certain.”

“If you had, you’d remember. Come on.”

We got out of the car and began to follow the tracks, into the woods. It was the kind of landscape that fools a person like me, a person who suffered some of his education in American elementary schools—fools me into remembering an origin myth, fools me into a nostalgia not my own, a longing toward the land, which must be the land of my father, and maybe even my grandfathers, but certainly not my great-grandfathers, because they came from somewhere else, and certainly not the land of my mother, or my

mother's mother, or her mother, because of the unhappy accident of their female birth, though America would claim them all if it could, these sons and daughters of the very same revolution I couldn't help but think of—as if it had anything to do with me—while I followed the tracks through the dogwoods, oaks and birches, descending into a valley between two rolling hills, able to see the land—or so I had been fooled into believing—the way a pilgrim might have seen it, or a settler at Jamestown: land full of modest naked promise, the land itself puritan in its appearance, just like the people it had been destined to receive, the land itself blushing in the midst of its plenty, the land precisely as those people had imagined it, precisely as they would continue to imagine it, no matter the cost of forcing their weak, limpid imagination onto the land and everyone who would ever live there. Tina and I walked without speaking. On and off again, she walked on the rails and tried to balance. I found myself walking in between the ties, on the gravel, wanting not to step on the ties, which somehow felt most natural to me. Wanting to walk in the center of the tracks, but not wanting to touch them.

We came to the tunnel, which was built into a small ridge and continued through the hill we'd been walking toward. The portal, maybe forty feet tall, and equally wide, was all brick, some of it gray now, some still brownish-red, much of it growing moss and small, hanging flowers. *HENRYTON*, it read, at the tip of the arch. *B & O – 1853. OLD MAIN LINE*. I smiled when I read it—the Old Main Line part. I thought about the little cluster of buildings on either side of the state road. I thought about how long it would

take to drive from here to anywhere that mattered. An hour to Fredericksburg. Another hour and a half to Washington—on the new main line.

Tina stopped at the mouth of the tunnel and turned sideways toward it. She motioned for me to do the same.

“Hear it?” she said.

I did. The sound of all the air swirling inside the tunnel, reflected and amplified every time it struck the tunnel’s brick lining, and trapped there in the tunnel’s curve. If a white noise machine had a speaker the size of a small building, it might be able to make a noise like that. Not that it was loud. No, it was very soft. But it seemed to inhabit every frequency at once. The air whistled like a boiling kettle and it thrummed like a waterfall, and everything in between.

“I haven’t heard anything like that before,” I said.

Tina laughed. “Course you haven’t. That’s what quiet sounds like.”

She entered the tunnel and I walked after her. I had the sense of being surrounded, enclosed on all sides by the noise and the air, and I thought I could even feel it rushing around me in every direction at once. The light dimmed the further into the tunnel we went. My eyes hadn’t adjusted, so I began to walk tentatively, using the sound of Tina’s footsteps in front of me as a guide, which didn’t quite work because the sound had begun to echo on all sides of me. My foot brushed one of the rails and then I was off the tracks, on a little gravel decline, facing, I guessed, toward the wall of the tunnel. I would have called out, but Tina’s footsteps stopped, too.

“Can you see?” she said.

“Not yet.”

“Not never—not ever, I mean. The tunnel curves too much. We’re right in that spot. You could wait. I’ve tried, but it won’t matter.”

I tried to focus my eyes on my feet. At first I couldn’t see anything except the dark. Slowly, blurry outlines appeared at the edge of my vision, in a silvery color, and began to drift through each other in an elliptical pattern. “Either I’m straining my eyes,” I said “or I’m *seeing* my eyes.”

“Love, just be silent for a minute.”

I was. I relaxed my eyes. The shapes disappeared. I couldn’t see. As the moments passed, I became less convinced I could hear. The noise in the tunnel was becoming less audible, very much like air, present in a way I no longer noticed. Then I felt Tina take my hand, except that—at first—because I wasn’t attached to my senses in the usual way, I didn’t think about how it was probably Tina’s hand. Had I ever learned a hand the way I’d learned faces? I just felt the hand in mine, and it could have been anyone’s hand, or everyone’s hand, or it could even have been my brother’s hand. Then a voice said, “I’ll show you the way out.” And that was Tina’s voice, so it must have been her hand. I held it, and I followed her.

Lokoja

Agbo felt pitiless toward the South African, now surrounded by pleading children, one of whom clung to his pant leg. Agbo guessed the South African had given that child money. How naïve. Now Agbo would have to disperse the children. They were drawing attention to the South African, which would draw attention to the bus he had been riding in. Agbo's bus. And the blown-out tire, which had yielded a fist-sized clump of tar filled with nails and glass. Agbo knew what that could mean in Nigeria, what it almost always meant in Lokoja.

Agbo approached them. "You dey go now," he said. He waved toward the far side of the travel plaza. None of the children moved. "Put leg for road!" He cuffed the nearest boy. The boy looked up at Agbo, pressed his fingertips and thumb together, and gestured toward his mouth. "Oga," he said. "Oga. Oga. Give me ten naira. Twenty naira, Oga."

"Nothing's the matter," said the South African. The corner of his smile twitched where a line of sweat crossed it. "Just kids. I understand." He put his hand in his pocket.

Agbo gripped the South African's wrist. "You dey see me trouble. Keep quiet now." He squatted to face the girl clinging to the South African, at eye level. She'd wrapped her arms around the South African's leg. She was beautiful. Seven years old, maybe. Wisp-bodied, high cheekbones, wavy umber-colored hair. Like an Arab. Green

eyes. Hausa girls outgrew their beauty, Agbo knew. Hausa girls who lived near the travel plaza. When they were old enough, they sold it.

Agbo picked up a handful of dirt. The dirt around the travel plaza was more litter than soil. He weighed it in his hand. He waited for the girl to relax. “Take dash,” he said. He held up twenty naira, out of the girl’s reach. She grabbed for it.

He moved like a sprung trap. The money disappeared into his palm. He pinched the back of the girl’s neck. She lifted her shoulders to push his fingers away. Her chin tilted. Her lips parted. Agbo flattened his other hand against her mouth, grinding dirt and broken glass into her lips and teeth and chin. She tried to spit. Agbo closed his hand around her lips. She wretched. She held onto the South African’s leg. Agbo hooked a finger into her mouth, between her teeth and the inside of her cheek. A flush passed through him; she was warm and soft. He pulled sideways. A sharp, sudden motion. The girl let go, sat down, and brought her thumb into her mouth to rub the spot. Drool leaked out under her thumb, and clods of wet dirt. She didn’t make any noise.

Agbo scooped more dirt and lunged at another boy. The children dispersed, running in all directions.

“Are you insane?” the South African said. He stepped toward Agbo. Agbo stood. Their faces nearly touched. Agbo was tall and broad. He was old, but he was Biafran. His gray, etched face marked him as a man who’d wagered his wits and an unloaded rifle against tanks and planes and four centuries of empire. He had survived on cockroaches, mice and cassava leaves for three years because he loved his God and nation. This was

apparent in his posture. Always a subtle forward tilt, as if he'd laid an ambush. The South African stepped back, but his tone didn't soften. "You put rubbish in her mouth."

"Dis maga," Agbo said. "Not a small thing."

"What's not a small thing?"

"You dey sabi small small?"

The South African opened his mouth, but didn't speak.

"Pidgin?"

"A little. I – no, actually. Not really."

Agbo remembered the South African boarding the bus that morning. With his young son. Why bring a child to Nigeria? The South African had paused at the bus's door to examine the sky.

"First time Nigeria?" Agbo said.

"My third time. I bought a hotel in Enugu three months ago."

There had been a time when Agbo would have tried to befriend a man like this. A man from a prosperous nation. A man of so-called means. No longer. Money had not changed; still, it was everywhere and everything. And Agbo had not changed. Nigerians had changed. Money had changed them: Replaced their tribes with tribalism. Clogged God's ears with petty pleading. If you asked Agbo, he would tell you: when he was young, there was a country.

"Why you don't know pidgin?"

"I fly, usually. Fly in, meet with my managers, fly out."

“Why you don’t fly this time?”

“The strike started today,” the South African said. “Domestic flights are cancelled.”

Agbo looked past the South African to the lot where the buses were parked. He faulted himself for not having noticed earlier: there were more buses like Agbo’s than usual. So-called executive coaches – eleven-seat vans, heavy curtains across the windows and off-duty soldiers in the front passengers’ seats. The rich were traveling by bus. He no longer wondered if there would be robberies or kidnappings near Lokoja today. He wondered how many.

“We dey leave now,” Agbo said. He pointed to the plaza building. “Go inside. Find every. Bring to bus.”

“What about the tire?”

“I dey fix,” Agbo said. “Fast now.”

Agbo watched the South African until he’d entered the building, then crossed to the far edge of the parking lot, where he’d parked the bus and paid some local boys to find a new tire. Okeke, the soldier hired to ride with Agbo, was in the passenger seat. The South African’s son sat on the floor. The boy gripped the soldier’s rifle by the barrel and peered down into it with one eye, then the other. Okeke, who was young himself – nineteen, he’d said – had removed the ammunition clip. His rifle wasn’t ready. In Lokoja.

“You don’t make ready,” Agbo said.

“If you use gun, you are fighting,” Okeke said. “If you use brain, maybe you are surviving.” Okeke sat with his hips open, one foot on the dashboard. He didn’t look at Agbo. He rolled his neck on his shoulders, as if to keep limber. His eyes ticked across his field of vision, restless. His fingers tapped a rhythm on the stock of his rifle.

“You take training in Lagos?”

“Katsina. Then I’m guarding the Emir.”

“But you are Christian?”

“I’m Christian.”

Agbo had seen the military academy in Katsina. It was not fit for human habitation. And he knew a Christian would not be assigned to the Emir unless he was a politician’s son. But children of politicians trained in better places than Katsina, and they did not work part time for bus operators. Agbo considered the possibility that Okeke was a liar, a fake. Military uniforms could be bought, guns stolen.

“Me, too. I’m a Christian,” Agbo said. “My God command me not to tell lie.”

“But: afterlife, I don’t believe in this one.”

“The holy kingdom?”

“This one can make a man die too easy. Maybe he will even be smiling when he die. God want us to live. He give us this life. He don’t give money. He don’t give food. He don’t protect us. We are always taking care of ourselves. But he make us alive. This only one. Should never throw this one away.”

“You dey sabi Mokpo?” Agbo said.

“The priest,” Okeke said.

“Bring Mokpo.”

“If he want chop?”

“I dey pay him.”

In swift, smooth motions, Okeke lifted the boy’s hands off the rifle, replaced the clip, chambered a round, secured the gun against his hip, swung his legs onto the bottom of the bus’s open window and propelled himself out. He jogged, knees high, across the parking lot. At least Okeke was not, like other soldiers Agbo had ridden with, lethargic or drunk. But fitness and reflexes promised nothing about judgment. The latter being precious, and in short supply.

Agbo sat with the boy. “Cape Town?” he said.

The boy nodded. “Where are we?”

“You know Lokoja?”

“No.”

“Lokoja is middle,” Agbo said. He drew an outline of Nigeria in the air. He pointed to the center. “Niger River come here.” He traced a line from the north. “Benue River come here.” From the east. “All the roads come Lokoja.”

“How many roads are there?”

“Not too many,” Agbo said. “Few good roads. Maybe five, six. Rest are too rough.”

“That cloud is gray and yellow,” the boy said. He pointed to a ring of smoke settled on the upper ridge of the soft-shouldered mountains that flanked Lokoja, in the direction of Ajaokuta, where the steel rolling mill had idled for thirty years.

Agbo wondered if the new governor had decided to resurrect the mill; some governors had tried. More likely, the smoke had drifted up from a fire on the far side of the mountain, lit to burn garbage or raze an abandoned building. Partway down the mountainside the trees had been cleared to make space for Lokoja’s miles-wide sprawl of tin shacks and bunker-like concrete business plazas. All of it orbited the highway. Faced the highway. Nothing came by river anymore.

Since Agbo had first visited Lokoja, its myths had changed. The mountains were no longer a cradle. Instead, two furrowed brows. Still, Agbo drew comfort from the shape of the valley and the jigsaw canopy of fast-moving clouds it captured. The sun might pierce a single cloud and cast its light on a huddle of family dwellings. No poverty or squalor could then dispute that the God of the land was still present.

“This one like Cape Town. Table Mountain,” Agbo said. He pointed to a place in the sky where the sun had broken through to illuminate a grassy promontory.

“It isn’t,” the boy said. He pretended to grab hold of the soldier’s rifle again. He made shooting sounds and dodged imaginary bullets.

“Wetin dey different?”

“You mean why not?”

Agbo nodded.

“Everyone here has a gun,” the boy said. He stopped playing with the make-believe rifle. “Where’s your gun?”

Agbo lifted his Bible off the dashboard. “Bullet can never enter. See?” He took his miniature Nigerian flag from behind the rearview mirror. “This one same. Try shoot.” Agbo held the Bible and flag.

The boy formed his fingers into a pistol. He aimed at the flag. At the Bible. Then swung his fingers toward Agbo’s face and made a killing noise.

The local boys came back with an old tire. Agbo squeezed the tire’s walls. He sat on it. A slow leak. This hadn’t cost the boys all the money he’d given them. Any extra, they had pocketed.

The midday rush was ending. A frenzy of hawkers and touts had gathered in front of the plaza building to press their goods against the departing buses’ windows. The plaza manager stood at the highway entrance ramp, orchestrating the exit queue, which proceeded according to driver generosity. If Agbo had to drive on a leaking tire, he would. But he would not let his be the last bus out.

All the passengers were back. Okeke wasn’t. Agbo pulled the bus over to the air pump. He squeezed the primer bulb on the generator attached to the pump. He pulled the cord. The motor wouldn’t turn. Agbo took a gas can from the bus and fed the motor. This worked. Agbo tested the pump. No air. He listened. Air hissed out of punctures in

the hose. He went to his glove box. He removed a roll of duct tape. He turned to face the passengers. "South Africa," he said. "Get out."

The two of them stood next to the pump. "I dey find problem," Agbo said. He handed the tape to the South African. "Fix."

It was slow work and the hose was long. The generator would run out of fuel, and the South African would feed it again, but the gas can was almost empty. "Put small small," Agbo said. "We no take time buy more fuel."

"Is something the matter?" the South African said.

"No problem," Agbo said.

"You're rushing."

"No worry."

"You've been unpredictable," the South African said. "Crazy. I'm going to tell your manager. I'll call the bus line and tell them."

Agbo dropped the hose. "This road kidnap, abi? Lokoja all the time kidnap. Someone dey break tire with nail. You want kidnap?"

"The tire wasn't an accident?"

Agbo went back to work on the hose.

"Are we being targeted?" the South African said.

"No target. Many dey see same trouble."

"I have to get my son safe. I'll take a cab. Where's the nearest hotel?"

"Lokoja is too rough."

“Isn’t this the state capital? What about the government buildings?”

“You dey listen. Government no dey take you. I dey drive Awka twenty years. Sabi highway. Fix hose. Fill tire. Drive now. This way is only way.”

“If I call my—”

“Why you bring your son Nigeria? Nigeria is too rough.”

“His mother is sick,” the South African said. “I couldn’t make arrangements. It was sudden.”

“It was cancer?”

“No,” the South African said. He pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. He ran his fingers along his cheek, massaging his eye sockets. “She was raped, actually. I guess I can tell you this because I don’t know you. You’re nobody. Well, nobody to me.”

“They broke in your home?”

“No, in the city. Walking to her car. She doesn’t feel ready to take care of him yet – I mean our son. And she’s still sick in the hospital. With the drugs. They give you drugs to prevent HIV. The drugs make you sick.”

The South African took up the hose and patched another puncture. His hands were slow and clumsy. He squatted on his haunches, tucked his chin into his chest and laid the hose on the ground in front of him to work on, like a child struggling with a broken toy. At least for an instant, no appearances could be kept. And this was dignity, Agbo thought. Of a kind too rarely seen. Maybe it would disappear. In Nigeria first.

Agbo scanned the road for traffic; the highway was safest when busy. But there wasn't any. Only a small queue that had formed at the roadside. These vehicles had been waved over for inspection. The checkpoint hadn't been there when Agbo's bus arrived at the plaza. While Agbo watched the highway, Okeke emerged from the lead vehicle, counting the driver's bribe.

Okeke returned while Agbo was inflating the tire. Mokpo was with him. Agbo had never seen the priest without his collar, nor a pound lighter than his generous frame would allow, and today was no exception. Mokpo was a kind of preacher common to places like Lokoja: of dubious background but rich in fervor and vocal capacity. Agbo was indifferent to men like this, but glad they could always be found. From a fat, immodest mouth a psalm is still a psalm.

Today, Mokpo carried a stack of paperbacks. "How many?" he said. "These are fifteen."

"I don't need any book," Agbo said.

"Why you send this boy?"

"We dey need blessing for bus. You can ride."

"I'm selling my book," Mokpo said. He held up a copy. *Knowing the Power of God Through Forgiveness*. "How many?"

"Every. How much?"

"Fifty thousand."

“Ten thousand, abi?”

“Fifty thousand.”

“Twenty.”

“Fifty.”

The South African exited the bus and joined them. “Who’s this?” he said.

“Dr. Dogood Mokpo,” the priest said. “Peace Messenger of God.”

“Delightful. I’m Nelson Mandela,” the South African said. “Are we leaving?”

“We need man of God to come.” Agbo said.

“You need this fellow?”

“Now is negotiation,” Agbo said.

“I’m selling my book,” Mokpo said. He showed the South African.

“We can’t go without him?”

“I don’t go without him,” Agbo said.

“You wanted fifty?” The South African said. He pulled a roll of thousand-naira bills from his pocket. “You get fifty.”

Mokpo regarded the money with an advertised detachment. He took half a step away. “It’s late in the day,” he said. He craned his neck to survey the plaza. “I have appointments.”

“No,” the South African said. “You have fifty thousand naira.”

“Seventy-five,” Mokpo said.

“I heard a funny thing from a man at the airport in Lagos,” the South African said. “He said before Christianity came to the Igbos – before the missionaries – they were the only tribe without chiefs. ‘Every man a king.’ But the Christians fixed all that. Now Igboland is the only place you can *buy* a chieftaincy. Right?”

Agbo howled. Nothing had ever been funnier. Wisdom from the stranger’s lips. “Preacher, this one give you shame,” he said.

Mokpo’s hand went to his collar. “The gift of faith—”

“If you want fifty, get on the bus.” The South African said. He put his money away and boarded. Agbo checked the tire and followed.

Mokpo mounted the bus’s side door and began to distribute his books among the passengers. “Good afternoon, my brothers and sisters. My name is Honorable Evangelist Dr. Dogood Mokpo, Arch-Messenger of God. Brothers and sisters, I am riding with you today. First let us make the prayer of protection. May we wash this bus in the blood of Christ, in the name of the holy savior, Jesus, amen.”

“Amen,” said the passengers. They closed their eyes and lowered their foreheads to the top of the seat in front of them. Agbo did not close his eyes. Neither did the South African’s son. The boy puffed his cheeks and held his arms in front of his stomach, indicating corpulence.

Agbo glanced at Okeke, who closed his eyes briefly, then opened them. He reached for Agbo’s Bible. He read silently.

“Oh mighty Jesus,” Mokpo began, “we ask today you bless this bus. Bless this travel. Bless your children who go by road. Blood of Christ rain down on us, Lord, rain down on this vehicle. Jesus protect us so this bus may not take accident. Jesus protect us so this bus may not take robbery. Jesus protect us with the holy blood and the spirit so this bus may not take kidnap.” Mokpo’s voice rose as he repeated himself.

“Some people has been keeping us from our destiny. Lord, they have been keeping us from knowing your almighty power. Even our own children may betray us. Jesus, we ask you reach down, reach down to give us victory, reach down your mighty hand to those who will interfere, reach down and destroy them completely. Destroy them completely. Destroy them completely. Destroy them completely.”

The South African opened his eyes. “How very Christian” he said.

“Read it here,” Okeke said, and pointed at the Bible. “On seventh day, God destroy enemies of Mokpo.”

Mokpo went on repeating himself. He held his fist in front of his mouth as if gripping a microphone. He went into spasms, plainly rehearsed. He spoke louder, then in tongues.

The passengers jabbered and rocked in their seats. The bus shook on its tires. The South African’s son was at the controls of an imaginary fighter plane, banking and firing.

Mokpo emerged from his fit. “Praise Jesus, amen,” he said. He straightened his collar. He affected a small bow. He lay down on the floor between the front seat and the

first row of passengers. His chest heaved. “Let us go forth in Jesus’ name,” he said. “Please, I don’t need any donations.” Money streamed toward him. He did not make an effort to appear surprised. “The Lord will truly bless you,” he said. “You will be with him in his kingdom.”

In Biafra, during the war, white missionaries had made the same promise to starving boys and girls in their dying moments. For a time, Agbo had imagined heaven as a cloud prairie roamed by skeletal Igbo children, their stomachs distended, dragging each other toward a distant light. But the missionaries stayed behind the blockade, and many chose to live and die in Nigeria after the war had ended. A man like Mokpo would leave the country if he ever had the chance. Agbo prayed quietly. *Merciful Lord*, he thought. *Forgive us for our messengers.*

Agbo drove the bus onto the highway. He kept a light grip on the steering wheel. He cut the wheel left, right, shimmying the bus, testing. No play or shudder. The tire would make it to Awka. He checked the passengers in his mirror. The South African’s son had gone to sleep, his head on his father’s lap. The priest, too, was asleep, on the floor.

Next to Agbo, Okeke had the window halfway down, and a hand dangling outside. He sang an old highlife tune. “*If you see Mami Wata o, never you run away.*”

“What’s the song about?” The South African said.

“Mami wata,” Okeke said.

“Mommy water?”

“He don’t know Naija,” Agbo said.

“You know mermaid?” Okeke said.

“Mermaids. Yeah, I know mermaids,” the South African said.

“Mami Wata is like mermaid. The man, he is singing, he’s always go to the river for fishing. But he can never see a mermaid because the ocean is too far. He say one day he must run to the ocean. Then he can see Mami Wata, and he never run again. He will be happy in his own land.”

“In Lokoja, just wait for river to flooding,” Agbo said. “Then you see Mami Wata.”

“The man come from Edo,” Okeke said.

“I dey sabi this man,” Agbo said. “This one old song. Go famous when I’m fifteen years. Why you dey?”

“My mother always playing this highlife,” Okeke said. “Sometimes when I’m young we don’t have money. We don’t have food. My stomach will be rumbling. My mother will play this one and we will still be dancing. Even my stomach can be empty and I will still be smiling.”

“You dey sabi cockroach taste?” Agbo said.

“Cockroach?” Okeke said.

Agbo mimed dangling a cockroach above his open mouth.

“Disgusting,” the South African said.

Agbo laughed. “Very crispy,” he said.

“You eat?” said Okeke.

“Before, I send to you take Mokpo. Why you go to highway and taking bribes?”

Agbo said.

“The priest want chop. I take bribe for pay him,” Okeke said.

“Wait,” the South African said. “We paid him twice?”

“He na bad belle this preacher,” Okeke said.

“Bad what?”

“He dey say you jealous. This priest smart for take too much money,” Agbo said.

“At least I didn’t pay seventy five.”

The bus approached the edge of Lokoja. Agbo saw the familiar curve of the road in the near distance where it rose out of the valley. He permitted himself gratitude for Okeke, who had done what was needed, and for the South African, who had offered his money at the altar of haste. God willing, they’d reach Awka.

Agbo looked out the window at the ravines that flanked either side of the road, where the destitute constructed their tin-walled shacks. The ravines flooded whenever it rained. The presence of poverty was not novel to Agbo. But the persistence of these slums affected him. He’d once driven through Lokoja on the day after a heavy rain. He had walked in the ravines and watched the people rebuild. Throughout, trash had rained down on them from the road. Chicken bones, Styrofoam bins, heavy glass bottles, soiled disposable diapers. A woman in a wheelchair had stopped him. “Please leave my house,” she’d said. He’d looked down at his feet. The woman’s personal items – photographs,

books, cups and flatware – had been embedded in the mud and garbage he'd been treading on.

Agbo steered into the curve. Ahead, a man climbed up the side of the ravine and stood in the road. Then another. And another after that until there were eight. Some carried blunt or sharp objects. Some carried guns. One carried a length of rope threaded with nails.

Agbo braked. The bus skidded, turned sideways and threatened to roll, then stopped. Mokpo had been thrown against the back of Agbo's seat. Other passengers had been ejected from theirs. "Seat belts," the South African said, as if the thought surprised him. Agbo heard buckles fasten. He heard a child's soft grunt. The South African's son. Probably, his father had pulled the belt too tight. Agbo made a three-point turn. He accelerated back in the direction of the travel plaza.

A rock hit one of the bus's side windows, cracking it. Then the struck-barrel noise of a bullet entering the bus's chassis. Then more.

Agbo looked to Okeke, who had not readied his rifle. Instead, Okeke scanned the shacks near the roadside and down in the ravine. Ticking, restless eyes. Half-focused.

"Shoot," Agbo said.

Okeke held up a finger. He brought his gaze around, studying the road in front of them and on Agbo's side.

Agbo stopped the bus again. The gunfire ceased.

Mokpo became loud. He stood up as much as the bus's ceiling would allow. He began to preach. He urged the passengers to join him.

Agbo watched Okeke. Whenever the preacher grew shrill, Okeke flinched, and pulled his head down toward his shoulders, as if refocusing a pair of binoculars. Agbo turned to the passengers. "Keep quiet! Shut him up now! Sit down!" he said. The South African seized Mokpo. Mokpo fought. He cursed. He invoked the Lord. Other passengers rose and he was made to sit. The South African took off one of his socks and, with some help, forced it into Mokpo's mouth. The South African's son had formed his fingers into a pistol again. He kept a steady aim at Mokpo.

"Okeke," Agbo said.

Okeke gestured to indicate that Agbo should move the bus forward.

"They will shoot," Agbo said.

"Slow," Okeke said, and made the same gesture.

Agbo crawled the bus forward.

Okeke placed a hand on the steering wheel. "More," he said.

Agbo accelerated.

Okeke turned the steering wheel hard left.

Agbo corrected.

Okeke turned the wheel left again, this time with both hands, and held it there.

Behind Agbo someone gasped. Another whimpered. The rest were quiet. He turned. The South African had taken his son into his arms and curled his upper body

over the boy, who had tucked his legs in. Only the boy's hand was visible, still in the shape of a gun.

Agbo understood. Kidnappers put their hostages in cars and drove away with them. They did not drag injured people from wrecked buses. Better to be in God's hands than a kidnapper's. He let go of the wheel. The front tires dropped onto the road's gravel shoulder, then off the edge of the embankment. Gravity took the bus. A twenty foot drop. In the final instant, Agbo lifted his hands to protect his face. Through the spaces between his fingers, he saw the tin roofs of the shacks: How many times they'd been rebuilt. How many floods had come. And he shouted inside himself: That he believed. In labor and shelter. In loss and penance and life after death. In every human intention. That he was ready. He had always been ready. To test his faith. To pay the cost.

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Ellis – Lena called him this because they were immigrants – was in the bathtub, trying, as a means of testing himself, not to think too much about Lena, who was downstairs familiarizing herself with the cabin’s kitchenette and laying out all her particular foods. They’d brought a week of groceries in a wheeled cooler, carted from train to train since setting out from Kyoto. With greater difficulty, he was trying not to think about the body he had hours earlier discovered hanging from the ceiling fan in the bathroom he was now using. They’d found the note first, taped to the door, signed by the deceased, a Dr. Yoshikawa, who turned out to be a professor of literature. The note had not been addressed to anyone and didn’t explain Dr. Yoshikawa’s decision to die. For all Lena and Ellis knew, having read it, it was merely a bizarre welcoming gesture extended by one of the neighbors. So they had continued into the house, and Ellis had been the first into the bathroom, and the only one in it while the body was still there.

The cabin on the shores of Lake Biwa – beautiful, boundless, polluted Lake Biwa – had been arranged and paid for by a Swiss sculptor they knew. “Post and beam in Shiga,” he’d said. “Think of it as your halfway house back to the West.” Which appealed

to Lena, if not Ellis, who could still choose to remain in Japan. This bothered him most: the efficiency of her migration from one horizon to another. First, the diagnosis, then the quick realization that nothing so complicated as the immune system should endure medical experimentation across a language barrier. And the understanding – or he supposed she'd come to one – that no immediate offer to accompany her was forthcoming. None of it made her less graceful. He would need her to be less graceful, he thought, or the decision would be his. It had been a long time since he'd made one.

“Lena,” he called. “I can cook.”

“Can you?” she called back.

“Fish. The tuna.”

“Oh, you *want* to. No thanks.”

“The things I could do if you'd let me.”

“Such as?”

“Anything. Cure you,” he said. It had just come out like that.

“What about forgiveness?” she said. “I think I'd prefer it.”

Addison's disease, he had learned, manifested when a malfunctioning immune system attacked and destroyed the adrenal cortex. One survived it by taking the missing hormones in pill form. By the time she'd received the diagnosis (two months ago), she'd become accustomed to her immune system's wandering appetite. First, as a childhood sufferer of Graves Disease, which Ellis had been surprised to learn was treated by irradiating the thyroid. Second, as a diabetic beginning in her early 20s. The immune

system was beyond medical comprehension, doctors had told her. Whether or not all her illnesses were related, they couldn't say. Would she be willing to participate in medical research? That was before Japan, where she'd lived five years now – a suggestion at first resisted, now resigned to.

“Come down here,” she called. “I'm having a party. Me and my childhood friends.” After Ellis and Lena (who were both from New York's north country) had found each other in Japan and fallen in love, they'd grown fond of picturing each other as children. To this ritual they later added imagining the other children they'd known, following them wherever they went now, reminding them that all was really play, and nothing was at stake anymore.

Ellis stood up in the tub. He liked the cold air on his wet skin, insofar as it was the opposite of what Dr. Yoshikawa had written about in his note: his last bath, taken in the dark; the slow triplet sound made by the leaking faucet, described as a kind of going back into the womb, where all would be warmth and humming. Ellis dried off and went downstairs naked, knowing Lena would be naked, too; she never wore clothes around the house. When he'd first noticed this about her, he'd presumed it a symptom of her profession: wouldn't all models also be exhibitionists? But she'd been doing it since childhood, and had shown him the photos: a little girl with all her clothes off in front of her parents' mountain home, the butterfly gland in her neck visibly swollen, a shade of purple all the time.

Lena was peeling two eggplants she'd roasted and struggling to read the Japanese print on a bag of flour they'd bought during a stop in Adogawa. Was it or wasn't it refined? Her insulin pump lay on the counter at the end of a flexible plastic tube, connected to a cannula embedded in her hip's subcutaneous tissue. Dr. Yoshikawa's note was on the counter, too.

"You shouldn't have kept that," Ellis said.

"A moral judgment?"

"An obvious thought."

She lifted a flour-dusted finger to her tongue and tasted. "This flour is inflammatory," she concluded, pointing to a pictogram on the bag that Ellis couldn't recognize.

"So tell me why."

"I didn't want the police to have it. It doesn't belong in an evidence bag."

"He might have family."

"Family he didn't mention?"

"What if someone saw it before we got here?"

"I tell the police I forgot about it. If they even come back. They weren't exactly zealous."

"We *both* forgot about it?"

"You were in shock."

"I was?"

“With you, baby, it’s *perpetual*. The world *does it* to you.” She sometimes channeled the ‘60s with her spoken emphases, the vaguely intoxicated roll of her head on her neck, the way she swirled her fingers under his chin. It reminded Ellis of her childhood, a lost Eden, and the lens he chose to view her through. “It’s the story of a generation,” she might say, as if at her own expense. He’d reply, “It’s the story of *you*.”

Apart from the description of his last bath, Dr. Yoshikawa’s note had two other parts: In one, he described his experience of entering the cabin through its unlocked front door and walking to the eight-foot wide picture window that looked onto the lake. He had lived near the cabin so many years, Dr. Yoshikawa wrote, often passing it on his walks. But he’d never noticed the way the window’s glass had rippled and dimpled with age. “The oldest glass I’ve ever seen,” he wrote, and went on to describe walking toward and away from it at varying speeds; how he’d looked through it from several angles. “Nothing looks the same through this window twice,” he had written. “But it looks alike enough that one forgets the previous viewing.” Or so Ellis and Lena had decided, having pooled their collective Japanese reading abilities, which were modest.

Lena pressed her finger against the kitchen window where the moon hung, leaving a powdery fingerprint. “I’m glad we came,” she said, and blew on the window. Flour scattered in the air.

It seemed like a strange thing to say. Ellis had been shocked that the landlord (and police) hadn’t once questioned whether he and Lena would stay in the cabin after the body was removed. He’d been in Japan for a long time, but hadn’t been prepared for

this manifestation of Japanese customer service culture, resulting in a plethora of apologies, accompanied by the promise to speedily remove the body and complete the processing of the scene so Ellis and Lena could commence their vacation.

“You are?” he said.

“Yes, I’m glad we came. Ears?”

“I have them, but – you’re glad we came, and in so doing?” He trailed off.

“This is not a decompression chamber,” she said.

“Oh?”

“I know that’s what you think. I don’t have the bends.”

“Wait until you get to America.”

Lena held Ellis’ hand and dropped it to her crotch, resting the back of it there. He pressed the curve of his wrist up into her pubic bone. They had not made love since the diagnosis, and gestures like this were meant as affection and apology, or so she’d explained. A way of letting him near something broken. It surprised him that he didn’t resent it, or want anything she couldn’t give.

“What I have,” she said, “is this tremendous, desperate need, which I feel right here,” she placed his hand on her inner thigh, “and here,” on her sternum, “and here,” she lifted his hand and put his finger in her ear, “to remember Japan when I leave. Whatever else may become a blur, I will remember the place I lived. Not the diagnoses. Just the days.”

Ellis dropped his hand below her waist again and slid a finger into her.

She grasped his wrist. “Leave it,” she said. “Just there.”

“One more,” he said, and put another finger inside.

“For a minute,” she said. She wrapped a hand behind his neck and pulled his head onto her shoulder. She whispered in his ear. “Do I feel the same?”

Ellis turned his fingers sideways inside her and waited to feel her pulse. He thought about the day when she’d called to tell him the diagnosis, which had come by virtue of routine blood tests. “Remember Addison?” she’d said, and he hadn’t. “Among the diseases I told you I’d probably get.” And then he did. “I think you know what I mean. But I’m wearing something here – I think it’s a crane costume? I have to go. There’s a photographer in the next room eager to take this seriously. I mean the costume.” This was the kind of thing she would do, and it gave Ellis the impression, which he always later realized was wrong, that difficult moments were easy for her.

Now he imagined her in a different life, wearing a hospital robe, seated on an examining table, awaiting a daily inventory of her benefactors’ non-conclusions, which would arrive in the form of a white coat, and a clipboard, and a detached, academic fascination with the war occurring inside her. It came to him that her body, the body she’d made her living by, would still be beautiful in that robe, in those antiseptic rooms, in the full light of her evanescence.

And she wanted to remember.

“You feel the same,” he said, after a time. “And you will – remember.” It was all he could think of.

*

Ellis awoke alone the next morning when Lena returned from her jog. He could hear a second voice along with hers, speaking Japanese. He dressed and went downstairs, where Lena was sitting on the porch steps with an older, *yukata*-clad Japanese woman, and he sat with them.

“Some men showed up on the rail bed near the house,” Lena was saying. “She didn’t know they had guns. She wouldn’t have gone out to talk to them if she’d known that, I don’t think. They asked her right away if she was alone. She excused herself and went to Maryann and Randy Badger’s place. Maybe they were just hunters, but that was the end of it. Mom wanted out. Dad bought a house in town and took a job flying passenger jets to pay for it. He became who he became. Never at home, never lonely.”

Ellis had heard this story. He’d heard all the stories about the Saranac house, a mile back into the woods, on parkland, off the grid. Lena had been birthed by a midwife in the upstairs bedroom there. Her earliest memory was climbing on the wood pile while her father split and chopped; eighty cords to get through one winter. Images of her parents rolling naked on the solarium floor. Everyday talk about seeds and weather. Good soil. If they planted, it grew. But somehow, nothing lasted. Not the decade, nor its idealism. Not sobriety. Not solvency. Not the marriage.

“Ellis, this is Maeko,” Lena said. “I was out jogging and I met her. She’s Mrs. Yoshikawa. This is Ellis, or at least that what’s I call him. He’s my husband. He doesn’t like to be called by his real name.”

Ellis wasn’t sure how he felt about the lie – they weren’t married, though lately he wished he’d asked when things weren’t as complicated. And he was surprised by Maeko. He’d assumed Dr. Yoshikawa didn’t have anyone. But here was a bereaved woman, nonetheless looking well, even red in the cheek; perhaps she’d just come from the *onsen*.

“I was explaining about Saranac,” Lena said. “Doesn’t this place remind you of the north country?”

Ellis looked around, supposing that was the right thing to do. Yes, Biwa was Lake Champlain in so many ways. But he hardly remembered what Champlain looked like except on postcards, and the same was true of any other place in the Adirondacks. That was Lena’s way of remembering: what kind of tree, and how its leaves had turned in a particular year; or contemplating the evidence of long-vanished glaciers, now boulders along the shore. For Ellis, who had grown up across the street from the region’s largest penitentiary, memory was different: a procession of shadows, people half-remembered or regarded only for the danger they might present.

“I’ve never actually seen it,” he said. “The house in Saranac.”

“We haven’t left Japan in years,” Lena explained. “Since we met.”

“Lena-san says the house is falling down,” Maeko said. “It’s sad, isn’t it? I think so.”

“The world always finds a way,” Lena said.

“A way to what?” Ellis said.

“A way in,” Lena said. “It gets in.”

“You mean the world is waiting, and we’re prey,” Ellis said.

Maeko shifted, as if preparing to stand up. “I’m very sorry for any inconvenience my husband may have caused you,” she said, and bowed as much as sitting would allow.

This struck Ellis as an appeal for comfort, or as much of one as an older, countrified Japanese woman might make, but he still wondered if Lena had breached decorum when, in response, she laid the back of her hand against Maeko’s forehead, as if to check for fever. Maeko seemed confused for a moment, but then closed her eyes and drew a breath.

“What were your husband’s research interests?” Ellis said.

Maeko opened her eyes, and Lena removed her hand. Maeko leaned toward Lena and rested her chin on Lena’s shoulder. This made her jaw clench a little. She took another breath while she settled the weight of her head on Lena. She seemed to refocus her eyes on something in the middle distance, out on the lake.

“I know it’s a silly question,” Ellis said. “I ask because I studied literature.”

“Poetry,” Maeko said. “Or poets, really. Do you know the Man’yōshū?”

Ellis nodded. He wondered if Lena knew it.

“He wrote monographs about the Man’yōshū poets.”

“The birth of a Japanese aesthetic,” Ellis said, reaching back into his memory for the little bit of literary Japanese he’d learned when he arrived in Japan, before he gave up on all that.

“Do you teach literature?” Maeko said.

“I give tours, walking tours of Kyoto. To tourists.”

“That’s exciting. You get to see beautiful things all the time,” Maeko said.

“I didn’t really choose it,” Ellis said. “I didn’t want to teach English. I wanted to live here.”

“What do you like about Japan?” Maeko said.

“I decided to live here,” Ellis said. It came out almost before Maeko had finished speaking, an echo of what he’d said before, not quite voluntary. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to interrupt you.”

“I read a wonderful poem recently,” Lena said. “I have it inside.” She shifted a little so Maeko lifted her chin. Lena stood up. “I’ll get it.”

Ellis waited on the porch with Maeko. She began to hum a simple melody, a song he’d heard children sing on their way to school in Kyoto. Their eyes met and she smiled for his benefit, which changed the timbre of her humming. “When I was young, we’d sing haiku to this tune,” she said. “Do you know this Shiki haiku? Poppies open / And the same day—”

“Shatter in the wind,” Ellis said.

Maeko gave him a thumbs-up. She looked sincere doing it, but awkward. Maybe it was something she'd learned from an American character on a Japanese TV show.

Lena returned holding Dr. Yoshikawa's note. Ellis thought to excuse himself, but only for a moment, and then felt that this was among the very basic things he owed Lena: his presence. Patience, waiting to understand.

"There's an English word in this poem," Lena said. "Not being rich / how can I understand a rich world? / Not being *happy* / how can I live in a *happy* world? / Not having any dreams / how can I possibly explain dreams? / If you lie, you usually get caught."

Sunlight struck the covered porch, shining through the sheet of paper to reveal the characters written on it. Did Dr. Yoshikawa write in a distinct hand? It occurred to Ellis that he hadn't read enough Japanese handwriting to be sure. But Maeko wasn't looking at the paper. She was watching the lake again, following the progress of a few small sailboats. She sat with her legs tucked together, but off to the side, in that half-traditional, half-at-ease manner rural Japanese sometimes had. In spite of her age, her back was perpendicular to the floor, her spine straight. Maybe that was what Lena had gained from her time in Japan, he thought. This invincible dignity: *shō ga nai*, there's nothing to be done.

"My husband often talked about that word," Maeko said. "*Happy*. He hated it. He called it *impoverished*. He didn't like English. Or Americans." She nodded as she spoke, rocked a little on her hip, and failed to stifle a smile, as if in the midst of an indulgence.

“Please don’t misunderstand. He lost his parents in the firebombings. It’s not funny at all. But he became so animated when he talked about America, about English. It feels good to remind myself. Already.”

Ellis wondered what he meant when he used that word. *I’m happy here*, he’d learned to say since emigrating, as if the place and the feeling – neither of which seemed finite – were things he had become.

“*Genki* is better,” he said. “It’s a better word.”

“It doesn’t really mean happy, though,” Lena said.

“It’s true,” Maeko said. “*Genki* is a small feeling. Smelling a flower. Drinking tea.”

“So how do I say ‘happy’ in Japanese?”

“We don’t have the same word, so we use *genki*,” Maeko said. “I think we Japanese feel like life is too big, so how you can talk about a *happy* life? You’re only happy sometimes.”

“That word is in the American Constitution,” Lena said.

“It’s strange,” Maeko said. “You must feel like you have to be happy all the time, or you’re doing something wrong.”

“But it says *the pursuit of happiness*,” Ellis said. “It’s always running away from us.”

Maeko arched her shoulders and seemed to stiffen. “Please tell me how you say this in English,” she said. “*Sono toki ni*.” Ellis could tell this mattered to her, and he wanted to know – though he doubted she would tell them – what she was really asking.

“Around that time?” Lena said.

“At that time,” Ellis said.

“*At that time,*” Maeko said. She pointed at the air three times, moving her finger from right to left, and squinted. She seemed uncomfortable. Ellis wondered – it was a common phrase, a common translation. Had it upset her? “Americans are really so different,” she said, and rested a finger on the bridge of her nose. “Do you think one time can be separate from another?”

“People use those words to explain,” Ellis said. “So whoever’s listening understands what they’re talking about.”

“We Japanese are not so fond of explaining,” Maeko said. She pulled a handkerchief from her *obi*. Her hand shook now. “My husband was not fond of explaining,” she said. She dabbed her eyes preemptively, perhaps to stifle tears – Ellis had seen Japanese women do this. The coral pattern on the handkerchief was Okinawan. He wondered if she was, too. She didn’t speak with an accent. Had she labored to eliminate it? Had she chosen Biwa to live near because its horizon-wide waters reminded her of where she came from? She was old now. Did she still think of Okinawa as home?

“I’m sorry,” Maeko said. “I’m very embarrassed.” She exhaled sharply – like the beginning of laughter – and nodded into a slight bow.

Lena laid a palm on Ellis’ head and massaged his scalp with her fingers. Her eyes had misted and her mouth was a little agape, as if she might say something. He was certain she was about to explain the note.

“I’m ill,” she said. “I don’t speak Japanese very well, so I’ll have to leave Japan. This is my last week. I wanted to spend it somewhere beautiful.”

“I hope you feel you’ve found that,” Maeko said. She gestured, palms up, to indicate the world around them.

“Ellis and I are leaving together,” Lena said, and sat down next to him.

Ellis wondered what she meant by saying they were married and omitting their uncertainty about the future. Was it a courtesy to Maeko, who might not know what to make of an unmarried foreign couple?

“A peaceful life,” he said, maybe too quickly. He wasn’t sure what he meant. The lie had made him uncomfortable.

Maeko shut her eyes and dropped her chin to her chest, as if tired. “It’s not my place, so please forgive me,” she said. “But Lena-san told me—”

“It seems like such a peaceful life people have here,” Ellis said. “That’s what I mean.”

Maeko opened her eyes and met Ellis’s gaze. He felt vulnerable. The look she gave seemed to search for insincerity. And her face did have an unfamiliar quality – it was darker and more crystalline than he’d become accustomed to.

“You’re not from here,” he said. “You’re Okinawan. Or you’re not Japanese.”

Lena touched the base of Ellis’s spine. He looked. She was waiting to look back. Her eyes were still wet. And now, he thought, wounded. He had cut short a kind of confession, a moment that should have belonged to her.

“Would you like to hear something funny?” Maeko said, and Ellis realized she’d been watching them. “Those boats belong to scientists,” she said, and pointed toward the water.

Lena pressed her eyelids shut and swallowed. It was only a moment, but when she spoke it was with sudden enthusiasm. “There are so many!” she said. She propped her chin on her palm and her eyes widened.

“It’s a kind of race,” Maeko said. “The government is offering money to universities if they can find ways to stop the pollution. But that requires diverting streams. One group of researchers has been trying to gather data as fast as they can to apply for the grant money. Another group is rushing to study the lake in its current state.”

“How do you feel about it?” Lena said.

“Entertained, you know? They fight all the time. They’ve rammed each other in those little sailboats.”

“Any sinkings?” Lena said.

“There was one,” Maeko said. “They swam ashore in front of my house. It was nighttime, and cold. They woke us up and we had to let them in.”

“Was it the ecologists or the entrepreneurs?”

“Some of both!” she said. She clapped her hands in front of her nose and laughed. A gesture, Ellis thought, learned in her girlhood, and he pictured her as a girl, but wearing the same *yukata*, lifting her arms in the same way, the gesture made comic by the

robe's overlong sleeves. "They sat by the stove, in these dripping clothes, and they were *still* arguing. They almost came to blows. Imagine it."

"What happened?" Lena said.

"Oh, people came and picked them up. But you know, my husband listened very carefully to their argument," Maeko said. "And when the first car came to get them, he locked the door and he lectured them. He was in a terrible mood about having to wake up."

"What did he say?" Lena asked.

"You can't always understand something if you also want to protect it."

Ellis felt disoriented by his fumbling of the moment Lena had tried to create, and by his sense that what had filled it should mean a great deal, but hadn't. He watched Lena, who had become very still when Maeko made this final statement, and who now seemed no more animated than she had been when Ellis interrupted her confession. But she laced her hand in his, and he hoped he was forgiven.

"Either one is a miracle," she said.

They were in bed together, that night.

"So you were being polite?" Ellis said.

"It wasn't just that."

"I thought about proposing," he said. "We talked about it."

“I remember. We were worried about our immigration status. We always were. You still are.”

“Do you want me to come with you?”

“You know I wouldn’t ask.”

“You almost did.”

Lena turned on her side to face him. “That’s not what happened,” she said. Her cheeks were puffy below her eye sockets. She hadn’t checked her blood sugar before dinner. Now it was elevated, and making her tired.

“You were about to,” he said.

“You think so.”

“What if *I* asked.”

“Think what you’d be asking.”

“To go with you.”

“Me, test subject,” she said. “And you? Living next to the prison. What would we have to share anymore?”

“I wouldn’t have to live at home.”

“Home goes with you. Home is with you *here*. Imagine what it would be like, even in another town. How close you’d be.”

“Close to what? I can’t live where we come from and be happy?”

“You’re good. You’re really good,” she said. “Not simple.”

“Not simple?”

“Like today,” she said. “When you wouldn’t let me talk. Of course you had to ask her that question. Sometimes I listen to you and I think, ‘Oh, there’s his heart.’ Other times – today – it’s this rattling chain almost. But you’re one of the good ones. Because you drag it. The chain doesn’t drag you. You’re here. If you go back, that’s different. Isn’t it?”

Ellis wasn’t sure. He willed himself to think about it. The prison’s wall ran the length of Dannemora’s central avenue, where he’d grown up. His father was the county administrator at the prison. *Siberia*, people always called it. Cold, isolated, terminal. Every year on Christmas Eve his family attended mass with the inmates, at the Church of St. Dismas the Good Thief, a freestanding stone chapel inside the penitentiary walls. On one of these nights during his adolescence, his father had pointed out Joel Rifkin. Rifkin stood directly underneath one of the church’s gothic, wrought iron lanterns, in the dark iris of its glow. Sweat glistened on his forehead and the muscles in his cheeks ticced rhythmically (Ellis later learned the inmates forced Rifkin to attend church services; they meant it as torture). He recognized Rifkin, whose photo had been in the local newspaper when he’d arrived at the prison, next to photographs of his victims, pretty young women lost to the world long before they’d met him. “You have to admire a man like that,” his father had said. That was the first Christmas Ellis had been taller than his father. He remembered the discomforting smell of his father’s perspiration, heavy in his nostrils all evening.

Lena placed her palm over Ellis' eyes, something she did to bring him back when he drifted. "We don't come from nowhere," she said.

"I'd be all right," he said. "What's the difference? Now and then. Here and there."

"Name a prison in Japan."

He couldn't.

"This beautiful in-between of ours," Lena said. She flopped on her back and flung her arms wide. "We hardly knew it."

"We didn't really try. That's the whole problem, I guess."

"Learn the language. After I'm gone. Really learn it. Promise me. No more walking tours. You never wanted to own a business."

"That man really died in the bathroom," Ellis said.

"Will you tell me about it?"

"I don't know. I saw his shoes when I opened the door. Not what kind of shoes. Just brown leather, and the shape, and I knew they were shoes. I knew they were on his feet, and his feet were off the ground. I didn't see him. I closed the door – no, first I locked the door. My hands wouldn't do what I wanted. It was one of those knobs where you push, so I had to reach my hand around. I locked it from the inside."

"Why?"

"So you wouldn't see it? Maybe just instinct."

"Did you *feel* anything?"

"I felt awful, Lena. Satisfied?"

“When I was a kid, I believed in ghosts. I didn’t believe they could walk through walls. I thought that was Hollywood stuff. I was smarter than Hollywood. My parents used to say that: ‘Lena, you’re smarter than Hollywood.’ In my child’s way, I really believed you have to let a spirit out of a room.”

“I didn’t feel anything pass by me, if that’s what you mean. Or anyone.”

“I thought I felt something. Something come down the stairs and go out the door.”

“I’ve never seen one before, not outside a funeral. A body.”

“Hey. Come down here,” she said.

He slid himself down the bed until he was even with her waist. She turned on her side and lifted her leg, letting him settle his head between her thighs.

“Is that where you want to be?” she said.

He hummed a short note.

Lena pressed her thighs together, increasing the pressure on both sides of Ellis’ head. “Tell me when you’re there,” she said, and pressed harder, until Ellis tapped her.

Ellis felt his pulse in his temples. He felt the blood coursing down from there, into his cheeks and jaw.

This was something she’d discovered could calm him, having tried it after learning cattle went to the abattoir this way, their heads in vices, soothed unto deafness while the saws and sluices closed in.

She loosened. “I’ll ask my father to list you for this month,” she said. “You don’t have to decide now. If you want to come with me, just show up at the airport.”

Ellis understood what she’d said, though most of it had been muffled, and right away had an image of his boyhood self, led by the hand onto a plane, by whom he wasn’t quite sure – the sun was setting behind the plane, and the figure appeared in silhouette. He felt the urge to call out to himself, to speak the words of comfort. He pulled his head out from between Lena’s legs, took the blanket off, and got out of bed.

“Don’t get up,” she said.

“I’ll take a walk.”

Lena stood, put her arms around him – they were so long – and pinned his arms to his ribs. “Hey,” she said, and the puff of her breath warmed his shoulder.

He pushed her off, and they fell onto the floor, her arms still around him, locked at the wrists.

“Hey, no,” she said. She turned him on his side and straddled his hip. “Hey, I love you. I don’t need anything.”

He took a breath. A fan of heat spread out across the back of his head. He thought he might cry. “I ran so far,” he said. “Please.” And he grabbed her hip to push her off. Something tore.

“Fuck,” Lena said. “My fucking infusion set.”

Ellis stopped, halfway out from underneath her. The tubing that led down to the infusion set was tangled in his fingers. The cannula had torn free and it dangled at the

end of the tube. Her insulin pump had come out of her underwear, where she kept it, and lay on the floor. A few drops of insulin leaked from the cannula onto Ellis' palm. He'd smelled it before, a medical scent, at once pungent and sterile.

"I'll fix it," he said.

"Do you remember how?"

She'd only ever let him replace her infusion set once before, just to teach him, just in case. It felt all wrong to her, she'd said. She never even used the needle inserter most diabetics couldn't live without, preferring her own hands. As long as she held it, she could pretend the needle, the cannula, the tube, were all a part of her own body. But this time she lay on her stomach in bed, and he put the new set in, slow, waiting for the memory of the first time to fully manifest in his mind, and then in his hands. She was quiet, and when he finished he discovered she'd fallen asleep, as if nothing could have been more natural.

Lena decided to return the note and apologize, but found that each morning, when she stopped at Maeko's house during her jog, no one was home. Nearing the end of the week, she jogged to the nearest neighboring house and learned that Maeko had gone to stay with relatives in Kyoto. It had seemed like a sudden decision, the neighbor said, undertaken on the same day Maeko had sat on the porch with Lena and Ellis.

Lena asked Ellis to go jogging with her on the last day. She was going to slip the note under Mrs. Yoshikawa's door. Ellis hated to jog. The long, slow release of physical

energy didn't feel like exercise so much as exertion; he'd worked difficult, physical jobs in his youth, and often thought that if so-called middle class people knew what that felt like, they wouldn't like jogging, either. But he went with Lena anyway, mostly because that second night in the cabin had felt like the end of a conversation, and he wasn't sure he'd been ready for it to end.

Mrs. Yoshikawa's house was built into the side of a hill, a two-story cabin with white pine eaves and a rectangular screened-in porch in the back. Ellis looked in through the windows and saw that nothing had been prepared for departure. Maeko had even left a fire burning. Ashes had spilled out onto the floor, and a few spent coals, now dull black, sat on top of scorch marks.

"Look," Ellis said. "She almost burned the house down."

Lena came to the window. "We did this," she said. "I did this. She knew. She left because she knew."

Ellis went to the door and tried it. "This isn't locked."

"I already slid the note under."

"Let's go inside."

"No," Lena said, but took a step toward the door.

Ellis crossed the threshold first. The room wasn't a living room as such, but a small hearth space surrounded by other, smaller rooms. "These were laborers' quarters," he said. He wasn't sure what kind of labor, or how long ago it might have occurred. The cabin was clearly an old one, the outside having probably been restored.

“Ice, maybe?” Lena said. “In winter, from the lake.”

Ellis nodded and moved toward a pile of clothes sitting in the doorway of the nearest room, on the left-hand side. They were men’s clothes. Dr. Yoshikawa’s, he thought, and beyond them, inside the room, was a large bookshelf, made from the same white pine. Half the shelves were full. The other half had been emptied, and the books lay, piled and strewn, on the floor of the room. A few boxes in the corner had been partly filled with books, or clothes, or sheaves of scribbled-on notepaper.

Lena stood in the doorframe behind him. “She started packing up his things,” she said. “She couldn’t finish.”

Then Ellis saw the window, which faced west, down a gentle embankment toward the lake. A half-dozen potted plants of varying sizes sat on the sill; without watering, some had begun to wilt. The glass’s droops and dimples were identical to those in the glass of the picture window in their rented cabin. He ran his fingertips across the pane.

“It’s the same,” he said.

Lena came into the room. “What is?”

“The window,” he said. “I bet the houses were built around the same time, maybe even the same builder. The glass comes from the same place.”

“But the note.”

“I don’t know,” Ellis said. He was watching the lake, which captured so much of the mid-morning light it was nearly featureless, whited-out. He took a step back from the

window and the scene outside flickered across the warps and divots in the glass. “Hey,” he said. “Go outside.”

“Why?”

“I want to try something. Go stand outside the window.”

She did, and he gestured to her with his hands until she stood in the center of the frame. She was a few feet back from the house. He could see her from the waist up. Ellis backed away from the window. Had the light changed? He moved askew from it. Then, slowly, one step at a time, he centered himself in front of it again and moved toward it until the tip of his nose touched the glass. Then, tilting his face forward, he rested his forehead against it, and the bridge of his nose, and the sharp upper edges of his cheekbones. He shut his eyes and tried to picture what he’d just seen. But it wasn’t like the note had said. When he pictured Lena, all the imperfections in the glass had disappeared, and the pane was clear and flat. The lake behind her was sunlit, calm and emerald. Two children played by the water’s edge – a nude little girl with a swollen neck and a boy who seemed bewildered to find himself in her company.

Ellis opened his eyes and motioned. Lena came to the window. She curled her fingers against the outer frame and pulled down. The window opened and she reached over the sill to grasp Ellis’ hand. Bracing the toe of her sneaker on the side of the cabin, she got her hip onto the window frame. Ellis was able to get his arms around her while she did this, and he lifted her down into the room, knocking the plants off the sill, spilling dirt on the floor.

“We have to clean that up,” she said.

“Not now.” He pulled her toward him and rested his lips on hers, stopping for a moment to feel her breath on his face. They kissed, and he was pulling her down onto the floor, lowering her onto the dirt they’d spilled.

They made love. She couldn’t feel it like she once had, and he knew she wouldn’t finish. A broken body, she’d told him, always feels broken. And there had been days spent blaming herself, experiencing the certainty that some failure of hers had done the breaking, days she couldn’t take back, even on the brink of some pleasure, some rest, or some release.

After, he lay on his side next to her, aware of the soreness in his hip where it met the pine floor, and aware of the slight give of the soft wood. He rocked his soreness down into it, letting the pain dull and spread along his flank. There was dirt on his palms, and little white pebbles of plant food. He saw where he’d left handprints of the same on Lena’s back, and ribs, and thighs. He remembered this was a stranger’s house, recently visited by tragedy. This made him feel vulnerable and alone – in a world of invisible intruders, shielded only by the love of one woman and this body, her only body.

Ellis put Lena on her back and lowered his head onto her stomach, resting his chin in the soft place between her hip and pubic bone. He tilted his head and pressed his lips against her.

“I’m sorry we’ll never meet,” he said.

“Never meet who?”

He looked up, over the mound of Lena's breast, to meet her gaze. "Our daughter," he said. "The daughter we would have conceived. In another life, some other body." He said it in the way one talks about a clear and familiar memory, about something easily decided. Had he decided, or only spoken? He had tested the weight of what held him. Now he knew: he could bear it in either direction, with her.

"Salem," Lena said. "That would have been her name. She's on the other side." She pushed a finger into the opposite side of her pelvis. She'd said it right away.

Years on Earth

I am gradually learning that answers are not among my possibilities, but decisions are. The journey toward that sensibility has occupied the past two years of my life, since I joked to my friend, a Sri Lankan short order cook in the red light district, that I wouldn't mind an arranged marriage, and the television producer seated next to me decided that sounded like a fine idea. They say we are living in an era of synchronicity. They are right about one thing, whether or not they know it: legion are the symptoms lately mistaken for signs.

Before you ask: yes, I am famous now, or “big in Japan,” as my friends are fond of saying. Marriage was not among the rewards, though Tase (my ‘intended’) and I care for each other in the way two lead actors might in their later years, having staged so many love stories together. I dine out often enough, and frequently someone will say, “Tell a story,” and I will know that they want me to explain what it's like to be notable in a place so far from home. I tell them I once met a very famous Nigerian comedian – famous in Japan, that is – who jokes primarily at his own continent's expense (we live in trees, we ride elephants to work). “Give them what they want,” he said, staring at me with his nostrils, as if his eyes could not be grave enough. By way of demonstration, he grabbed his crotch and jostled it, like he was testing a luggage strap. I'll let you decide what he meant.

But in the beginning it was only Tase, Shige and I, and the one camera, and our many misapprehensions, foremost among them our shared sense that the age of expectation – at least for the three of us, who believed we’d seen so much – had ended.

I chose Tase from among five women, all of whom were ostensible good girls, and all of whom claimed to have theater degrees. It was a decision I made on instinct, having recognized her from an encounter we’d had in the red light district, where she was a sex worker. She must have remembered it, too; she shifted her shoulders and tensed, perhaps to excuse herself to the restroom and then slip out of the building. This was in an editing suite at the TV station, NHK, with the same intrepid producer I had inadvertently intrigued and the writer-cameraman he’d selected to steer the project through the pilot phase.

By then I’d spent enough time in the red light district to know a few of the *sōpu* girls, though none in the way I’d known Tase for an evening, and they were not simple or predictable people. I picked her anyway, at no small risk; I needed the paycheck the project promised, having lost my last job in a spectacular manner – something not done in a nation where nothing is mightier than a reference letter. But I was simply following a thrill to its conclusion, as I tended to.

After the meeting, I found myself standing next to her on the platform at the station, waiting for the train home.

“Do you take the first train?” she said.

“The first?”

“In the mornings, after you spend the night in Kabuki-cho.”

“No, I take the 5:15.”

“I take the first train,” she said. “My body is tired. I can’t wait.” She dropped her hand, fingers pointed downward and splayed a little, to her pelvis, just above her crotch.

“Do you know the problem with the first train?”

“Drunks?”

She laughed. It came out as a single syllable, offered to the sky, her head tilted up. A Tsarina’s laugh, I thought. “Nighttime is full of sadness,” she said. “And the first train—” she extended her index and middle fingers downward, gesturing with them as if they were two legs walking, “—offers a solution.” The legs leapt, hung in the air, and collided with her oncoming fist.

“I don’t know anything about you,” I said, as a chime announced an approaching train.

“I’m *burakumin*,” she said. “Does that explain it?”

“Explain?”

“What I do for money.”

“That’s not what I meant,” I said.

“It’s as much as you want to know,” she said. It happened that an emergency brake button was located on the pillar directly behind her, and she turned, and pushed it. The train lurched to a halt halfway into the station and Tase began to walk toward the

escalator. A station employee approached her and asked what the problem was, but she recoiled, as if he'd menaced her, and screamed, "I was about to jump!" Bewildered, he backpedaled, and she strode up the escalator past equally confused commuters, toward the gate.

When I say 'red light district' I mean Kabuki-cho, where Tokyo's starving hearts wander in search of sex, or all-you-can-eat river eel, or ten floors of video games and duckpin bowling. I hadn't always been drawn to it, but when I got there, it felt like fate's wheelhouse, its rhythms like rail tracks clicking into place. I'd been in Japan a few years by then, and thought of myself as someone who had emerged on the far side of his closest brush with self-destruction.

If I told you that before I came to Japan I'd been a heavy heroine user, it probably wouldn't surprise you to learn I'd been living in Boulder, where my version of moss-gathering was an education degree, subsequent certification, and a job teaching third-graders at the elementary school where I'd done my practicum. Yes, I used throughout, and was always high around my students. I felt I was doing a lot better than my colleagues, who, for all their rehearsed disdain, preferred to take life on a slow drip.

When I think of my upbringing, I'm only surprised I didn't start using sooner. I come from a small town in the Berkshire Mountains. When I choose to remember it, my mind alights on two things: a disaffected former punk musician turned gourmet cheesemonger who once predictably advised me that "sex is like cheese – God enters

through the mouth,” and the so-called South County Welcome, which the chamber of commerce touts to ulcer-prone New Yorkers as a cozy antidote to New Englanders’ puritan hauteur. The former was my first employer. The latter serves as the basis for an innuendo which is also my creation myth, insofar as the natives might knowingly mutter “South County Welcome” when they see a young man of the town languidly watching the sunny, bare legs of some Manhattan moneybag’s soft-throated daughter as she exits the BMW. My father was young once, and no doubt regarded sunny legs and soft throats – including my mother’s – as the bounty of his inherited province. There was never a relationship, much less a marriage, but there was, I gather, a night when my father showed up at Wharton, feeling rather noble – perhaps like Pizarro surveying Cuzco – only to have certain subtleties explicated to him by a pomaded future CEO with whom he shared just one common interest: she happened to be sleeping at the moment.

To her credit, my mother is the only potential beneficiary of the Doogle fortune (baby socks, if you can believe that) who never worked for the family business. She’s the fundraising director for the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC. I don’t know her too well; she was always busy. But I often think about a time when she had me for the week and the sitter (or perhaps chauffeur is a better word – I was a high school freshman) caught a stomach flu. I spent it in the museum offices with her, or watching her pace the floor in front of the exhibits, since the offices were tornado-stricken at that time – the museum director’s spending account had been caught with its proverbial pants at ankle height.

But work remained to be done, and my part of it was to follow her, puppy-like, as she wandered among the life-sized dioramas and attended to the business of fundraising, which had become unpleasant. This continued, of course, long after closing hours, and I recall in particular sitting in the empty museum on a plastic log stump, beholding a topless mannequin's droopy breasts, which I followed to the slope of the mannequin's clavicle, and outward to the arm that held the leather cord binding her to her fellow plaster primitives. *Some coastal tribes*, the placard read, *conquered and enslaved their neighbors*.

My mother was seated atop a nearby replica of an Adena burial mound, dictating amounts and varieties of caviar to a caterer who was doubtless wishing he hadn't given my mother his home number. I know that sounds like a joke I'm making at my mother's expense, or the world's expense, perhaps. But my mother was always alive with wealth and beauty, and in the suggestive light of the darkened museum seemed no less perfect to me than a dancer glimpsed in her private labors. And I realized – for the first time, by way of my father's sneering provincialism – that such admiration could harden into a clot.

My mother had also been a drug user in her youth, as children of privilege sometimes are. "Cocaine can be very prosaic," she once said, causing me to look up the word. To whatever degree I understood the dictionary's explanation, it sounded like something I wanted to feel. When I used heroin for the first time four years later, I felt a breast come into my mouth and fill it up completely.

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By the end of my second year teaching in Boulder, I was lucky if I received so much as a momentary caress from the cosmic nipple when I used. I hadn't started injecting yet, but I could see it coming, and I was certain the words "high functioning" would disappear from my biography at precisely that juncture. The farther I could run, I decided, the better. Friends of mine taught English in Korea, but I couldn't bear the thought of any future, let alone living in an entire nation that looked forward to one. Japan, reeling anew from the Lehman Shock, was a comparative crypt, which suited me.

Off drugs, I wasn't any more talented or intelligent, but years of previously medicated momentum had been loosed, and I didn't stay at the conversation school I'd hired onto for very long. I glad-handed, I checked the right boxes, and eventually secured a salaried position working for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who sent me hither and yon attending to various federal ministries' English language needs. It was the kind of job expatriates in Japan wait decades for, but I also felt trapped in the gilded ghetto to which foreigners are consigned, which is really neither ghetto, since it is comfortable, nor gilded, since the effect that comfort has is more like plastic on furniture than gold on a picture frame.

I was spending more time in the red light district every night, and arriving at work by taxi in the same clothes I'd worn the day before. It wasn't that I'd buy prostitutes or get drunk. I'd just walk all night, memorizing the lay of the streets, etching the faces I

saw into my mind, and pausing to regard the occasional turmoil which inevitably arises in such parts of a city.

In the midst of this, I was assigned to edit the English translation of a government white paper on nuclear power, intended for public consumption in the wake of Fukushima. It was more or less automatic, what I did. Or at least it felt that way, and still does. Everywhere the translator had written “safe,” I crossed it out and wrote “unsafe.” Where he’d written “not dangerous,” I wrote “dangerous.” And I submitted it. My supervisor, a shriveled, monkish man who peered out from his glasses the way a fish gazes out of an aquarium, simply gave me a new assignment teaching business English to federal fisheries officials. There, my second act was equally autonomic: I began the first lesson by making my students repeat after me five times: “We should not kill whales.”

The meeting that followed, with someone more important and less *sakana-teki* than my supervisor, was amicable by American standards. “I’m very sorry there has been a difficulty,” the gentleman said. “I wonder, was there – perhaps – a way you could have taught the class differently?” All questions and apologies. It occurred to me that this was the Japanese equivalent of “you’ll never work in this town again.”

Half an hour later I was in Kabuki-cho, where I found a nightclub tout and asked for directions. “*Sōpu*,” I said. The sign outside the place he pointed me to was illustrated with a nude woman drawn in the style of Japanese animation. She was squatting in high heels, her legs splayed impossibly wide, like a butterfly’s wings. Strips of caution tape had

been drawn onto the sign in every direction, covering her where it mattered. A stairwell led down into the basement.

That was the only time I ever paid for a woman's touch, in Japan or anywhere. Of the two who lathered my body and whose hands slid up my soapy thighs to encircle me, Tase was the more morose, and the more beautiful because of it. I would have emptied my wallet just to watch what she did to me, with all the stern focus of a plumber at work on a clog, but I also felt it could have been happening to anyone anywhere, since whatever sensation I felt was small and distant, and I would not be able to enact the customary conclusion. "One of us will have to let go," she said, and worked on me a moment longer before standing up and leaving the room. The other girl rubbed my shoulders for a while. I listened to the moans emanating from an adjacent room, but nothing stirred in me.

When I stepped back out into the street, Tase was waiting for me, holding my wallet. "Not everyone is as honest as I am," she said, and flipped it open to remove my credit cards, which she examined, one after the other. "These," she said, "should never accompany you here." She gestured with her hand to indicate Kabuki-cho, though her gesture – hand skyward, fingers together and cupped, forearm pivoting in an arc from the elbow – only made me think of someone waving goodbye to an airplane. She read my name aloud from one of the cards, then replaced them and handed the wallet back to me.

"I'm sorry," I said. It was all I could think of.

She nodded, as if the apology had been necessary. “May I ask you a personal question?” she said.

I didn’t speak. I just glanced across the street, into a video arcade, where I saw a father lifting his small daughter so that she could strike a plastic *taiko* drum with two batons; the rhythm appeared on the screen in front of her as bursts of neon color.

“You only looked at me,” she said, and nodded behind her, into the stairwell. “I wonder,” she said, and paused. She crossed her arms over her chest and rested her hands on her shoulders. “Like you looked at your mother?”

“Thanks,” I said. I held up the wallet. “I know I’m not supposed to tip—”

“I’ve seen that look before,” she said. “This is my job, you know? But not like that. Like that, I haven’t seen it in a long time.”

I was compelled to meet her gaze, which I held for a moment while something in it plunged backward; there is nothing less like pleasure than recognizing another person adrift with you in the current of your only memory.

Shige was assigned to follow Tase and I while we did the kinds of things we might do for the show. We dined, went shopping, took trips out of Tokyo, met my friends and hers. He videotaped everything and we played around with a few of the scenes, repeating conversations that seemed interesting to set them in our memory, concocting squabbles or moments of affection. In three weeks he’d submit a highlight reel and a written report, which the producer would use to assemble a plan for the pilot episode.

Tase and I were both taken with Shige, who had a way of setting his eyes – light brown unto near-yellow – a little downward to match the slope of his sharp, Slavic chin. He was from a town where nuclear waste reprocessing provided the only viable living, and had blown the whistle on his former employer after they'd put him in mortal danger by sending him into the plant's high voltage switchyard during a lightning storm. Lightning had indeed struck – twice – and the story had been turned into a TV special, during which time he got to know some of the producers. He'd since worked his way up at NHK, and when we met him he'd done the same kind of preliminary fixer work on a series that sent struggling comedians to remote locations on scavenger hunts. “We sent the Japanese Chris Farley to the Amazon and made him catch an electric eel with his bare hands,” he once told us. “Proving once and for all that Japan is an advanced society.”

On our first outing we went to a theme park inside a shopping mall, where a plastic *maneki-neko* with a speaker in its palm and a homing device in its stomach guided us through the attractions. “Are you hungry?” it would ask us near the dumpling stands; “Think of someone you love!” near the gift shop. I remember sitting down to lunch before we left and listening to Shige describe the moment when lightning struck the first transformer: the torrent of yellow and orange sparks arcing over him, his fear giving way to an involuntary sense of the sublime, which just as quickly became pain and fear again when the sparks landed on him and many turned out to be bits of scalding mettle and molten plastic. He pulled the collar of his shirt aside, revealing the jagged boundary of a skin graft. His story defeated our cynicism; I think he could tell, and that he was

accustomed to inspiring sudden credulity, because he only shrugged and said, “I don’t believe in God,” then leaned onto the table with his elbow and pointed straight upward, indicating an absence. “So, as long as it’s up to me:” and here he showed us the notebook he always carried, which turned out to contain an immaculate record of everything he’d done and everything he’d heard said in the past week, “no more lightning.”

After that, whatever residual discomfort Tase and I felt from our first meeting at the *sōpu* dissolved into the simulated permissions of our shared task, and being physical with each other became easy. We would practice this on the train rides. Shige would sit across from us and gesture with his hands to indicate how we could canoodle for the camera. And we would talk it out: What kind of couple were we? The kind that would hold hands in public? Kiss? Nuzzle each other furtively, somehow alone in the train car, and yet conscious of the other passengers? I admit the camera became an erotic device, and there were moments when I noticed Shige hadn’t remembered to press record, but we had to do something to pass the train rides; all three of us had pasts, and the more reckless we were the better we could forget them between destinations.

On an early fall day, in the last of the summer heat, we rode the train to Shizuoka to scout a location Shige had learned about. Local teenagers called it “the monster office,” and it turned out to be a semi-abandoned medical clinic constructed in Japanese modernist style to resemble a coiled dragon. Shige expected the interior of the spiral building to provide the visual interest one might expect from a derelict medical facility,

and thought we might ad-lib a scene where I insisted on exploring it, much to Tase's simulated anxiety.

I might have sensed the gravity of what I was traveling toward. I knew I had stopped play-acting my attraction to Tase, who seemed shapeless and invisible and brilliant, like the portion of light that stays trapped in a prism. Our fumbling had become perfervid on the train that morning, abetted by the absence of other passengers except for Shige, who observed us, camera in hand, with his own restless intensity. Of course, we were escorted off the train, and might have been questioned by the police if not for Shige's sleight of hand. We took a taxi the rest of the way, the three of us in the back seat, pressed shoulder to shoulder.

The building was all Shige had hoped for, though the spiral construction, accomplished with wood slats and piled concrete, meant that light didn't diffuse inside, and the circular central staircase of the building held alternating shafts of sunlight and darkness – not ideal filming conditions. We shot on the roof, and we had a good time practicing a moment where Tase would jump into my arms, afraid of a sudden sound. We were standing on a kind of balcony, facing downhill. I could see and hear the ocean a few hundred meters downhill. The building had been constructed in a natural alcove in the limestone cliffs and the occasional yellow leaf flitted down from the trees that grew on the ridge above us. Every time Tase's weight landed against my chest and I felt the muscles in my shoulders tighten to support her weight, she came with the sudden smell of her skin-lightening cream, and the sensation of wrinkled linen against my palms,

where I'd clutched her and her dress had gathered around her armpit or thigh. I don't remember if I closed my eyes, but I know that for a moment I meditated on the sound of the ocean, and of Tase's breath, until they began to overlap and merge; I felt her lungs laboring under her ribs, which were pressed against mine. I felt how far I was from home. Something had pulled me out toward open water, and Tase had noticed.

"You're happy right now," she said.

"I'm not sure," I said. "I think so."

"I'm not built for happiness," she said, and gestured toward her body with her head, as if to say I should have known as much when I caught her.

We went down from the roof. I was less than halfway down the winding staircase when something pushed me on the back, and my body pitched forward. Did I put my hands out? I remember the rush of air, which seemed to be happening all around my ears, like only my head was falling.

I landed in a pile of the building's detritus – bits of glass and shredded paper, wisps of insulation – and before I had a chance to right myself, Tase had turned me flat on my back, head pointing down the stairs, and pinioned my arms. "This isn't about sex," she said. I may have tried to nod; my head was suspended above the step, in mid-air. I didn't fight it: not the hand on my belt buckle, nor the hand that slid down my pants to stiffen me. I just laid the weight of my head against the lip of the concrete step and concentrated on the cold, hollow sensation that began to well up where my neck pressed against the concrete; immediately, I could not remember a time I had not felt it.

The sound of a lens clicking into place on Shige's camera rebounded from the concrete walls, and I realized he intended to film this. It seemed unremarkable, if sudden. I regarded what was happening inside Shige's camera merely as the transfer of so many electrons, as I might have if I'd been using heroin. It was nothing, really.

My clothes were off by then, though not by any effort of mine, and I felt myself enter Tase's mouth, and then it was her hands, and between her closed thighs. And then into another darkness, while the shaft of light beat through my eyelids, painting everything orange and pink. The rhythm of the ocean was present, too, arriving through a broken window.

Then Shige was with us, at first in the form of his lips against my forehead, and then the sound of his struggle with his clothes, which he shed with audible urgency. For a moment, because this was new to me, there were more hands and mouths and exhalations than I could count, and then there only seemed to be one thing, one consciousness, that breathed and touched and tasted. No faces, no names, no corresponding egos to rest the weight of my mind against.

I didn't lie back anymore. I moved into and with it. The thing I'll always remember was how a hand would grasp me somewhere, or a tongue would drag along, and my thoughts would seize for a moment in terror: terror that another human body had reached out for me, terror that I could feel the steady pull, downward and outward, in that grasp – terror in my recognition, which seemed to spread and harden, that nothing had ever felt as real.

Tase went up to the roof afterward, where I found her a few minutes later, laying naked on her back, counting on both hands at once – clouds and waves, she later explained. Shige joined us after a time, having spent his afterglow exploring the building. He was the first to speak. “The architect who built this place was some kind of perfectionist,” he said.

Any number of things could have occurred, or failed to, after that. But lately such thoughts occur to me less often. It happened that I stole a copy of the recording from Shige’s apartment. Not out of self-preservation; I only wanted to watch it, and Shige had claimed it lost. As I watched the recording, which was only shadow and noise, and the occasional bare shoulder – or sunlit knee and inner thigh – appearing at the edge of the frame, it did occur to me that Shige had been nearly silent throughout, and I remembered a disturbance in his expression, a smile captured before it could emerge, perhaps, which told about an unfolding in him no afternoon could contain.

Whatever shook loose in him (Tase knows everything, but I have never asked), it resulted in Shige submitting his notes to the producers with an elaborate description of that afternoon intact. This scandalized the producers, but their shock was only briefly indulged; attorneys were soon consulted, hard drives recovered (they were the broadcaster’s legal property) and the final outcome was more than equitable to Tase and I, who went on to film the show. In return we acknowledged certain facts about Shige,

namely that he was not a stable individual, and precisely the kind of person who would fabricate a story about a deviant sexual encounter with cast members.

I can't tell you where I last saw Shige because I didn't see him, and I didn't often think of him. As a person who was once too lost to distinguish sinking from rising, I am sometimes without sympathy, which belongs to the uninitiated. The one time I remarked to Tase that it might be nice to find him – but where to begin? – she shrugged and said, “wherever there's lightning,” and I realized that she, too, hadn't struggled with absolving herself.

Later, after the first season had aired, probably around the time Tase and I were doing the daily variety show circuit together, she bought my mother a plane ticket and didn't tell me about it until the night before the flight's scheduled arrival. I went to the airport, sure. I've always had a tendency to stand where the pendulum's momentum will be greatest, though collision continues to elude me. From afar, I watched my mother enter the arrivals lobby. Time had wrought few changes, though my father had told me about the mastectomy when it happened; he had sounded relieved, like a man who'd just seen the horse he couldn't afford to bet on collapse in the final lap. But there it was on her body: this perfect absence in a place of honor, no less miraculous than a mountain made into a harbor.

I saw her wait awhile there, under the billboard-sized digital clock and the names of many distant cities, then shoulder her bag and walk away. I stayed in the airport long

enough to hear the first two announcements: would I please meet my party at the information desk?

Someone else would find her. Someone else always had. I thought about Alain, the dashing Iranian physicist she'd brought with her to the Berkshires, and how, a moment before my father had answered the door, she'd put her hand in Alain's pants, then removed it when the latch clicked; she had wanted my father to notice, I think. I had watched from my bedroom window. As we walked to her car, the promise of impending purchases tumbled off her tongue. We could all have whatever we wanted.

Alain wasn't with me for long. Not on that day in the Berkshires, not fifteen years later in the arrivals lobby at Narita, and now I'm surprised I remember his name. But I do remember an image that took shape in my mind while I wondered about my mother's continued presence in the airport, somewhere nearby, somewhere I could find her. I imagined Tokyo as seen from the roof of a tall building at night, looking down onto a train station, where the trains came and went as caterpillars of light. As I persisted in this daydream, time became almost visual – the trains would come and go, the souls board and alight, or wait forever on the platform if they wanted to. I stood at the top of an escalator while I imagined this, watching it disgorge couples, inconsolable or joyous, and reunited families in their moments of wholehearted solicitude. Then I went down into the airport basement, where the trains depart, and disappeared back into the city where my face was widely known.