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Insect Light:
Stories

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by

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The New School
Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Arts, 2013

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ABSTRACT

A collection of short stories. Literary fiction.

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TEN THOUSAND KNOCKS

Kei wears everything he needs to look the part: sunglasses, even when the sky is darkening; a black suit, the sort most people only wear to Buddhist funerals, with a pack of Hopes visible in the breast pocket. He never takes off his coat, no matter the season, and when the occasion presents itself, Kei will tug at the sleeves of his shirt, as though he's hiding tattoos. Ninety percent of the job, as Nomura explained it to him, is the ability to inspire confidence and fear. Dressing the part helps manage both. The rest is just the luck it takes to get someone to answer the door.

It's just after three when Kei walks out of Ireji station. He has a map the SafeNihon branch office staff drew for him on a sheet of graph paper, but now that he can see the neighborhood for himself, Kei doubts it will do much good. There are rice paddies placed next to driveways, and the sounds of late summer cicadas wind up and wind down. It's a country town, the sort Kei grew up in. The train comes only once every two hours. Kei knows how insular these sorts of towns can be. What the map describes as a quick walk is probably closer to thirty minutes. It's bizarre, he thinks to himself, that he can be so close to Tokyo and still be somewhere chickens are scratching around.

The apartment building Kei is looking for is run down and two stories. It is down the road from a Junior High School surrounded by several sports fields, and across the street from a Shinto shrine fenced off by overgrown palm trees. The apartment complex houses a grand total of ten households, eight of whom, according to the records, always pay their rent on time. Only one is delinquent this month, though, so if luck holds this will be the only trip Kei has to make to

Ireji for some time. Kei walks to the second floor, apartment 204, and knocks on the door exactly four times. There is no doorbell.

“Miss Tamura?”

Silence. Kei knocks four more times. He hears movement inside the apartment and decides to take a gamble.

“Miss Tamura! My name is Itano, and I’m here on behalf of the SafeNihon corporation. You are three months behind on rental payments. I know you’re inside, Miss Tamura. I can hear you.”

There is a creaking, and then nothing.

“I’m going to slide a past due notice through the mail slot Miss Tamura. It is imperative that you pay the fine at the nearest post office by this time tomorrow.”

The mail flap clicks back into place. There is rustling on the other side of the door.

“Miss Tamura?”

Silence again. Kei scratches the outside of the box of Hopes. He doesn’t smoke, but he lights a cigarette and holds it by his waist, letting ash drop onto the ground. Everything is a matter of impression. It is a well-practiced strategy to be loud enough for neighbors to hear. Embarrassment can make a person do a lot of things that guilt can’t. Having a smoker, dressed the way he is, on a front doorstep is also bound to arouse some suspicion. Neighbors tend not to stand for certain kinds of people hanging around, and there are all sorts of neighborhood associations that can be called to action.

“SafeNihon is a company, Miss Tamura. We are not a charity. We loan people like you our name, so that you can get an apartment even if no one else in the world trusts you. Isn’t that a wonderful thing? There’s so much risk involved, and we still offer our services to individuals

with no one else to turn to. But you have a duty to us as well. There are times, Miss Tamura, when people cannot pay the rent. This is unavoidable. Not every person in a country can be wealthy. But in those times, Miss Tamura, we are forced to pick up the slack. We have to pay for you until you can pay us back. And now you haven't paid your rent for three entire months. Why, that's a quarter of a year already. So much time has passed, and you still continue to take our money. Ask yourself, is this fair? Is this the way the world should work? People should pay their debts, Miss Tamura. It is a vital part of maintaining a functional society. A world without integrity is not a place anyone should want to live in. Don't you agree?"

Kei doesn't expect this will change anything. It's a matter of who holds out the longest. He knows that he has to be patient.

"I'm going to leave now, Miss Tamura. But I will be back tomorrow, at the same time. If you pay the fines before then, we can avoid having any further unpleasant conversations."

Kei crushes the cigarette under his heel, walks down the steps, and phones his boss to report the situation. He is going to spend the night in nearby Ryugasaki and return in the morning to avoid hours on the train the next day. He books two nights in a business hotel and naps at the station, waiting for the train to come.

When Kei first started working for SafeNihon, he was called into the manager's office for an instructional briefing. Kei wasn't sure what to expect. He had heard plenty of rumors about Mr. Sakuragi—that he only had eight fingers, that he once assaulted a dog breeder over a few month's rent—but Kei knew those sorts of things have a tendency to be exaggerated. Sakuragi might be a brute, but SafeNihon was, ostensibly, a legitimate organization. They were more likely to handle conflicts with lawyers than brute force.

SafeNihon's Ibaraki branch office was located on a single floor of a faceless office building in downtown Mito. Most employees spent their time shuttling themselves to different parts of the prefecture on various assignments. There wasn't call for much space. Kei was greeted by the receptionist and shown into a small room.

"Mr. Sakuragi will be with you shortly."

Kei nodded and sat in an uncomfortable chair across from Sakuragi's desk. A framed gun schematic was hung on the wall next to the door. Above the desk two Noh masks, both faces of women, were floated in parallel. The secretary knocked on the door and placed a cup of watered-down green tea on the desk in front of him. Sakuragi arrived about ten minutes later.

"You must be Itano. Thank you for coming in so early."

Kei stood and bowed slightly.

"It's no trouble at all."

Sakuragi sat down and rifled through a desk drawer. He was a short man, balding but powerfully built. His suit was immaculate, but his tie was completely ruffled out of shape. Kei found the contrast distracting, and had to force himself not to stare. How had the tie gotten so messy? After a few moments, Sakuragi found what he was looking for and set a small folder down on the desk.

"This is what I was thinking for your first solo assignment. It's best to start with something tricky. Helps shake off the nerves."

Kei took the folder. The address listed was for an apartment complex in southern Ibaraki, somewhere near Toride. The materials indicated that the tenant, a woman named Shigeko Morita, hadn't paid rent in two months. In addition, she owed nearly sixty-thousand yen to SafeNihon in guarantor processing fees.

“Do you have any questions?”

Kei shook his head.

“Nomura recommended you, and I understand he’s been showing you the ropes, so I can’t imagine there would be any problems. But I want to make certain that you understand what it is we do here.” Sakuragi paused to choose the right words. “You came to us with an outstanding academic record, but no college education or experience. I can’t say for certain what bad decision led you to us, but we’re grateful to have you. It’s just that our work requires a particular sort of mentality. And I need to know that you and I are of the same mentality. This is a company with many arms and many faces, but only one mind. Do you understand, Mr. Itano?”

Kei nodded and glanced up at the Noh masks, recalling that they were painted to change expression with the angle of the light. The glint of the fluorescent bulbs seemed to be creating a grimace.

“Do you like them?”

“They’re exquisite,” Kei lied.

Sakuragi smiled. “I’m very fond of the theatre.”

Sakuragi folded his hands together and leaned his nose on top of them. He had all ten fingers in their proper places after all.

“SafeNihon is a business, Mr. Itano. We are not a philanthropic organization, nor do we provide a public service. It is our duty to make a profit, and we do this by ensuring that our partners’ tenants pay their rent. It is not your job to show compassion to those that cannot. It is your duty to intimidate so we don’t have to call in anyone tougher. All that matters are the results.”

“I don’t think there will be any problems,” Kei replied.

Around seven, Kei asks the front desk at his hotel directions to a batting cage. The concierge smiles and draws him a small map, explaining the nearest is a twenty minute walk, and that at this time of night it may be best to take a taxi. Kei refuses her offer to call him one and steps outside. He has changed into a white T-shirt and chinos from a Global Work by the station. He assumes no one will be able to recognize him. There was a storm in the early evening, and the streets are heavy with humidity.

Kei reaches the batting cage in under fifteen minutes. A cashier stands at a small green desk, a series of bats lined on the wall behind him. The Talking Heads are playing on the speaker system. Kei orders three games—sixty pitches—and receives a bat from the wall.

“The early rain must’ve done everyone in. We’re not very well covered,” the cashier explains, gesturing to the open nets above the complex.

Kei thanks him and goes to his assigned cage. He sets the machine to slow. He misses twice, but on his third try scores a solid hit. Kei has never been a particularly good baseball player. He played on his high school team for one year before quitting in order to study for college entrance exams. That was the plan, anyway, before he tanked them for a girl he couldn’t hold on to. Still, there is something that calms Kei about the feel of a bat in his hands, the sound it makes when it strikes something. There is something primal and violent about it; something dangerous. It makes Kei feel like he still has the potential to accomplish something, though what he isn’t sure himself.

A buzzer sounds. Kei has played through the three games he bought. He returns to the register and pays for two more games. Forty more balls makes a hundred, and he reasons that should be good enough for the day.

As Kei returns to the cages, a tall man in glasses walks through the doors behind him. The man pays at the register and sets up in the cage next to Kei. He turns the machine to the fastest setting and proceeds to hit every ball Kei sees him swing at. After twenty pitches, Kei realizes that he has lost his concentration, that he is paying more attention to the man next to him than he is to his own swings. Kei takes a deep breath and adjusts his grip. He can't keep letting himself be distracted by what others are doing well.

Don't stop, Kei tells himself. No matter what. As long as you can, just keep swinging.

In the morning, Kei stops for breakfast at a Doutor by the station. He orders a croissant filled with ham and mayonnaise and munches it at one of the overcrowded tables. There are a lot of commuters in Ryugasaki. It's a normal town, with shops and even a few highrises, but people mostly live here because the rent is half what it is in Tokyo proper. Five or six days a week they ride the train for two hours to Shinjuku or Minato Ward. They spend their lives in transition from their homes to work. It is as though they are constantly both waiting and in motion.

Kei finishes his breakfast, buys a ticket, and takes the ten-minute train ride to Ireji station. The train is still steam powered, apparently, and the interior is plastered with signs explaining the historical and cultural significance of maintaining the JR Ryugasaki line, despite its paltry three stations. Above these are advertisements, for NHK dramas and Pocari Sweat and some children's cartoon about a talking lion. Kei spends most of the ride pondering who chooses the juxtapositions, which advertisement gets placed where, but can't come up with any sort of pattern or explanation.

The outside of Miss Tamura's apartment complex seems more serene than the day before. A light wind is blowing, and the sound of chimes echoes in the distance. A cat naps in the

sunlight on the staircase. Kei sighs. He doesn't particularly enjoy his work, but he is good at it, at least as far as the numbers are concerned. He checks his phone one more time to make certain the branch office hasn't received payment yet.

"Results," Kei mutters under his breath. He knocks on the door four times.

"Yes? One minute," a small voice answers.

The door creaks open. A short woman, maybe thirty-five years old, stands on the other side. She wears no makeup and has her hair tied messily back. The dark circles under her eyes are difficult to ignore.

"How can I help you?" the woman says.

"Are you Miss Marika Tamura?"

"Momoko Tamura. I'm her sister."

"Would your sister happen to be home right now? It's important that I speak with her."

"I'm sorry, she went out to run some errands. I'm not sure when she'll be back."

Kei considers this for a moment. He doesn't have a picture of Marika Tamura, but her file states that she is roughly the same age as this woman appears to be.

"You're her younger sister, you said?"

"I didn't. I'm her older sister. Why?"

"No reason." Kei reaches into his pocket, takes out a business card, and passes it to the woman at the door. She accepts with both hands. "Here's the thing, Miss Tamura. Your younger sister is quite late with her rent payments. Three months late, in fact. I represent SafeNihon, the guarantor company affiliated with this apartment complex. It's my job to collect payment, and I'm afraid this is already my second visit. I came here yesterday, but your sister pretended not to be home."

“Oh dear.”

“It’s placed me in a bit of a dilemma. This is the last time I will be able to make the trip to collect Miss Tamura’s fees. After this, the company will have to reassign me to another case, and they’ll have to send someone new.”

“I see.”

“Unfortunate though it may be, not all of our employees are quite as patient as I am. I’m concerned the next person they send might take things a bit more seriously.”

The woman takes a long look at Kei, seeming to recognize the significance behind his funeral wear and the sunglasses. Kei does his best to smile back.

“I’ll be certain to let her know.”

“Please do. I’m afraid she’s causing us quite a bit of trouble.”

The woman inclines her head. This could indicate yes or no, but Kei chooses to interpret it positively.

“Can I help you with anything else?” the woman says.

“No. No, I suppose you can’t. I’m sorry for disturbing you, Miss Tamura.”

“It’s no trouble at all,” she responds and shuts the door in a hurry.

Kei stares at the apartment number, the shut door, the mail slot. He considers ringing the doorbell again, but recognizes that this would probably be a mistake. His options are limited from this point forward. He turns and begins the walk back to the station.

Kei sits in his hotel room, perched on the end of the bed, listening intently to everything the other end of the phone has to say. Mr. Sakuragi, it seems, is less than pleased with Kei’s performance.

“Itano, this should have been a simple collection. I gave it to you because I was sure you could finish the job quickly. If you can’t manage a simple intimidation routine anymore, I’m not sure I have much use left for you.”

“No, sir. I’m very sorry.”

“You can show it by finishing up this job. I can’t send Nomura or Okada all the way down to Ryugasaki this week. So it’s got to be you. Show me you can get it done.”

The line shuts off with a click. Kei grimaces. He doesn’t want to see himself as the sort of person suited to dirty work. He takes a memo pad and pen off the table and begins to scrawl a shopping list before thinking better of it. He rips the paper into shreds and flushes it down the toilet. If things go wrong, he doesn’t want to leave a trail.

Kei walks to a sporting goods store and purchases an aluminum baseball bat and a carrying case. He used to own one the same make and size. As he carries the bags home, he realizes the bat feels lighter than it used to. He stops into a convenience store and buys latex gloves, antiseptic wipes, plastic bags, and a package of plastic wrap—the sorts of things he’s seen before in crime dramas. If things go well, he won’t have to use any of it.

As soon as he has assembled everything, Kei returns to his hotel. He remembers what Nomura has told him about getting a tenant to pay up: the most important things are confidence and fear. Kei takes out his phone and dials a number.

“Hello?” a woman answers.

“I bought a baseball bat today.”

“What?”

“It’s metal. Heavy. Just like the old one.”

“...Kei?”

Kei doesn't say anything.

"What are you planning to do with it?"

"I'm not sure yet."

"You couldn't last time, remember? He never showed. We just went home."

"Yeah."

"Don't do anything stupid."

"Yeah."

"You're smarter than this."

"It's different now." Kei says. "It's not about whether I'm smart or not. There are just some things I have to do."

"You know you shouldn't be calling me. I'm married now."

Kei scratches the back of his neck.

"I just sort of felt like it."

"Bye, Kei."

She hangs up, and Kei falls backward onto the bed. For a long time he stares at the ceiling, counting the wrinkles he can see at the top of the wallpaper. There are forty-two. For reasons of his own, Kei finds this ominous.

It's early the next afternoon when Kei checks out of his hotel. He is wearing chinos and a T-shirt again, along with his sunglasses and a Hanshin Tigers hat. The baseball bat is slung over his left shoulder in a Mizuno carrying case. He spends the ride to Ireji convincing himself of what he has to do, that all debts have to be paid, that fair warning has already been given.

As he walks to the apartment complex, Kei is already considering contingencies. What if the sister is also home? Is the sister really a sister? He should have asked Sakuragi for a picture. Kei feels his resolve weakening. He takes the bag off his back, unzips it, and feels to make certain the bat is still inside.

No one answers the door at the apartment complex.

“Miss Tamura? This is Endo with Yamato Transport. I have a package for you, if you’re willing to sign.”

The door stays shut. Kei listens for a while, but he can’t hear any rustling inside. It may really be empty. Kei considers his options. With the train running so infrequently, it seems like the best choice would be to stay close by and watch. He recalls that there is a shrine across the street, and figures there will probably be a bench there. He crosses the street, walks through the palm trees, and sits down on a stone bench covered in overgrowth. Time passes slowly. A group of elementary kids walk down the street, escorted by a woman in a sundress. The same cat that was sleeping on the steps crosses the street, headed somewhere else. A man in a suit leaves one of the first floor apartments. Kei loosens his grip on his bag. He feels as though he is always waiting.

The sky starts to darken. Day cicadas give way to crickets. A woman comes out of apartment 204 holding a white shopping bag. She drops it in a recycling bin—it must be filled with cans—shakes her head twice, and walks back up the steps to her apartment.

As far as Kei can tell, it is the woman that claimed to be Momoko Tamura. Her hair is the same length, and even in the darkness, the style appears to be the same. Her heels are fairly worn, and there is a small tear in the handbag that hangs off her shoulder. Her outfit is not exactly fashionable.

Kei waits until he sees the door shut before climbing the staircase to her apartment. He knocks four times.

“Miss Tamura!”

He knocks again.

“Miss Tamura, I know you’re in there. I just saw you leave to take out the trash. You’re probably standing right behind your door, staring at me through the peephole. I’m right, aren’t I?”

Kei steels himself. This is it. No turning back.

He knocks again.

“Do you have any idea how many doors I’ve knocked on, Miss Tamura? Dozens and dozens. Hundreds, probably. So many that I’ve lost count. I’ve spent the last two years going to every corner of Ibaraki prefecture. I’ve must have knocked ten thousand times. Do you know how many people answer their doors these days? Almost none. I may have the best numbers of anyone at my level, but most of the work is done by people far worse than I am. Do you understand what that means? Do you understand why I bother to spend so much time warning you when I could have just called in someone tougher? Maybe it doesn’t matter, Miss Tamura. But I promise you that I tried.”

Kei unzips the bag containing his baseball bat.

“I’ve brought this with me today. Maybe you can see it through the peephole. It’s heavy, Miss Tamura, and I know how to use it.” Kei lets the bat thud against the ground and echo. “But it’s not my job to use it. It shouldn’t have to be my job to do these sorts of things.”

Kei takes a final deep breath.

“Pay your debts, Miss Tamura. It will only get worse from here.”

Kei picks up the bat, and spends a moment considering the possibilities. If he wanted to, he could probably smash down the door. He could put on a pair of gloves, wrap the bat in plastic, and smack it against the frame until the door bent cracked, bent and gave way. He could smash off the hinges. He could break a window and climb into the apartment. Once inside, Kei could calmly destroy all of her possessions. He could smash the television, the light fixtures, all the bowls in the kitchen. If the woman tried to interfere, he could push her to the ground. He could shatter a limb or two. The cracking sound would be deafening.

This is probably what Sakuragi expects. Kei pulls himself into a batting stance. His muscles stiffen. All it takes is one strike to start, but no matter how hard he tries to, he can't force his muscles into a swing.

Kei walks down the stairs, and follows the road back to the Junior High School. He climbs over the fence, and sneaks behind a brick building to a baseball field in the back. It is late enough that everyone has gone home; the baseball team has already swept the field and put away all of their tools carefully. He walks to home plate and stares up at the clouds, as if waiting for some kind of divine message. He picks up the bat and begins to swing. It makes violent noises as it slashes through the air. Tomorrow, he will tell Mr. Sakuragi that he waited all night, but Miss Tamura never returned to her apartment. She is out of town, perhaps. Or maybe she has run off into the night. Maybe Kei did too good a job of scaring her. If he is lucky, Mr. Sakuragi will ask for his resignation, but if not, Kei thinks he will probably resign anyway. He doesn't have to support anyone but himself. He could work at a convenience store, at a pet shop by the station. The possibilities are limited, but they exist. He will find something else that suits him. Kei grits his teeth and swings, and swings, and swings. His muscles cry out and his hands grow raw. The

wind blows behind him, softly, and it feels as though with each of his swings he is gathering it, a part of it, pushing forward with the current until it will carry him somewhere new.

1988, Summer

At some point during the last August of the Showa era, Azumi Nakahara becomes pregnant. She has recently married Kazuhiko, a former entomologist who now works for a large publishing company, proofreading textbooks. Azumi calls Kazuhiko “Nobita” because his round glasses make him look like a character from *Doraemon*. It is Kazuhiko’s second marriage and also his second child; he is twelve years older than Azumi, and a lifetime of experience separates them on many issues. They do, however, care about each other deeply. They are excited by the prospect of their life together.

In August, they also visit Kazuhiko’s family in Okayama prefecture for the Obon holiday. Azumi is from Tokyo, and it is the first time she has ever been west of Osaka. She is amazed by both the mountains and the heat, as well as the speed of the train through such rough terrain. In the evenings, Kazuhiko takes Azumi to a river in the neighborhood in which he grew up, to listen to cicadas. One evening, towards the end of their trip, a firefly lands on Azumi’s hand. The season too is ending, and few fireflies are left. The firefly pulses and glows, lingering. The two of them take this to be a good omen. They stand on the riverbank in silence, listening to the cicadas and crickets, until the firefly rises and darts into the darkness. Though the summer is insufferably hot, though Azumi has a summer cold which has lingered for days, and even though her husband’s family has been less than accepting of his choice to take a second wife, this is a moment Azumi will remember for the rest of her life as a time when she was happy.

1989, Winter

Hirohito, 124th Emperor of Japan, dies at 6:33 on the morning of January seventh. His son Akihito ascends to the crown. Cancer is cited as the cause of death; apparently the imperial family has long been struggling with this illness in silence, walled off from the eyes of the nation. The end of an era is declared, and the name Heisei (“peace everywhere”) is selected for the present age. In the evening, the Emperor’s death is marked by cannon fire in the imperial gardens. The sound echoes throughout the center of Tokyo shortly before a press conference. The Nakaharas, like many other people on this day, mistake the sound for fireworks, and assume they have forgotten about a local festival. They unceremoniously continue to eat their dinner in a small apartment in Ochanomizu, a district of Tokyo known for its celebration of music.

Among other things, Hirohito is famous for his post-war declaration that he was not, in fact, God, and should not be revered as such.

1989, Spring

After a labor of a length which Azumi had previously believed impossible, Hotaru Nakahara is born. She is named, by her parents, after the sort of firefly that landed on her mother’s hand. Azumi likes the sound of it—it reminds her of a warm, soft glow. When they choose the name, Kazuhiko remarks that fireflies were once mistaken for wandering souls of the dead. He makes the comment as though it is something he read in a textbook (and, indeed, it was). While Kazuhiko’s statement makes sense, Azumi assumes there’s something even simpler at work: anything you don’t understand looks magical from the right distance.

1989, Autumn

Kazuhiko and Azumi find some balance in the chaos of their apartment. Hotaru is up at all hours of the night, but after a confused six months, Azumi has started to develop a system for determining what her child needs. She notices, increasingly, the things which are unsafe or swallowable in the apartment, and somehow finds an extradimensional amount of time to clean, decorate, and straighten. Occasionally she cooks a meal of mackerel simmered in miso—Kazuhiko's favorite—and for hours the smell of the apartment, the miso settling into the tatami flooring, gives Azumi a feeling of confidence. She may be a young mother, and she may be inexperienced, but she has a sense that she is living her life well. Sometimes, in moments of particular satisfaction, she buys a small bunch of grapes and snacks on them in the late afternoon while watching a tourism variety show about the great inns of Japan. For reasons of her own, Azumi considers this to be wonderfully decadent.

1990, Autumn

The effects of an economic downturn are pronounced. Kazuhiko spends an increasing amount of time in the office, putting in long hours producing textbooks as the company he works for undergoes round after round of layoffs. His role at the company is expanded, requiring him to work not only on the science textbooks he was employed to oversee, but also the material for other subjects. English, history, and Japanese texts cross his desk, and the complexities of the Chinese characters in the books geared towards university students require him to constantly reference a large, musty dictionary. He often worries that his hands smell of old books, and he washes his hands more frequently as a result.

1991, Winter

At home, Hotaru has begun to gain independence. She crawls, takes a few unsteady steps. Azumi takes her for walks, to the park and along the Kanda river. It is cold, but the snow is infrequent this year, and Azumi often spends more time outdoors than she expects. Sometimes Azumi feels ridiculous, as though she is parading her child around like a small dog instead of a human being. Sometimes the old woman who works at the post office tells her that she has a beautiful child. Both of these thoughts hold true in the moment, somehow.

1992, Spring

Kazuhiko's ex-wife, Mari, runs away in the night in order to escape a series of outstanding debts. Kazuhiko's first son, Naoya, is shuttled to Mari's parents' home, but eventually comes to live with Kazuhiko and Azumi. Naoya is seven, four years older than Hotaru, and a handful when he is not sullen. In addition to tearing the house apart, he refuses to eat both carrots and green bell peppers. Azumi spends several weeks attempting to connect with him. Eventually, Azumi discovers that like his father, Naoya has an interest in bugs.

Because they don't live in an area with much greenery, aside from a few zelkova trees on the street below, Azumi rounds up the children one Saturday afternoon and together the three of them take the train to Yoyogi park. It is a short ride—just six stops—but they can't find a seat and Azumi finds herself constantly corralling Naoya into a corner of the car. By the time they arrive at the park, Azumi is already exhausted.

Azumi spreads a picnic blanket on some grass at the outskirts of a grove, and Naoya bounds in and out, looking for beetles. Neither Naoya nor Azumi realizes that it is too early in the year to find the sort of beetle Naoya is looking for. The day ends in disappointment.

Kazuhiko gets home from work late, long after the children have gone to bed. “I’m not sure I can do this, Nobita,” Azumi tells him, her head bowed over a teacup while he hangs up his jacket. Kazuhiko promises to try to come home earlier.

1992, Autumn

Kazuhiko tries, but coming home earlier turns out to be an impossibility. The economy is still slow, perhaps slower than the previous year, and Kazuhiko is willing to do whatever he has to in order to protect his job. Once or twice a week, he takes a taxi home from the office too late for Azumi to be awake. Azumi has mixed feelings about this—it’s certainly not the marriage she imagined, not the marriage she was promised when Kazuhiko proposed. The man she had agreed to marry seemed confident and mature, capable of resisting orders when he had to; but at the same time Azumi wants to be sympathetic. The work Kazuhiko is doing is work that only he is left to do. Azumi does her best to avoid the issue. The food she cooks grows more elaborate, and she tries to broaden her range of interests by reading books on Mongolian history and ornamental gardening. As a surprise, Azumi buys Kazuhiko an expensive electronic dictionary. It is bulky; the brochure promises it contains the definition for at least six-thousand words installed, along with a series of plastic memory cards containing additional characters and even a few hundred words in English. Kazuhiko uses it at work frequently, but he still washes his hands hourly. At this point, it has become a habit.

1994, Summer

The Nakaharas take a family trip to visit Kazuhiko’s parents in Okayama. A new model of bullet train has been released—faster, cushier—and they reserve four seats on an express line. The first

section of the ride is speedy; the landscape dissolves into a blur before Azumi can focus on any of it. Shortly after they reach Nagoya, however, the train is stopped by an accident and held by torrential rain. In the end, it is close to two hours before the train starts moving again, making the trip slower than it would have been, even by express.

For most of the delay, however, Naoya and Hotaru don't seem to mind. Even while stuck on the train, they are fascinated by the rivulets of water running down the sides, the sleek interiors, the overpriced snack cart that wheels around every half-hour. Kazuhiko splurges and buys a frozen mandarin for each of them, and beer for himself and Azumi. For a moment, it doesn't matter how long it will take the tracks to clear.

1995 Winter - 1995, Spring

In early January, the Hanshin quake destroys most of Kobe, leaving a trail of wreckage and aftershocks that reach as far as Kazuhiko's parents' home in Okayama prefecture. People in the neighborhood rally and donate supplies—bottled water, canned fish, cup ramen—to send to the affected area, and Azumi donates once or twice before attempting to push the whole scenario from her mind. Azumi stops watching television; the news is too depressing, and the kids take up too much of her energy already.

Just when Azumi begins to feel as though she is returning to her normal life, a doomsday cult launches a chemical attack on the Tokyo subway system. The news breaks in the early morning, and though it is immediately clear that something has gone wrong, the details are finicky and vary from account to account. Hospitals fill with the injured, and for hours Azumi is unable to contact Kazuhiko. Kazuhiko, luckily, takes an above-ground train to work, and it's

unlikely that he was anywhere near the attacks themselves, but still, Azumi frets throughout the day.

The number of casualties and injuries are much lower than even the Hanshin quake, but there is still something even more deeply unsettling about the incident. Perhaps it is because it is closer to home, or perhaps because it is an act perpetrated by people, not nature. Azumi compulsively reads a series American mystery novels, even though the subject matter isn't any happier, and absorbs herself in that instead.

1995, Summer

A brood of the cicada *tanna japonensis* awakens and swarms the country in much larger numbers than previous years. In Japanese, this species of cicada is known as higurashi, a word homophonic for “day-to-day existence.” The higurashi has a life cycle of fifteen to seventeen years and spends all but one of these underground.

When Kazuhiko explains this to Hotaru, she begins to think of them as a kind of ghost—she can't see them, but she knows that they're out there somewhere, buried, out of sight.

1995, Autumn

Hotaru has a series of recurring nightmares where the ground opens up and *something* comes out and grabs her. The thing grabs her around her ankles and slowly drags her back underground. The last image she remembers is of the sky disappearing overhead. Azumi does her best to convince Hotaru that it isn't real, and over the course of months, it is a dream that Hotaru stops having. Azumi wonders if it is a dream about the earthquake, or the subway, but she hasn't allowed Hotaru to watch television or see much about it on the news. If it is a dream about a disaster, it is a dream that has seeped in, inexplicably, through the net of censorship Azumi has

put up. This idea terrifies Azumi more than Hotaru's dream itself, as it is a problem she is powerless to resolve.

1997, Autumn

Azumi takes a tea ceremony course with a mother she met during a cultural festival at Hotaru's elementary school. It has become trendy, retro even, to have traditional art as a hobby, and many of the members of the local parent-teacher association are taking up tea ceremony or flower arrangement or a fleeting interest in kirigami.

When Azumi enters the classroom, she finds that she and her friend are easily the youngest taking the course. It is mostly filled with retirees, who (despite their arthritis) seem to perform the ceremony with more deftness and composure than either Azumi or her friend can manage. Azumi leaves the lesson wondering if she has become old. She doesn't return for a second.

1999, Summer

The whole family attends a Hanshin Tigers game while visiting Kazuhiko's parents. It is a one-sided matchup against the Hiroshima Carp, and by the third inning it is already obvious who will win. Kazuhiko, the only diehard baseball fan in the family, does his best to enjoy himself anyway. He orders several rounds of beer and is uncharacteristically drunk by the time the game is called. Azumi has had a few beers less and, much to her chagrin, is left shepherding the kids. Hotaru, eight and too uncoordinated to have a keen interest in sports, is already bored by the affair and won't stop squirming. Azumi accompanies Hotaru on a series of unproductive trips to the bathroom; all the while the sun beats down harder and harder.

In a misguided attempt to help Azumi, Kazuhiko regales Naoya with a slurred retelling of the 1985 Japan Series, but keeps skipping over key details and forgetting his place, and all Naoya really wants to be doing is watching the game. Naoya avoids breathing through his nose as his father talks, already resenting the scent of alcohol.

In the eighth inning, the Carp hit a home run that flies out of the stadium with a crack, and for an instant, all four of their heads are craned skyward, as though they are waiting for something to fall.

1985, Autumn

The story, as Kazuhiko remembers it, is basically this:

The Hanshin Tigers have, in an unprecedented season, made their way to the Japan title. Kazuhiko is living in Ashiya—a suburb between Kobe and Osaka—and is still married to his first wife, Mari. It is November, the day of the sixth game of the series, and attendance is sold out. Kazuhiko watches from a sports bar in Kobe. The walls are plastered with black and yellow memorabilia. It is on the strength of a recent acquisition, the American Randy Bass, that the Tigers have done so well this year. It is the sixth inning, and already they are closing in on their first-ever championship. There is a sense of electricity in the air.

The instant the Tigers win, Kobe and Osaka devolve into riots. Trains are hijacked in celebration; Osaka's downtown district of Nanba is filled with people. It takes Kazuhiko two hours to walk home from the bar, and the news reports continue long into the night. In a frenzy, fans begin to dive into the river from the Dotonbori bridge, screaming the name of the Tigers player they look most like. After a few minutes, a concerned fan realizes that no one is yelling the name "Randy Bass," because, of course, none of the fans are white. Hoping to give his

favorite player the honor he deserves, the concerned fan steals a statue of Colonel Sanders from outside the Nanba station KFC and throws it into the water. The surrounding crowd yells “Randy Bass!” as the statue crashes through the surface, and the party continues.

In the cold light of day, many of these decisions are regretted, and the statue of the Colonel is not recovered, despite many attempts. Fans worry the spirit of Harland Sanders—now five years deceased—was residing in the statue as the Shinto embodiment of the object, and that angered by this desecration, he has placed a curse upon the team.

In the years that follow, the Tigers never win a Japan series again.

1999, Summer

Kazuhiko mutters over and over, “We’re all still cursed.”

1999, Autumn - 2000, Spring

While Tokyo begins to prepare to celebrate the new century, Hotaru locks herself in her room, forcing herself to study for middle school entrance exams. She has always been smart, excelling in particular at math and science, but her stress is palpable and wraps the entire home in a curtain of unease. Naoya, who attends a public school of no particular excellence, was never concerned to the same degree, and he finds himself cowed by Hotaru’s ambition. His own high school entrance exams will come soon as well, and he begins to mimic Hotaru’s habits, secluding himself in studies until he begins to feel the limits of the information his brain can absorb. Azumi worries about both of them, but isn’t quite sure what to do other than to support their efforts, and Kazuhiko insists that it’s best that she just leaves them alone, which sounds ridiculous to Azumi, who believes that there is never a bad time to help your children. Whether out of generosity or

spite, she makes rice balls for lunch, sometimes, and brings them to Hotaru and Naoya while they study.

2000, Spring

Hotaru enters a prestigious middle school a few train stations from home, but Naoya has given up on the extra studying. Naoya instead focuses on other things—baseball, video games, issues of *Shounen Sunday*—and gradually his studies lag more and more. Hotaru, however, is thrilled by the fact that she now commutes to school by train. There is an independence to it that even Naoya doesn't have.

One morning, crammed into a small car with entirely too many other people, she is unable to exit in time for her station. The train passes Ichigaya and Yotsuya until finally Hotaru makes a decision and walks out of the car at Yoyogi. The platform is mostly deserted; Yoyogi is the station between two large hubs and is mostly maintained as a matter of convenience. Trees sway in the park, the tips just visible over a distant fence. There's construction going on nearby, but for some reason the sight is still wonderful. Hotaru considers ditching school, going to the park and maybe just returning in the afternoon, but in the end decides against it. Even at eleven, she doesn't want to be wasting her own time.

2001, Winter

Kazuhiko and Azumi fight more often, though neither of them is particularly sure why. One week it's about tissues—Azumi buys a box of blue tissues instead of the regular white, and Kazuhiko can't stand them. Another night Kazuhiko brings home take-out from a ritzy sushi restaurant downtown and a meal Azumi prepared winds up in the garbage. Kazuhiko continues

to return home late, perhaps later than he needs to, and Azumi still resents him for it. On the Sundays the family once spent together, Kazuhiko instead goes to the mountains and hunts for bugs by himself. Occasionally Naoya will go with him, but it is out of humor rather than interest, and soon the entire enterprise is abandoned.

2002, Summer

In the evenings, Naoya rides his bike to Hotaru's middle school and the two of them return to their family's apartment together. Hotaru takes the train to school instead of biking, so she is forced to sit on the back, keeping an eye out for police and anyone else nosy enough to say something if they're caught. On one ride back, Hotaru notices that Naoya's hair has grown long. Naoya explains that he has been busy lately, and hasn't thought much about cutting it.

"I can cut it for you," Hotaru offers. She means it as a thank you—she looks up to Naoya and he does a lot for her.

Naoya hesitates. He doesn't trust Hotaru to cut his hair, but he's also too nice to turn her down. After a series of bungled refusals, Naoya allows Hotaru to tie a towel around his neck while she hovers over his head with a pair of scissors. Hotaru cuts and chops, and despite nicking Naoya's ear once or twice, eventually gets his hair into a shape that she likes. When she gives him a mirror, Naoya nods his head in approval and gets up.

While it isn't a terrible haircut, it is uneven in many places that Naoya cannot ignore. He waits a week, and eventually gets it all buzzed off, saying his hair was too hot for the summer. Hotaru has her suspicions, but rather than say anything she calls him baldy and laughs. Naoya keeps his hair tightly cropped for the rest of his adolescence.

2003, Autumn

Azumi divorces Kazuhiko. It is a quiet divorce, and even the moment when Azumi finally tells Kazuhiko her intention is marked more by exhaustion than anger. The direct cause is initially nebulous to Hotaru, but in later years it will become clear that there was an indiscretion involving a client at Kazuhiko's work. Hotaru will blame Azumi for the divorce until she discovers this, and in the early months of the separation Azumi will already feel her resentment dividing the two of them like a knife. Hotaru comes home from school later and later. Azumi pretends not to notice.

Kazuhiko and Naoya move to an apartment somewhere in Ota ward, while Azumi keeps their previous apartment. Azumi applies for work at a number of companies where friends and acquaintances are employed, but ultimately she is forced to take a job at a supermarket until something better comes along.

2005, Spring

Nothing better comes along. The job market is *still* slow, just as it has been for fifteen years, and it is rare that someone over thirty is ever hired by a major corporation. Azumi and Hotaru move to Yamanashi prefecture, where they will live in a cottage once owned by Azumi's grandmother. The cottage is on the same plot of farmland owned by Azumi's parents. It is as though the two of them are moving home.

Azumi's mother quickly finds Azumi a job as a caretaker at a local inn that has done well in recent years. Her salary will not be exorbitant, but it will be higher than the supermarket. It is the kind of work at which Azumi excels—paying attention to others and smiling cheerfully have always been, she feels, her strong points. Moreover, Azumi finds the problems that crop up are

the kind she can easily solve. It is, after all, much less difficult to calm an angry guest than it is to worry about the safety of your children.

2006, Winter

Kazuhiko accepts a transfer that moves him from the company's head office to a smaller, less prestigious position in Osaka. There isn't a change in salary, and it is all Kazuhiko can do to comply. He arranges a change in school for Naoya, who is close to graduation and, like Hotaru, doesn't want to leave Tokyo. The two of them fight once or twice, but in the end Kazuhiko decides to rent an apartment for Naoya and leave him a small allowance to live on. Neither of them ends up living in luxurious housing, but Kazuhiko barely notices his own living situation. Even as he selects a new futon, tables, curtains, he feels as though he is moving through the department store robotically, buying mostly things normal people should want, rather than things that he does.

2008, Summer

A trendy diet book declares bananas to be a weight-loss superfood, causing the health-conscious to buy so many that there is a national shortage for the entire month of September. All throughout Tokyo, stores plaster large signs on their windows, stating whether or not bananas are available within.

When Hotaru returns to Tokyo, for the first time in two years to visit universities, she is astonished by the fervor. The banana diet was popular in Yamanashi, but the popularity is on a completely different scale. It's as though Tokyo is a different world entirely.

Hotaru meets Naoya where he works, a no-talking jazz bar called Peter Cat. It's still an hour or two before the bar opens, and the two of them drink coffee and catch up. Naoya lights a Gudang Garam—a kind of Indonesian clove cigarette—and the room fills with a scent that reminds Hotaru of a Buddhist temple. He explains that he dropped out of high school and had started working for a convenience store full time when Kazuhiko moved to Osaka, and through sheer luck has managed to move to something a bit more lucrative. He hasn't spoken to Kazuhiko in two years now.

Hotaru nods in time with Naoya's story as he tells it. Naoya's appearance and demeanor have changed a lot in the years since she has seen him last. His clothes are simultaneously trendier and worn, and the disaffected way he speaks seems less compassionate, somehow, than the older brother she remembers. Hotaru isn't disappointed by this, but she has a strange feeling she can't quite identify, as though the tectonic plates of her world are rearranging.

Hotaru stays and talks to Naoya until it is time for the bar to open. She has plans the next morning, and has to take the train back in the afternoon, so this is (once again) the last time she will see Naoya for an indeterminate amount of time. On the way to her hotel, Hotaru notices a bunch of bananas sitting in a produce shop along the sidewalk. She buys it, partially out of curiosity, and partially because she doesn't know when she'll see one again.

2009, Winter

In early March, Kazuhiko watches a news program by himself one evening after work. The lights in his apartment have all been shut off; the only illumination is the glow of the television, flickering across his low table, the tatami, the cushion he is sitting on. The news stories are all mundane, and out of boredom he knocks back three fingers of shochu. He is about to turn the

television off when the announcer says something about Colonel Sanders. Apparently, while dredging a canal in central Osaka, a team of divers has found an unidentified object, discolored and barrel-shaped. It is presumed to be a corpse, but upon close inspection the divers determine that it is likely the missing torso of the Colonel Sanders statue thrown into the canal nearly twenty-five years earlier. Surprised, the divers return to the scene and search more thoroughly. They find the statue's legs and right arm, and make swift plans to repair the parts. Only the left hand and glasses remain missing, presumably lost forever.

Kazuhiko stares in disbelief for a few moments. It seems impossible that a plaster statue can rest at the bottom of a body of water that long and one day be found. There is something wonderful, something incredible about the implausibility of it. He shakes his head and laughs. The curse, he is convinced, is one step closer to breaking.

2009, Spring

Hotaru attends her entrance ceremony at a prestigious university in Western Tokyo. She has entered the law program after passing a series of rigorous exams, but knows that the bulk of her testing will come in six years, when she attempts to pass the bar. Cherry blossoms sway in the yard outside the auditorium. The university president says, as is always said during speeches like these, that the cherry blossoms represent both the beginning and ending of things; the blossoms denote the fact that the journey Hotaru is about to embark on is a transient one, and that she must enjoy the experience while she has it.

Hotaru does her best to take the president and his speech seriously, but it is so filled with cliches and platitudes that it is difficult for her to keep a straight face. What would the university president say if the blossoms had bloomed a week earlier than usual? The whole enterprise

strikes Hotaru as desperate and needlessly rigid. But nevertheless, she listens thoughtfully until the speech comes to a close, comfortable in her knowledge that she, at least, will never make the same kind of speech.

2011, Winter

Another earthquake ripples through northern Japan. The damage is far-reaching and in many cases irreparable following the destruction of a cooling system at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant. Azumi barely notices the quake itself, and the worst Hotaru sees aside from power outages is a broken bowl. Still, Tokyo shuts down for two weeks, power coursing through rolling blackouts until things begin to stabilize.

As soon as the cell towers are online, Hotaru spends a morning fielding phone calls and Facebook messages from virtually every person she has ever known. Her friends from elementary school, Naoya, Azumi—even Kazuhiko makes an appearance in her voice mail. For a long time she is unsure how to respond to their questions. From people close by: Is she okay? From those far away: what is it like in Tokyo, during a disaster like this? Hotaru feels that this moment should be a moment of significance in her history, a moment of more power than it has for her yet. She spends a lot of time imagining what it would be like if she weren't okay, what it would be like if things were a lot worse. What it would be like if the ground opened up and swallowed her. She feels guilty, somehow, that nothing worse happened to her. She doesn't know yet that in the coming months her efforts in a relief organization will lead to a series of connections which in turn lead her, after law school, to accept a position as a junior district attorney in the affected region. She doesn't know yet that Naoya will quit his job and drive north to volunteer, and in those initial days he will meet a girl from Hokkaido, from even further north,

that he will eventually marry. She doesn't know that she will never feel safe eating a vegetable grown in Fukushima again. She doesn't know that, eventually, this moment will become a dividing mark in her life, that things will happen either before or after the quake, and that she will never categorize them differently again. She doesn't know any of this yet. But, for now, "I'm okay," is what she answers, and for now, for her, that is enough.

2011, Summer

A brood of the cicada *tanna japonensis* awakens and swarms the country in much larger numbers than previous years. Azumi spends her days alone, in the Yamanashi cottage that once belonged to her grandmother. Most of her days are quiet, but she will often go for long walks through rice paddies and along the vineyards at the outskirts of town. From time to time Azumi feels her life has entered a sort of lull. Her days off are lonely, but the days she spends at the inn occasionally have an air of excitement. Her routine, at least, is one that makes sense to her.

In the evenings Azumi always opens the window to listen to the cicadas. There is no air conditioner, and the window lets the heat seep in along with the breeze. It is so hot, on some nights, that Azumi imagines her body is dissolving into the humidity. On those nights she allows herself to sprawl, childishly, on the hardwood floor beneath the window while insects echo outside. Though she is happy here, she recalls, distantly but fondly, similar nights spent by her family in their Ochanomizu apartment, the family spread out on cushions above their tatami floor, the drone of their inefficient air-conditioner, the creaking of insects from the zelkova trees outside their window. She recalls Kazuhiko smiling and teaching Hotaru and Naoya, who listen attentively, that the higurashi is known, among other things, for the cadence of its cries on

summer evenings. It is said they always sound regretful; mournful, as though something ineffable has come to an end.

TRANSLATIONS, FROM THE JAPANESE

日本語からの翻訳

1. The Japanese word for “foreigner” is “gaikokujin,” but it is often shortened to “gaijin” in everyday speech. Literally translated, this means *outsider*.
2. According to a 2013 census, Japan has a population of 127.3 million people. Approximately 1.9 million of those residents are foreigners. I, a white American, have been inconsistently part of this statistic for the past decade.
3. The same census also states that over half the foreigners in Japan are either Korean or Chinese. This means that less than one percent of the population comes from a world other than East Asia, a figure which gives Japan a reputation as one of the most insular and homogeneous countries in the world.
4. Despite the nation’s reputation for homogeneity, there are many minority populations. For example: most Korean residents of Japan are Korean by citizenship only. They are native Japanese speakers and have spent their entire lives in the country, but lack the right to vote. I find this fact particularly uncomfortable, but I also know that I have no say in the matter.
5. I have lived in Japan for three extended periods of my life. Collectively, these periods add up to five years.

6. Five years is longer than I've lived anywhere else, so long as early childhood is removed from the equation. But I've never cared much for early childhood anyway.

7. In the odd moments when I am inclined to pinpoint times where my life could have rocketed off in another direction, I wonder what might have happened if my best friend hadn't been Japanese when I was young. Or what things might have looked like if my mother hadn't been sick when I was that age, if she hadn't raised me alone—if I hadn't spent afternoons in a household where foreign language radiated the air like cosmic noise. Is it, in the end, all a matter of place and timing? How much does where we grow up determine who we become as people? And what does it say about me if, since then, I've rarely lived in the same place?

8. I've spoken some Japanese since I was seven years old. It didn't occur to me that this was something unusual until I was eleven.

9. The first Japanese word I learned was “dame,” which essentially means *don't* or *off-limits*. I also learned, on the same day, that it is far more terrifying to have a friend's mother yell at you in a foreign language than it is to have her yell at you in English.

10. I have only broken one of Mrs. Narita's dishes since. As much as possible, I try to learn my lessons the first time.

11. My favorite Japanese word is “tsundoku”— an archaic term that refers to *the act of buying books and never reading them*. This is a crime I commit often and may be incapable of learning from.

12. I was never punished much by my mother. She was sick, or she was working; anyway, she wasn't there. Mrs. Narita, however, routinely scolded me for poor grades, or for coming home too late, and then there was the time when her son and I were twelve, and she caught us drinking a bottle of vodka we had lifted from the corner store.

13. Before that incident, I didn't think it was possible to be grounded by someone else's parent. Apparently it was.

14. I have never been arrested in America. In Tokyo, however, I have been questioned in relation to several cases.

15. Some crimes the Tokyo police have spoken to me about:

- Trespassing
- Espionage
- Bicycle theft
- Cotton Smuggling
- Littering

16. I originally thought “cotton smuggling” was some kind of euphemism, but the police assured me that it was literal, and a common crime perpetrated by Iranian and other Central Asian immigrants.

17. I have never met an Iranian in Japan, but perhaps I’ve never gone to the right place. The world is filled with people of all sorts of nationalities, living their lives in places I can’t see.

18. Of all the foreigners I’ve met in Japan, only two have remained for more than seven years. One speaks Japanese fluently, and the other not at all. Both, somehow, have managed to navigate the world around them without difficulty.

19. In the last year, both of them have married Japanese women. Luckily, all parties speak English fluently.

20. While eating lunch on a rooftop in downtown Tokyo, I once overheard a conversation between three American men. The three were standing at the other end of a rooftop garden, away from the benches and ashtrays, probably on break from one of the many English conversation schools in the building. One had proposed to his Japanese girlfriend, and the other two were congratulating him. Towards the end of the conversation, the engaged man revealed that his fiancée spoke no English, and that he also spoke no Japanese. “But isn’t that a problem?” one of the men asked, and the other two just looked at him blankly.

21. Situations like these are common, and though I've been skeptical in the past, maybe there's some truth to those sorts of romantic comedies. Both parties, after all, are getting what they want out of the relationship.

22. I have only dated one Japanese woman, a nurse several years older than I was. She spoke very little English, and at the time my Japanese was still weak. I suspect the reason we stayed together for the six months we did was that our schedules were too rigorous for us to realize this was a problem.

23. I have always worked at least two jobs while living in Japan. Most of the time my primary employment was teaching English. This is the gaijin equivalent of a dead-end job, and typically a sign someone will move back to their home country one day.

24. Other jobs I have had in Japan: bouncer, housekeeper, editor, cameraman, and (briefly) tourism associate at the embassy of Afghanistan. None of these has lasted more than three months at any one time.

25. The average full-time English-teaching job in Japan pays anywhere from 250,000-275,000 yen per month, depending on where in the country you happen to live. This is roughly equivalent to 25,000\$ per year. I can't speak for the countryside, but in both Tokyo and Osaka this is not a luxurious wage.

26. The average salary of a Japanese worker employed by the same company tends to be closer to 200,000 yen per month. I've never understood how functional adults manage to get by on so little, but there are probably other mechanisms which make it possible.

27. The secretary at an English school I worked for in Osaka was a Korean single mother of two, and she made something in that ballpark. She was a very sweet woman, but had a rare medical condition which caused her hands to break out in hives when she nervous. She always organized her desk so that the keyboard was hidden from view.

28. Most of the Japanese coworkers I've had have been very kind to me, but this may be owed to my ability to speak the same language. I've heard other foreigners theorize that their Japanese coworkers were constantly, somehow, conspiring against them. It might be the case that normal workplace gossip sounds a lot more sinister when you can't understand it.

29. My American girlfriend and I once invited coworkers from both our offices for dinner at our apartment in Osaka. We ate bad homemade appetizers and drank and chatted for several hours. Towards the end of the night, the secretary from my office came up to me to say goodbye. She told me it was a wonderful thing to be happy so young. It wasn't until after she left that I realized she had worn gloves the entire evening.

30. There are many signs that, no matter how much Japanese I learn, I'm never able to understand.

31. On my nineteenth birthday, I took the final train of the night home. At the time, I lived in a small suburb of Tokyo. The ride was long and stretched out into the countryside. After several stations the light outside the train faded, and the windows became panels of black glass, clearly reflecting the train within. It was late and I was exhausted and slightly drunk. I spent the trip watching dark circles beneath my eyes through the tangle of other passengers.

32. The train jolted to a stop and for a moment everything swayed. Things were still for a long time. It seemed like hours, but was likely only a couple of minutes. There were several announcements made over the intercom, but the voice was too garbled for me to understand what it was saying.

33. When we finally pulled into the next station, the colors of the LCD tickers announcing arrivals were inverted. Where the time and line of the next incoming train are usually written was the phrase 人身事故. The best translation I have for this is *human accident*.

34. A lot of the foreigners I know have a story about a suicide they've seen in Japan, but I've never witnessed one directly. The closest I've come is seeing a pair of empty white sneakers, neatly lined and abandoned, next to a river, and wondering if someone was trying to send a signal.

35. When I was twenty-one, Mrs. Narita's son came to Japan to visit me. It had been a difficult year for him, filled with the deaths of both relatives and relationships. We spent a month gallivanting around Tokyo, drinking with my foreigner friends and nurse girlfriend. I was trying

to show him a good time, to make up for all the awfulness of the year. At the end of the month we had a long and protracted argument about my hospitality. He said that being in a foreign country had changed me, that we hadn't done any of the things he'd been looking forward to, that I was acting like I belonged in a place that wasn't mine to belong to, that I didn't and couldn't understand him anymore.

36. We have both since apologized, blaming the close quarters and exhaustion, but I think on some level he was probably right. I'm probably still pretending I belong somewhere I don't.

37. While in Japan, I sometimes get the sensation that I'm standing on the outside of a giant pane of frosted glass, looking at people moving around within. There are a lot of dark shapes, and when they get close enough I can make out the details clearly, but inevitably before I can make sense of everything the shape recedes into the background again.

38. I'd like to say that there's a special word in Japanese for this sensation, but there isn't. The closest I know in any language is probably *loneliness*.

39. Japan and loneliness circle each other. There was the time, for instance, when I was eleven, and my best friend's older sister moved away for college. I was in love with her in the strange way that only eleven year olds can be, and stole a copy of a Japanese novel from her shelf before she left. I read the novel cover to cover without understanding the context for any of it, but for some reason I felt better about things afterward.

40. I once read the same novel, almost a decade later, in a coffee shop while I waited for the rain to clear. It was a very different experience, and not at all cathartic, but I'm still glad I did it.

41. One Japanese word that's taken me a long time to understand is "karamawari"—*empty spinning*. Or maybe *fruitless effort*. In any case, it is a word that indicates motion for the sake of motion. No matter how hard you try, there are some things that can't be won through effort or work. But for some reason, we go through the motions anyway.

42. One thing I've struggled a lot with is why, after so much moving back and forth, I return to Japan again and again. It seems silly to oscillate as much as I have. Shouldn't it be normal to want to stay in one place, to live there and be comfortable?

43. What does it take to be able to call a place your home?

44. On one occasion, right before I left Osaka to move back to America, to break up with my girlfriend and start over again somewhere new, I had a goodbye lunch with the office secretary and her two children. We ate at a cheap family restaurant close to their apartment. Her son and daughter were both very well behaved. The daughter was thirteen, the son eight. They were both half-British. I hadn't realized that their father was a foreigner, and this added another wrinkle to my understanding of what was already an overcomplicated situation. I asked the secretary, in Japanese, if her children spoke English, and she answered that yes, yes they did. She was trying to raise them so that they could be comfortable in whichever environment they chose. I asked if, being Korean, she had grown up feeling comfortable in Japan and she stared at me for a long

time. She took her hands off the table and set them on her lap. I felt as though I had asked something inappropriate, for her to sketch the moment in her life that had most terrified her. Suddenly uncomfortable, I retreated and asked her son and daughter if they liked their school. I wish I had waited for her answer instead.

45. We sat in a booth together for an hour or so, until it was time for the daughter to leave for track practice. I pretended that I wanted to stay in the restaurant a bit longer, so I could take care of the check myself without her children noticing. The secretary and her children put on their coats and walked out the door. I rubbed the moisture off a nearby window and watched them until they were out of view. Soon, the heat from the inside of the restaurant fogged the glass over again and the outside world vanished; all that was left was an indistinct blur, where beyond dark shapes faded into the distance.

FOR THOSE OF US WHO DON'T HAVE WINGS

Fog coils around the parking lot by the sea, diffuses streetlamps into distant stars. It is the off-season, and too late for anyone to be parking at the beach. The shore is barren and quiet. Even the highway road, running towards Tokyo across the cliffs above, is deserted. Kei and Hazuki are the only ones around. Kei wears sunglasses, even though it's dark, because he thinks they make him hard to recognize. He twirls the baseball bat in his left hand, and Hazuki scowls as it scratches against the pavement.

“Stop. Get down low,” Hazuki says. Kei knows she doesn't want anyone who zips along the road to see.

Kei walks to a nearby wooden enclosure and crouches beside a vending machine. He rests his baseball bat next to him. He is trying to be quiet, but it thuds anyway.

“You're ready, aren't you?” Hazuki says. Her eyes are locked on a bus stop at the edge of the lot.

Kei murmurs something indistinct. He is as ready as he is going to be.

Moonlight sharpens the shoreline into a blade. Kei breathes into his palms and rubs his hands together. He regrets forgetting his gloves.

“He's late,” Hazuki says.

“He didn't exactly have an appointment.” Kei drums his fingers against the side of the vending machine. Half-shadowed that way, he imagines his hands look eager, ready. “Are you sure he'll come this way?”

“He always does.”

“Right. Okay.” Kei takes a long, exaggerated breath. “Then we'll keep waiting.”

Hazuki frowns. Her eyes are too dark for Kei to make out, but he knows her expressions well, the way her eyebrows narrow when she's angry.

“He earned this. You know he did.”

Kei shakes his head. “Are you sure this is what you want?”

Hazuki nods. “Positive.”

“And I'm the one who has to do it?” Kei points to himself.

“Who else is going to?”

“Your boyfriend.”

“Tanabe?” Hazuki laughs. “Hardly. He'd stop liking me if he knew I did this sort of thing.”

“So you do understand this is something a normal person might hate you for.”

“Yeah. But you're not a normal guy anyway.”

Kei's fingers trace the outline of a long scar on his forearm.

“No, I won't stop liking you for something like this. I'm in over my head already.”

“See?”

“Buy me a coffee,” Kei says. He points to a button on the vending machine.

“I don't have any change.”

Kei feels himself glaring. He doesn't ask Hazuki for much.

“Sure you don't.”

Hazuki raises an eyebrow.

Kei decides to give up. “Yeah, fine. Just keep quiet about all this to Tomoka, okay?”

“Don't worry. Your little girlfriend won't hear about any of the horrible things you do for me. So long as you're sure that's the way you want it.”

Kei feels something hard gather in his stomach, and he forces himself to ignore it. He prides himself on being able to move past that emotion, now. A light wind picks up and blows sand across the beach. Grit stings Kei's cheeks. He turns away from the shore and stares at a clump of grass. Blades peek out from the pavement and sway. Absentmindedly, he plucks one from the ground and toys with it between two fingers. The grass tears, roughly—as if smashed by a mortar and pestle—and even though he can't see it in this light, Kei knows that it has left a stain.

This is the third time Kei has done this sort of favor for Hazuki. The first time it was the Kugaharas' dog. Hazuki and Kei lived close to one another, and often walked to school in the same group. Hazuki always looked terrified when the dog barked at them. One day Hazuki came to the classroom—late—with blood running down her arm. The teacher didn't believe her when she said the dog had bitten her, so Kei took matters into his own hands. No one guessed that he was responsible when the dog vanished, and the Kugaharas never got a new one.

The second time was when they were in middle school. Hazuki's old man was a drunk, a pretty bad one, and everyone knew it. Kei wasn't sure if Hazuki's father ever actually *hit* her or her Mother, but there were whispers along those lines, and worse. Regardless of the details, it was a matter of fact well-known in the community that something was going on. Many times, Kei had overheard old ladies from the neighborhood gossiping in the grocery store, talking about how the women in Hazuki's family always seemed to have such horrible luck with men. Kei would have done something sooner, if he had been asked, but Hazuki wasn't the type to open about things like that. So once again, if no one else was going to help, Kei decided he would have to do something himself.

On a day Hazuki's father was in another town for work, Kei went to the small hardware store in the shopping district. He wanted to buy a snow shovel. A thick one, he decided—steel, not aluminum. It was early in the season, but he figured no one would think it was odd. He dragged the shovel to the counter—he was short for his age, and the shovel was long—and paid a full sixteen-hundred yen for it.

That night Kei wore a green poncho and parked his bicycle on a seaside road by the port. Rain loosened the soil and slicked the pavement. The road was separated from the ocean by a low metal barrier and a ten-meter drop. Kei knew that Hazuki's father took a bus back from a city closer to Tokyo when he worked in the head office. Hazuki said he usually spent the hours after work in a bar. With any luck, Hazuki's father would be in a fog by the time he got off the bus.

Every so often a bike or a car passed by, and Kei felt his heart shrink and jump. His grip on the shovel was tight, but he could feel the wood slipping between his fingers. He wasn't sure if it was from sweat, the water, or the cold. He held on tighter, until his knuckles went numb, and waited.

Eventually, Hazuki's father rounded the bend up the road. He had forgotten an umbrella, was already sopping wet. Most of his body was hidden by the rain, obscured by the darkness in the gaps between streetlamps, but Kei felt as though he could count the hairs on the man's arm. The shovel in his left hand was impossibly light. And then his legs were pedaling. Kei moved slowly at first. A meter and then two. Hazuki's father stumbled beneath a streetlight. For an instant Kei was nauseated. He sped up.

Soon Kei felt the business end of his shovel barreling into the man's gut. Kei pushed his arm outward, and the bike slid out from under him. He fell to the ground and scraped his arm

open. Clutching his forearm, Kei looked upward just in time to see Hazuki's father stumble, fall over the barrier and off the road.

A fisherman found Hazuki's father on the shore the next morning and brought him to the hospital. Despite his wounds, Hazuki's father was remarkably fine. And he had been too drunk to remember what happened. To his own surprise, even Kei was relieved the situation hadn't been worse.

Kei sips from a can of warm coffee. He has somehow persuaded Hazuki to buy it. His breath steams upward from where he has collapsed against the side of the vending machine. Now that his eagerness has melted away, the silver glint of the baseball bat appears far more ordinary. Its significance has faded; it might as well be a part of the background. Kei looks up at Hazuki and scratches his nose. Her long hair is tucked into the back of her jacket, and her hands are stuffed into her pockets. Hazuki looks almost boyish in that position, but Kei can't force himself to look away.

“Hey,” Kei says.

“What?”

“If I go through with this, will you dump Tanabe?”

“Hardly.”

“Thought not.” Kei takes another sip of coffee. The drink is sour. “But it never hurts to ask.”

“You have Tomoka, anyway.” Hazuki stares down at her fingernails, squints at them as if they are something alien. “If I dump Tanabe, it'll just complicate things.”

“That's different.” Kei says.

“Is it?”

Kei doesn't reply, and instead stares out over the deserted beach. Even during the summer, it doesn't get much traffic, but on cold nights it feels almost like a graveyard. A shoreline at the end of the world.

“Then why do you want me to be the one doing these things?” Kei asks.

Hazuki hesitates. Kei imagines a million-and-one possible explanations, but buries them in his gut.

“I just thought no one would guess if it was you. No one knows we're close like this. They'd never think you had a reason.”

Kei wonders, briefly, if that is the reason. The half-moon shimmers on the ocean. A passing long-haul truck drones in the distance.

“They probably won't.”

“They won't.” Hazuki says. “I promise. You won't be here much longer anyway.”

Kei sets down his can of coffee and stretches his arms. He checks his wristwatch. He knows that he should be ready at any time, but for some reason he can no longer summon the tension back to his body.

“I wonder about that. Leaving a place like this is harder than everyone thinks it is.”

“Because of Tomoka?”

Kei shakes his head. “Not exactly. It's not really a matter of any one person. It's just that this place has its own kind of gravity. It's a self-contained circuit. Maybe all towns are like that. When you're a part of a place, you can't really escape it. I'm probably not explaining it well, but being born here, sometimes I get the sense that the circuit is *inside* of me. That I'm actually what keeps it running.”

Hazuki scratches her wrist a few times, but she doesn't say anything.

“Which is stupid, I guess.” Kei finds himself shrinking back, “but it's just a feeling. I'll get out of here sooner or later. You and your Mother could have gone away a long time ago.”

Hazuki makes an exasperated face.

“It's not that easy.” Hazuki says. “It's never that easy.”

“I know,” Kei says.

“And we can't anymore. My mom would never go through with it.”

Kei looks away from Hazuki. “Still?”

Hazuki nods. “She hasn't missed a meeting in two years.” Her voice has a resigned tone to it. “And it's not like they do anything all that bad. I don't think that they do. All she has to do is make food for them. Which I guess is fine. Everyone needs something to believe in. Even a monster like you's got to have something buried down there.”

Kei considers this. He can count the number of things he's believed in on one hand, but he feels uncertain about all of them. Even Hazuki. He clenches and unclenches his hand. It seems as though everyone around him is always choosing to believe things they shouldn't.

“But you resent her for it anyway.”

Hazuki shakes her head. A few strands of hair come loose from the back of her jacket and sway.

“No. She seems happy.”

Kei pushes himself onto his feet. He grabs the baseball bat in his left hand. It has a pleasant heft to it.

“Do you talk to Tanabe about this stuff?”

“I'm not that kind of person.”

Kei works his jaw up and down a few times, considers what that statement means. He takes a several swings with the bat. Each one is crisp and precise; perfectly timed, as though he has been doing this for years. The bat makes a violent shriek as it cuts through the air.

“So you need me to do things like this.”

“Right. I need you for things like this. For now, anyway.” Hazuki almost laughs, but the noise is sickening, as though a live animal is calling up from her gut.

Kei nods. He can tell what she is thinking. In the coming months they'll take college entrance exams, and Kei will be one of the only students who tests at schools in Tokyo.

“I might not pass, you know.”

“You'll pass. You don't even need to study. You're smart enough.”

Kei stops swinging and taps the bat against the ground. It echoes hollowly.

“We'll see,” he says.

Hazuki's cell phone casts a dim light on her fingertips. Kei glances at the screen over her shoulder. It is now close to two in the morning. Hazuki's father is nowhere in sight. Kei sighs. The anticipation has exhausted him.

“It's getting pretty late,” Kei says.

“So?” Hazuki says.

Kei runs his fingers through his hair. Clearly Hazuki isn't ready to quit.

“Why now?”

Hazuki raises an eyebrow. “What?”

“Why are we doing this *now*. We could have done it such a long time ago.”

“I didn't feel like I needed to before.”

A bus passes the parking lot, but Hazuki's thoughts are somewhere else. She doesn't seem to notice. Kei feels his arms grow tight.

“But you're almost done with school. If anything, you need it less.”

“This is my last chance,” Hazuki says. She chews on the tip of her thumb. “This is my last chance. That's all there is to it.”

Kei watches the edge of the parking lot, somewhat distracted. The minutes tick by, but no one appears. Hazuki says something too quiet for Kei to hear. He cups his hand over his ear.

“Nothing,” Hazuki says.

The sound of a motor cuts through silence. A car roars, accelerates. There is a horrible skidding followed by honking. Kei and Hazuki both turn to face the road as the front of a sedan crunches against a metal barrier. A headlight pops, shatters. Thousands of glass shards glint in the moonlight. Kei feels his arms shuddering, as if the reverberation of the crash is passing through him. The baseball bat clatters to the ground.

Kei cranes his neck upward. As if a firework has exploded, the sky is brilliant and blinding. A flashing green light is passing overhead. It slows slightly, Kei thinks, as it passes over them. The light hangs in the sky for what feels like an eternity before it finally speeds out over the ocean and fades into the distance.

“They were distracted,” Kei says aloud. His body feels as if it is teeming with electricity.

“By what?”

Kei recalls, for an instant, his first date with Tomoka. They had spent a long time talking in a family restaurant, until it was dark and the place had to close. They walked together until they met a fork in the road, where Kei would normally have turned left. Tomoka asked, sheepishly, if he would walk her home, and he did. Nothing ended up happening between them

that night, and Tomoka confided in him, weeks later when they finally slept together, that the real reason she had asked him along was that she had a paralyzing fear of the dark. It wasn't a matter of what was actually out there, she insisted. It was a matter of what she was sure *could be* out there.

Kei opens and closes his eyes. He looks at Hazuki, then gestures at the sky.

“I think it was a UFO.”

“Don't be stupid. It was just a satellite. Or a plane, maybe. Something man-made. There's no such thing as UFOs.”

Kei shakes his head. His brain is foggy, as if he has just woken from an intense dream. He feels certain that he has seen something unusual. He doesn't have the words to describe it yet, but he has the sense that something significant has occurred.

“No,” he decides. “It was a UFO.”

Hazuki shrugs. “If you say so.”

There is a shuffling noise. A car pulls over. Someone is stirring on the road above. For an instant Kei considers going to help. He glances at Hazuki and the bat.

“People will be here soon,” Kei says. He moves back toward the parking lot. Hazuki grabs his elbow and refuses to let go.

“Hide behind the vending machine,” she says.

Kei looks up at the road. He pulls his arm away.

“I don't think he's coming, Hazuki. It's too late now.”

“He'll come. He always comes.” She bites her lower lip, hard. Kei imagines something red glistening beneath her teeth.

Kei shakes his head again. He is certain. All that was going to happen here tonight has already occurred.

“He won't. I'm sure of it. It's not worth waiting anymore. Let's go home.”

“No,” Hazuki says.

She grabs the baseball bat and walks toward the vending machine. She smashes the face of it as hard as she can. Plastic cracks. An alarm sounds.

“Your father's not coming back today,” Kei says. He rushes towards her, wraps her in a bear hug. She writhes and struggles against him. Her foot flashes outward and pounds the vending machine again and again as Kei hold her back.

“It's already too late, Hazuki. It's not going to happen.”

Hazuki makes a noise like sobbing. No matter how much she writhes, Kei won't allow her to move. Eventually she settles into his arms and drops the bat. It strikes Kei, in that instant, how much taller he is, how much power he has over her. He could smother her in an instant, if he wanted to. There is something there, in a dark place, that terrifies him. Something that is only now clawing its way to the surface of his mind, only now he feels it, he can never not feel it. It will always be there. And with that he decides, with certainty, that he will fail all of his exams in Tokyo. He understands that this small town by the sea will be the only place he will ever live.

The two of them stand in the parking lot for a long time, locked in embrace, until the sound of sirens and the flashing of emergency lights forces them to separate, and, heads tuned toward the night sky, start walking the long seaside road back into town.

REDIRECTION

A friend confessed to me, once, that for about a month he had trouble finding his way around. At first I assumed he was joking—all of us are bound to get lost every now and then—but he assured me that he was serious. He was a meticulous person, and had recorded all the details in an electronic diary.

“It wasn't like I was just having trouble finding the quickest way to the store. I genuinely had no idea where I was, or where I was going. It was the strangest thing.”

We met for the first time in years during a home visit in Tokyo's working-class Nippori district. I was finishing my second year as a history teacher at the local elementary school, and he was the guardian of one of my students. Meeting a former classmate during a home visit was about the last thing I expected, at my age. I had spent the morning ironing my shirt and retying my tie over and over—the parents of my students were usually imposing, especially the parents of problem children. I was relieved to see a familiar face.

“I heard you were a teacher, but I had no idea you were in charge of Kanae's class. It's funny how things work out.” He set down two cups of tea and motioned to a basket of mandarins in the center of the table.

“It's a small world,” I shrugged. I took a mandarin and did my best to shave the peel in one piece. It's a game I've played since I was a child—my grandmother said it was good luck. An old habit like that can be hard to kick.

“What brings you here today, Yanase?”

I hesitated for a moment. Kanae—his niece, if I remembered correctly—had been involved in an incident in the third-floor science room. The particulars were unclear, but she and two other girls had been found surrounded by piles of broken glass. Not a single beaker was left

unturned. The janitor who cleaned up the mess said the room looked like it was covered in a thin layer of snow. The principal had recommended a series of strident disciplinary measures, but it was my job to make certain that the outburst was not caused by Kanae's unusual living situation. The school couldn't afford to replace materials twice in one semester.

My friend peeled a mandarin and rearranged the scraps into a neat circle around his tea cup. He seemed to be deep in thought, but didn't have anything to say about the incident.

“How long has Kanae been living with you?” I asked.

“She transferred in at the end of last year. It's been about eight months now.” He scratched the back of his head. “She's a well-behaved kid and doesn't cause any trouble at home, but she doesn't talk to me much either. Her parents said she was having trouble making friends after they moved to Osaka, so they shipped her back to live with me. Can't say I've noticed any difference though.”

I shrugged. “You know, kids can be pretty sensitive. Sometimes all it takes is a slight disturbance at home to cause all kinds of reverberations. It's not always obvious when something is wrong. I'd appreciate if you were on the lookout and said if you noticed anything unusual. We can take this one step at a time.”

He nodded. I couldn't think of anything else to say, so we chatted idly for a few minutes and made arrangements to meet again once the school had finalized its position on the issue. When I put on my shoes in the entryway, I noticed an extra pair by the door. I wondered if Kanae had heard us, and if she did, if she had cared.

It was at a chain restaurant, about a week after my visit, that he told me about his trouble with directions. It had usually happened when he was distracted. He'd be standing at a crosswalk, a

plastic grocery bag dangling from each hand, and something would happen: a dog would bark, a car would run a red light, he'd hear someone yell a name that sounded like his own. And then it would be over. His mind would go completely blank, his sense of direction melted away like ice cream left out in the sun. The more he struggled to remember where he was, what he was doing and where he was going, the bigger the hole in his memory grew.

What was especially odd about the problem is that my friend had always had an impeccable memory. He never forgot birthdays or anniversaries; when he was in school, it was enough to read through a textbook once for him to get a good score on an exam.

“I don't think I was all that special or anything,” he said. “But at the very least, my memory never gave me any problems. I really had no idea what was wrong with me. I thought I was losing my mind.”

The first time it happened he was on his way home from a bakery in Tabata. He had just broken up with his girlfriend a week before, the daughter of the manager of a supermarket near his home. They had been dating since the last year of university, and he had chosen his apartment to be near her, but since they graduated they had slowly grown apart, and in the end they were simply too different to see a life together. His older sister, too, had moved (along with Kanae) to Osaka for work, and it was as though he suddenly had no one to talk to. Bored and on his own, he had a craving for French bread from a certain store, and took the trouble of walking all the way from his apartment in Nippori. He was about halfway home when his head went blank, and suddenly nothing around him looked familiar. Try as he might, he couldn't think what could have caused it. Why he had a craving for French bread in the first place, and why he felt the need to walk all the way to that bakery in Tabata—these were also questions he didn't have

answers to. He wracked his brain but couldn't think of any connection between those events and the loss of his sense of direction.

The first occurrence was odd, but it wasn't anything too far from the ordinary. Everyone, he figured, is bound to have that kind of mental lapse now and then. It was uncomfortable, but he chocked the event up to daydreaming, stress, or even lack of sleep.

“I didn't think much about it at first. It was only when it happened again that I really started to worry. The second time I was walking home from work and couldn't find the way from the station to my apartment. I don't live very far—it's maybe an eight-minute walk. But for some reason the pattern I drew in my head had just vanished. I ended up using the address on my ID card to ask for directions at a Lawson's. After that it became a regular thing: I'd lose my way once every few days.”

He made an appointment at a clinic, worried the directional issue might be a sign of Alzheimer's or another similar disease. After running a number of tests, though, the doctors confirmed that the problem was far too specific; other than his tendency to lose his way every once in a while, my friend had a perfect bill of health. They referred him to a psychiatrist, suggesting the problem was likely psychological, but at that point he was too embarrassed to go.

“It's been my experience, with psychiatrists, that their view of problems like these tends to be too narrow. Unless you conform to a group of textbook symptoms, they assume you're just making things up. And it's not as if I could actually prove what was happening. A lot of the time I wanted to believe I was just imagining the issue anyway.”

“So you just didn't do anything?”

He shook his head.

“Not exactly. I knew that I had to take some sort of countermeasure. I tried a lot of things: drawing maps with landmarks before I left, writing addresses on the back of my hand. After about a week, I decided the best thing to do was to take some time off, in case it really was a matter of stress. I had some vacation days saved up, so I went ahead and took two weeks. I work for a western company—the attitude is a bit more lenient there, and besides, it was a slow time of year. So I took a couple weeks off to see if I could find some sort of trigger.”

Each day he circled his neighborhood to see if anything would happen, and if it did, if there was any sort of pattern. But he couldn't make heads or tails of anything. Some days he'd forget where he was, and some days he wouldn't. Sometimes there was a good reason for him to be distracted, and on others there wasn't. By the eighth day of his vacation, he had gotten nowhere, and instead decided to spend the last few days relaxing. If he ordered delivery once or twice, the groceries he already had would be enough to see him through the week. He wouldn't have to leave the house at all.

It only took another day for him to settle into a routine: in the morning he would make two fried eggs and eat them with a light salad and plain toast. He would spend the next few hours catching up on reading (he was fond of Yumeno Kyūsaku, and had yet to finish the collected works), and then cook an elaborate lunch using whichever vegetables seemed to fit well together. In the afternoons he put on the radio and cleaned a part of the house he had been neglecting, and in the evenings he would eat simply and read a few more pages with a glass of brandy. He was asleep before ten, most nights.

On the fourth day of this routine, the twelfth day of his vacation overall, there was a knock on the door at three in the afternoon. My friend was in the process of cleaning his shower, and

cleaning supplies were scattered across the vinyl bathroom. At first he decided to ignore the knocking; the best it could possibly be was a salesman, and he didn't have any interest in talking to anyone about a new vacuum cleaner. But there was a second set of knocks, and then a third, and soon enough he found himself taking off his rubber gloves to see what all the commotion was about.

“Now, I'm not a hermit or anything, but I've never liked talking to anyone at my front door. It's never someone you want to hear from, and most of the time it's either bad or an inconvenience. A fee collector from the NHK or one of those crackpots from a new religious sect. There's rarely any good that comes of it. It's just—sometimes it's hard to leave the possibility open. It's the sort of thing that itches at the back of your consciousness, and you can never quite reach to scratch it.”

I nodded. I had a few experiences like that myself, moments where even though I knew it wouldn't be pleasant, I had to look at the sole of my slipper to make certain the spider was dead.

“So you decided to answer the door,” I said.

“So I decided to answer the door.”

On the other side was an elderly woman in a dark gray sweater. She held a plastic bag filled with empty cans in one hand and a cane in the other.

“Are these your cans?” she said.

“Excuse me?”

“Are these *your* cans?”

She thrust the bag out for inspection. The cans were all the sort that he tended to keep around the house—everything from empty cans of mackerel to empty beer cans—but he couldn't recall having thrown any away recently.

“I’m not sure.” He answered honestly.

“It isn’t cans and bottles today. Today is burnable trash day.”

“I see.”

The bag hung awkwardly between them like an abandoned clothesline. The woman shook it a few times.

“Take it and put it out next Tuesday.”

Unsure of what else to do, he grabbed the bag, nodded, and shut the door. He put the cans with his other recycling and went right back to scrubbing the bathroom. In the evening, he ordered a bowl of tonkotsu ramen from a local shop and settled down with a brandy and the last twenty pages of *Dogura Magura* for the night.

He figured that would be the end of things, but the next day at three-thirty, there was another knock on the door. This time he was halfway through dusting the cabinets. A Louis Armstrong number was playing over the radio and there were piles of food and dishes spread across the counter. Against his better judgment, he chose to answer the knock again. And again, it was the same woman, holding a bag of aluminum cans.

“Are these your cans?” she asked, and thrust the bag out in front of her.

“No.”

“Are these your cans?” she asked again.

“They can’t be mine. I haven’t been outside in days.”

The woman looked perplexed, then drew back the cans and examined them again.

“This is apartment 301, correct?”

They both looked at the number beside the doorway.

“This is apartment 301,” she confirmed to herself. “These were put out with the large garbage tickets that were labeled apartment 301. So these must be your cans. I shouldn't have to do this. This is a matter of public decency. You should only take out your garbage on the proper days, and never on any others.”

She dropped the cans in front of his doorstep and walked down the hall.

“I was at a loss for what to do, so I just took the cans inside again. They were basically the same: all the sort of things that you could find in my kitchen, but nothing I had used recently. I hadn't even been outside to take the trash out, so how could it possibly have been mine?”

“But why would she give you cans that weren't yours?” I asked.

He set his beer down and squeezed some edamame out of a pod. “I came up with a few theories, but nothing perfect. Maybe she had been saving up the trash every time I misplaced it and just wanted to come when she knew I was home. The radio was on both times, so she might have been a neighbor on an upper or lower level. Maybe she just had the wrong person, or maybe she was crazy. Maybe it was all part of a ridiculous scheme to harass me until I left the apartment. I honestly have no idea what she was up to. It could have been anything.”

“But you couldn't come up with the answer.”

“Right. Sometimes there isn't a good one. An answer, I mean.”

The next day was the final day of his vacation, and he was faced with an unpleasant dilemma: if he stayed at home, the old woman with the cans would probably come by and bother him again, but if he left the apartment there was a chance he'd have a lot of trouble finding his way back.

“I wasn't about to spend the last day of my vacation worrying about something that might not happen. So I decided the better idea was to head out for the afternoon and run a few errands, rather than stay at home.

“I wrote my address on the back of my hand and went around the shopping arcade to the dry cleaner's, the grocery store, and the drug store. I think I also stopped by the butcher's for a couple of croquettes. Nothing out of the ordinary, but enough for me to have a few bags in my hands. When I had everything I started walking back to my apartment.

“Between the shopping arcade and my apartment is a huge intersection, the sort with a pedestrian overpass. It's busy enough to get traffic at all times of day, and long haul truckers often drive through on their way out of Tokyo. Anyway, it's a place I've been a million times. I was walking up the steps to the overpass when it happened again. There was a screeching noise, or something, and I dropped one of my grocery bags. Cans rolled everywhere, and a bottle of lemon juice broke and spilled over everything. It was a real mess.”

“And you forgot where you were going.”

He nodded, sipped. “I just completely blanked and couldn't remember a thing. Where I was or where I was going—I guessed that I must have been headed for home based on all the stuff I was carrying, but it took me a few minutes to realize that the groceries bouncing into the street were mine and go and pick them up. Eventually I had to ask a stranger where my apartment complex was. I said it was my girlfriend's house or something like that. I must have looked crazy, carrying a bag of ruined groceries.

“That was the last time I got lost. To this day I don't have a rhyme or a reason for it, but I haven't been doing anything differently. The only thing that's disappeared is the problem.”

I took a sip of beer and thought for a moment.

“You really don’t have any idea what caused it to stop?”

“No more than I do what caused it to start. It’s just something that happened to me. Like a birthday or a natural disaster. I didn’t have any control over it.”

“Where was Kanae during all this?”

“Kanae? She was still in Osaka. Her parents asked me to take care of her maybe a week after that. It’s not like I could ever tell her about this. She’s only eleven now, and the last thing I want is for her to worry.”

“Are you worried it might happen again?”

His eyes fogged a bit, looked somewhere distant.

“Not really. It might, it might not, but it’s not something I have any control over. It might happen to me, it might happen to you. It might happen to Kanae, for all I know.”

“I suppose that’s possible,” I said. “So long as you’re not sure what the cause is. I can’t rule it out, anyway.”

“Exactly,” he said with a smile. “It’s always important to remember that there’s a possibility, Yanase. No matter what, there’s always a possibility.”

The school determined that Kanae was not at fault for the incident in the science room, and soon Kanae moved up a grade and into the hands of another teacher. Eventually, we all forgot about the whole thing, and I’ve done my best not to bring it up to others.

Still, I wonder from time to time whether that old woman ever returned, or whether my friend’s trouble with directions will ever come back to visit. But either way, it’s been about two years since Kanae graduated, and we’ve only seen each other a few times since. We haven’t spoken, so I couldn’t say for sure when, but neither he nor I have lost our way in recent months.

CEREMONY

The only thing I liked about Tokyo was the mirror.

I was seven or eight at the time, at an age when mother would still tie my obi and comb my hair in the morning. We had just moved to a small apartment in Hachioji. It was the rural, western edge of the city, but still a world utterly different from our country home in Akita. There were paved streets, convenience stores, schools with hundreds of students—all the things I had only been able to imagine from the dim whispers of the maids. It was the opposite of the insular estate of my grandfather, where workers and visitors were obliged to wear traditional clothing, a place where even the slightest flowering of the Occidental was trampled with unforgiving ferocity.

Our apartment in Tokyo was the size of a single room in grandfather's home. The floors were not tatami, but tile and flaking hardwood. The walls smelled of mildew and constantly leaked the voices and grunts of our neighbors on either side. Not even servants lived in rooms so small. When I asked mother where the rest of the house was—the kitchen, the lounge, the courtyard—her gaze floated aside, bored holes in the ground.

Even though I was born a girl, mother named me 'Shiki.' I'm not certain what possessed her to do such a thing. It was strange, as though she had forgotten to select a name altogether and simply sketched the first word she saw on my birth certificate. She didn't write the name in hiragana, to make it more girlish, and she forewent any typical combination of Chinese characters. No, mother named me “Shiki,” with the Chinese character for *ceremony*. A symbol at the end of both “graduation” and “formula.” When I see my name in print, I still think of it as some kind of legal

jargon—not a part of my name, proper, but merely a suffix to the family name. *Houjou Shiki*, not a person, but simply a ceremony of the Houjou clan.

When we arrived in our new apartment, mother hung a nameplate that read Shirakami, like the mountain range. Mother told me to memorize it, that we were no longer members of the Houjou family.

“This is a family of just the two of us,” mother said. “Shirakami. You and I.”

I nodded, vacant, not really understanding. All I knew was that it was important to mother, and so it must become something that was also important to me.

Our first afternoon in Tokyo was spent greeting our new neighbors, one by one. Mother explained very carefully that this was something you must do whenever you moved into a new apartment in the city, or else you might get off on the wrong foot with someone and have to move again. I blinked a few times to show I understood. When she was satisfied, mother took me by the hand, pulled me to each of the doors, and rapped against the wood three times with a pair of her pale knuckles. Within a moment or two, the doors all swung open. We would then be greeted in the entryways by all sorts: a stout old woman, a college student, a man in a suit with sunken cheeks and cavernous eyes.

“What a lovely little girl,” they said without exception, as though there was a rule that all little girls must be lovely. “Just how old are you?”

I never responded, but instead drew strands of long, dark hair around my face. Mother's hand came down seconds later and brushed my face clear while her mouth muttered some sort of apology for my unsociable actions. She then bowed several times and excused us, even as the

neighbor brushed off the strangeness of the encounter with a word about how shy they had been as a child.

Mother didn't say a thing when we returned home. I was left to unpack my things alone while she went to the market to gather ingredients for dinner. Her only instruction, as it would always be in the years to come, was not to open the door for anyone other than her. I obeyed.

The minutes passed slowly when mother wasn't around. My only possessions were clothing. Mother had not needed to see to my entertainment in Akita, and the notion must have slipped her mind as we moved. The servants had occupied most of my days educating me in traditional arts, everything from proper seating posture to incense to flower arrangement. The few spare moments I was given were often spent chasing a red hydrangea-patterned handball across the courtyard. But there was no red ball in our new apartment. So I investigated.

It took only a moment to move from one end of the apartment to another. Walking about the house, I discovered, was much easier when I didn't have to constantly dive into corners to avoid being seen by servants, or worse, grandfather. There was still next to nothing in it. All of mother's things were locked inside her suitcase, and aside from two futons which had been shipped well in advance, there was no real furniture to speak of. It was curiosity, then, which lead me to the bathroom.

Of course, I hadn't realized that it was a bathroom before entering. The toilet was western, the bath less than a tenth of the size of what I was accustomed to. Both were made of the same off-white material. My first impulse was to run my fingers along the edge, to feel the texture, but a shifting image caught the corner of my eye, and the thought was lost forever. Next to the sink was a child, hair to her waist, clad in the same deep blue kimono as I. She was staring

at me. I raised a hand, and the opposite hand raised in return. I raised a slippered foot, and an identical slippered foot jumped right up to meet it. Every face and gesture was answered by a face and gesture inverted, point by point. It was like eating an old favorite dish I had forgotten the name of: the sensation was familiar, and the name and flavor were on the tip of my tongue, but I couldn't break through the haze to identify it. My eyes were locked with the reflection for a long time, unmoving.

There had been no mirrors at our house in Akita. Grandfather was fiercely opposed to such things on principle. "Mirrors," my mother said, long after my discovery, "were what your grandfather hated most. He felt they represented the worst in the world: pride, vanity, greed." I often think, now, that there must have been another reason. A family code, maybe, or a childhood trauma, or perhaps he simply found ordinary silver mirrors far too western for his home. I have spent hours plucking the possibilities, but whatever the reason, it had been hidden away, like so much wood painted over by layers of lacquer and gloss. What I do know is that grandfather never spoke a word on the subject, and his face was always cleanly shaven, his hair painstakingly groomed.

My only conception of what I looked like before seeing that mirror came from the rippling images of the reflecting pool in the courtyard. The handball had, amidst a gust of wind, once fled from my hands and drifted across the surface of the pond. I tried to fetch it on my own. As I reached my arm out over the water, I became distracted. The appearance of a face in the pond had shocked me. It was obscured by shadows and petals fallen from nearby trees, but it was most definitely the face of a child.

"What are you doing, little miss?" a servant's voice, quiet yet piercing, carried across the courtyard.

I looked for the speaker. It was an old man I had only seen roaming the halls a handful of times. He stood between two stone lanterns, without a smile or a scowl, but there was something terrifying about his expression.

“I lost my ball,” I managed to squeak.

The old man fished the handball out of the pond and gave it to me. “Be more careful. You could have lost more than just a ball.”

At the time, I had no idea what he meant.

“—Shiki? Shiki, could you come help me for a second?” Mother had returned home.

A pit sank to the bottom of my stomach. Still staring at my reflection, I felt a profound sense of guilt. I didn't know what, and I didn't know how, but I knew that I was doing something that was wrong.

“Shiki?”

“Coming, Mother.”

And so, for a time, I left the mirror behind.

One of the first things Mother decided, after we arrived in our new home, was that I needed to attend a normal school. I had never been to a school before, and I had no conception of what it was like. The maids only spoke of it as a place of the past. Most of them had hated it, and assured me that what I was studying under my grandfather's careful eye would be far more beneficial to my adult life.

I tried, completely inarticulately, to make this point to Mother, but as usual she wouldn't hear of it. A proper, normal education, as she phrased it, was necessary for my development. In retrospect I can only imagine the piles of paperwork she must have needed to forge in order to

ensure that I could even attend. On paper, “Shirakami Shiki” wasn't a person. I'm not certain that “Houjou Shiki” was either. But through some sort of mysterious magic, Mother worked something out. Mother always worked something out.

One evening, several weeks after our arrival to the apartment, Mother brought my future homeroom teacher for a visit. He was a tall, solidly built man, not handsome but not ugly. The only defining feature I can still wrap my mind around was the scar that wove its way, snakelike, across his nose. It dominated his face so completely that, no matter how hard I tried to stare at something else, my eyes ended up fixating on it. He didn't seem to mind, though, and only chuckled when he noticed, without so much as a remark to discourage me.

We had nabe the night he visited. Mother gathered a pile of vegetables— mushrooms, spring onions, leafy greens— and tossed them into the soup with tofu and sliced pork. She poured a can of Sapporo into a glass and handed it to the man. He drank the entirety in three long gulps. She refilled the glass, carefully, and offered it to him again. His face was distorted by the amber liquid whenever the glass approached his lips.

“Little miss,” he called me in the same manner as the servants, and glanced my way. “Your food's going to get cold.”

I sputtered and blushed. I was so fascinated by his scar that I had forgotten to eat. I reached down with my pair of chopsticks and, hiding my mouth as I had always been taught, consumed pieces of vegetables and meat one at a time.

Mother smiled and said very little. Shortly after the meal, the scarred man left, and she thanked me for my attention to manners.

The morning we first went to school, Mother dressed me in western clothing. Not a kimono, as I had been accustomed to for years, but a skirt and a long sleeve shirt. The cloth was heavy and constricting, but at the same time I could move in a number of ways that would have never been possible when wrapped in a kimono and obi. I was still too young for a uniform, but Mother shoved a bright yellow hat on my head and smiled, insisting that this way I would be like all the other children.

“What other children?” I was incredulous.

“The ones you'll be attending school with. You've seen them in the streets, haven't you? All wearing the yellow hats.”

I said nothing.

The two of us went into the bathroom. I brushed my teeth and washed my face; Mother supervised. All the while, a girl in a yellow hat was next to the sink, mimicking my every move. If Mother noticed my fascination, she must have written it off as a passing obsession. She must have assumed that like many other integral pieces of childhood, its relevance would fade slowly, in the manner of a petal drifting across a pond.

The two of us left the house on time, and walked to school for twenty minutes. The building was small, yellow, gated, one story. An ordinary elementary school tucked away in its own innocuous pocket of reality. Mother smiled and said something, softly, to the security guard and he let us through the gate. Mother brought me into the faculty lounge. She didn't hesitate at any turn; she knew where the room was. She had been in the building before. My hand still clasped tight to Mother's, I watched other children filing into the classrooms all on their own. They seemed strangely independent, as if they had never had anyone do anything for them.

The scarred teacher was waiting for us in the faculty office. He smiled at me as we walked in.

“Hi there, little miss.”

I said nothing.

Mother hugged me tightly. “I’ll be back to pick you up when school ends. Remember—don’t go off with anyone but me.” Her scent was tinged with a foreign perfume.

“I’ll be off, then.”

She left me with the scarred teacher, without looking back.

On the blackboard, my name was written as “Shirakami Shiki,” the first name entirely in hiragana. The scarred teacher was introducing me to the class in sharp, pointed tones. I felt a little faint. I had barely been around anyone my own age before, and now I was standing before a classroom filled with them. They seemed rowdy, somehow unsettled. It occurred to me that none of them was wearing a yellow hat. I had seen plenty of students wearing yellow hats that morning. Some of them must have been in that group, but I was the only one with a piece of yellow fabric still on her head. I flushed with embarrassment.

“Now then, Shiki, if you could introduce yourself?”

I muttered my name incoherently and gave a deep, formal bow. The sort grandfather had always insisted I give whenever I introduced myself. Everyone laughed. Except for one girl in front, who just looked at me blankly, as if none of what I said had mattered at all. Immediately, I liked her.

The seating in our class was alphabetical, by the Japanese ordering, and so I too sat in the front row, right next to the girl, who was named Kurihara Mitsuki. Mitsuki was a small, frail

thing, both quiet and delicate. She ignored me when I sat down. But that was fine, she also hadn't laughed. I was determined, in the way that most stubborn children can be, that she was going to be my friend.

Soon I learned that it wasn't just me. Mitsuki was the same with everyone. She rarely spoke more than a sentence at a time, preferring to sit back and observe. Our other classmates ignored her. It wasn't malicious; they just felt as though it was impossible to have a normal interaction with her, that she would rather sit there expressionless, thinking whatever it was that she thought in that head of hers. She was independent beyond her years, her manner honed and refined.

Day in and day out, what I cared about in school was watching Mitsuki. The content of the lessons, the interactions with other children—all of it was meaningless in the face of Mitsuki's charm. I began to take notes. Mitsuki always wore a small blue ribbon in her hair. It was a light shade, and often slightly out of place, but she always wore the very same ribbon. Why she loved it so much, I could never say. The ribbon was as natural a piece of her appearance as the mole beneath her left eye, or the slender curve her left hand would make whenever she wrote with a pencil. It was probably because I was admiring Mitsuki's form so intently that I made such an amateur mistake.

“Houjou Shiki?” Mitsuki asked one day, pointing to the name I had written at the top of my paper. For a moment all I thought about was the impossible sweetness of her tone.

I had been careless. I wasn't sure what came over me. Mother had told me, very pointedly, that my name was not Houjou Shiki. I was “Shirakami Shiki,” with Shiki written in hiragana.

“I forgot.” I blurted it out like a dumb animal. This was the first half-sentence Mitsuki had even deigned to give me. “My name changed. I just forgot.”

Mitsuki nodded, losing interest, though she still seemed to file the information away.

“Don't tell anyone,” I said. “It's supposed to be a secret.”

“I won't,” she promised.

Outside of school, my life was mundane. Cold, even. My afternoons came to have a strange uniformity to them. For the first six months of my schooling, Mother picked me up after school and dropped me off at home, always giving her usual warning—don't open the door for anyone—and then running back to wherever it was that she went in the evenings. After that, the house was mine.

At first my routine was the same. I would wander around, glance at my reflection, and then do my homework. A quick, easy, and ordinary end to the day—just like Mother wanted.

Each day, when I was alone, the mirror would interest me more. I was as fascinated with the girl in the glass as I was with Mitsuki, even though I knew that she and I were one and the same. The fact that I had no idea what parts of me looked like seemed inhuman, somehow. The curiosity got the better of me.

When I knew Mother would be gone, I would walk into the bathroom and drop all of my clothing in front of the mirror. I would spend hours painstakingly identifying every nook and cranny of my skin. My arms, my legs, the contours of my face. It was not so much vanity, but rather paranoia and curiosity. I was looking not for beauty, but inadequacies, deeply disfiguring marks and shapes, like the scar that savaged the face of my homeroom teacher. I would search for blemishes, jutting bones, any imperfection I could steep in the reflection long enough to

purge. At times the mirror would increase a thing's value, and at times it would deny it. Some days I was pleased with what I found, and others I was not. I could never tell what dictated the variations. Mood, perhaps, or maybe just a mild shifting in the light. After all, a single mote of dust has the potential to ruin the composition of an entire painting—why would a reflection be any different?

During our last year in elementary school, Mitsuki began to wear makeup. She had just turned twelve, and received a small kit—the sort they sell for a thousand yen in department stores—as a present. She must have seen it as a rite of passage. Maybe she even celebrated with a dinner of red rice and snapper. I liked to imagine details like that, bits of Mitsuki's life that she would never tell me, but that someone doubtlessly knew.

She took to putting makeup on, like many of our classmates, during first period. She always used a blue plastic mirror. I liked to watch her as she did, from my seat to her left. I would pretend to be sleeping, my head resting on folded arms, my long hair covering my eyes. Her slim fingers were absurdly precise. Even with a makeup kit that was like a toy, she knew what she was doing. While she worked, I would often wonder if the process was like wearing a mask. There was something in the action that seemed impossibly disparate—I couldn't tell if she was hiding her face or transforming it into a work of art.

“Let's see,” the teacher muttered. “Kurihara. Read the poem at the top of page 57.”

I glanced at the top of the page. A Yoshioka Minoru piece; “The Water Mirror.”

Mitsuki, startled, shuffled the mirror and the makeup back into her bag before flipping to the correct page.

“Why was I drawn to the sound of wings?” Mitsuki read, her voice sliding into a high lilt. “More fleeting even than the moth itself...”

The mirror, hidden in the depths of Mitsuki's bag, just looked like a piece of blue plastic. Totally normal, something that anyone could have. For a slight moment I was profoundly jealous.

Mother and I moved three times during our stay in Tokyo. The changes in our address were never drastic. We moved from one part of Hachiouji to another, maybe fifteen or twenty minutes' walk in any given direction. I suspect that if she wanted to, Mother could have scouted out enough new apartment complexes in the area to send us to a new home every year for the next century.

Each moving day was the same. Mother would hire an independent moving company, a different one each time. The movers would load the small selection of furniture Mother and I collected over the years—a desk, two chairs, a low table, a television, and several cushions—along with our two futons and bedding into a small van. Mother would ride in the van, with the movers, and I would ride my bicycle to our new apartment. By the time I arrived, Mother would have already introduced herself to our new neighbors, and would tell me that it was unnecessary for me to do the same.

“You need to focus on your schoolwork, Shiki,” Mother would remark. “Leave the petty details to me.”

I would nod and pretend that she was saying something that made perfect sense. My studies were not so intensive that they would interrupt a ten-minute activity, but whenever Mother decided something, there was no changing her mind.

Our third move was to a four-story building, close to Nishi-Hachioji station. Our apartment was on the second floor. By then I was old enough to recognize that our new home was fairly decrepit, a demotion even from the apartment we had been renting before. Mother, too, had grown more haggard over the years. Her hair, once lustrous and black, was now wiry and pinpricked with gray. She continued to stay out late, saying she was working, and returned deep into the night.

“Shiki, can you hand me the box with the toiletries? I have to go to work soon.” After the movers left, Mother was out the door as well. She was already in her uniform, a gray suit with a white shirt.

Wordlessly, I handed her the box. She rummaged through it for a moment, knocking plastic containers together with flat thuds, before withdrawing her one bottle of perfume. She held it up to the light and inspected the container for any cracks. The green glass obscured her face. Satisfied, she put on a small dab.

“Remember, don't open the door for anyone but me.” I nodded. The door shut. The lock closed with a click.

I waited a few moments, made certain that I heard Mother's footsteps moving down the stairs, and then headed to the bathroom. I had it in my head that I was going to try putting on makeup. Mitsuki had done it so elegantly; surely I could just as easily. When I began to dig through Mother's things, though, the only thing I found was the perfume. I gave it a sniff. Even after years of her wearing it, it was still nothing I recognized. Its smell was beyond anything else, completely and utterly *foreign*. I splashed a bit in my palm and rubbed it on my neck, but that did no good. I smelled foreign too. I tried to wash it off my neck, but the efforts were fruitless. I still reeked. I scrubbed again and again, until my skin was pink and raw from heat and friction, but

the scent was still everywhere. The perfume was in my brain, like some sort of parasite. It was something, I was convinced, which didn't belong in our home. It was foreign, alien, an intruder. Calmly, I decided to destroy it.

The obvious thing to do was to smash the bottle against the ground, but the flooring was hardwood, and the bottle was thick. There was a chance I would accomplish nothing but denting the floor. The bathroom was vinyl, which seemed even more flimsy. No good. Then it came to me: the door was made of metal. It'd be loud, but it would do the job. I walked into the apartment hallway. A long stretch of hardwood dropped off a full six centimeters in the entryway. I could stand a good four or so meters back. I just had to throw the bottle as hard as I could. It was easy, perfect. I heaved my arm backwards, and hurled the perfume. I worried I wouldn't be strong enough.

The bottle wasn't nearly as hard as it felt. The instant it hit the door it split into thousands of tiny pieces of emerald glass. The mess scattered across the entryway. Perfume leached up into the air.

Something clicked. It was like waking from a trance. I stepped over to the entryway and reached down, grabbing for a piece of the glass. It cut me the instant I touched it. I fixed my eyes on my finger as a small drop of my blood fell into the perfume, slowly pooling in the entryway. I grimaced and stuck my finger into my mouth. I would deal with it later, I decided. I never did.

The mess was still in the entryway floor when Mother arrived home, nearly at three in the morning. The entire hallway reeked of her perfume. She stared at it for a long time, as though she were a detective searching a crime scene. For a moment, an expression I couldn't quite identify flickered across her face, and then it was gone forever. Without a comment, Mother

cleaned up and deposited the pieces of glass into a garbage bag. Mother came home later and later, after that. She never gave me an explanation.

One late summer afternoon, I decided to try on a blue ribbon.

This was after my last year in elementary. Mitsuki and I had already separated, enrolled in different schools. I had followed the recommendation of the scarred teacher and chosen a small local junior high. Mitsuki had enrolled wherever she saw fit—probably somewhere closer to Tokyo's city center, though I can't say for sure. In any case, Mitsuki was out of my daily life, so the blue ribbon was no longer hers alone. It could be my signature now, if I wanted. Anything that had been Mitsuki's could become mine.

In front of the mirror, I tied my hair to the side in a ponytail, as I had seen Mitsuki do countless times. I realized I had done it perfectly the second I moved my hands away. Excited, I tried speaking in Mitsuki's sugary voice. It came out unbalanced, flat as a long-abandoned balloon. I grimaced and tried again, hoping to get somewhere closer to the right pitch. It took a full ten minutes, but eventually I managed to do the voice perfectly. When I spoke, it was like Mitsuki was speaking. I was giddy. I reached for Mother's makeup, hoping to complete the ensemble.

The doorbell rang.

I stopped short. Mother wasn't due home for hours. Besides, Mother never rang the doorbell. But it could always be something important. My hair still tugged to the side with a blue ribbon, I answered the door. What was the point of dressing up like Mitsuki, after all, if no one would ever see it?

“Yes?” I opened the door. Outside was a man in a dark suit and a red tie. His smile was bleached into a brilliant white.

“I'm sorry, miss, but I'd like to ask you a few questions, if you don't mind. I noticed you don't have a nameplate by the door. You're the only one on the floor without one, I'm afraid, and I happen to be looking for a name I didn't see.”

I eyed him suspiciously.

“No, no, miss, I'm not up to anything criminal. I'm here on behalf of the city office.” He proffered a business card with the relevant information. “Most regrettably, there has been a bit of a mix-up. You see, we merged two of our departments last week, and a good deal of paperwork was lost in the shuffle. I'm just here to verify and obtain new records. It's all very simple. The information is available freely on our website, if you care to look.”

He gestured at the card again. I nodded.

“What's your name, miss?”

“Kurihara,” I answered automatically. “Kurihara Mitsuki. I'm sorry, we just moved. We haven't gotten around to finding a new nameplate yet.”

“Ah, my apologies. Ms. Kurihara, then,” the man spoke in formal tones. “I'm looking for someone named Shirakami.”

I stifled a gulp. “Shirakami,” I said, inadvertently mimicking Mitsuki's sweetened inflection. “Shirakami...”

“Or, perhaps, Houjou.”

“Can't say I know anyone. I think I'd remember the name 'Houjou.’”

“And Shirakami?”

“There could have been a person like that.” I pretended to strain my memory. “On the third floor, I think. But I don't know. I don't talk to the neighbors, moth—mom handles all of that.”

He scratched this all down on his notepad. “The third floor you say.”

“Yes. The third floor.”

“Understood. I'll check up there. Thank you, little miss.” His smile was so genuine that I didn't notice the oddity of the phrase, the strange formal intimacy of it, until much later. “You've been a tremendous help. I'll try not to bother you again.”

Shortly after Obon, Mother returned home from shopping with a lone plastic bag. A few wilted white petals leaned out from top. The bag swayed slightly with each step.

“There was a sale today.” Mother noted it to the air, like no one was listening. I nodded, even though she wasn't looking in my direction. “I went ahead and got some flowers, too. Chrysanthemums. Everything's so inexpensive this time of year.”

Mother took the bundle of flowers out of the bag and laid them on the table. Yellow and brown speckled the petals and leaves. Mother set them lightly in a vase, and filled the bottom with water.

“Lovely,” she said to herself, and then returned to her shopping bag. I stood and moved over to the kitchen counter, where Mother was arranging apples into a small porcelain bowl. The smell they gave off was unbearably sweet.

Worried, I peered into the shopping bag. At the bottom was a small tray of beef, wrapped in plastic. A bright red-and-yellow ‘50% off’ sticker dominated the front. Mother shoved her arm underneath my face and wrestled the package out of the bottom of the bag. It was a strangely

uncharacteristic, violent gesture. I looked at her questioningly. She was already unwrapping the package.

She shoved the tray in front of me. “Look,” she said.

The stench from it was foul. The burgundy flesh was tinged both dark and gray at the edges, but the appearance didn't matter. A single whiff was enough to tell that it had rotted all the way through.

“You can't cook with this,” I murmured. “You'll get sick.”

Mother smiled and seemed to consider something for a moment. Her face twitched a few times, as though some invisible animal was scurrying about beneath her skin. She took back the meat and turned over the entire container into a frying pan. Its sizzling was deceptively ordinary.

A noxious odor permeated the house.

“It's fine, Shiki. Your Mother knows what's best.” Her face kept smiling and twitching.

I didn't eat dinner that night, but Mother sat down at the table with her plate. The meat on the plate all looked ordinary, cooked beyond any point of visible spoiling. Her form was exquisite, exactly as grandfather must have brought her up. She wove her chopsticks gracefully about the platter of food and lifted piece after piece of the seared flesh into her mouth, always veiling the moment it touched her tongue with an outstretched hand. She chewed each bite a meticulous thirty times, without once changing her expression. It was as if she couldn't taste a thing.

After the man in the black suit visited, I found myself often wearing a blue ribbon in my hair. It came about unbidden, without any clear or practiced thought. In the morning I would be before

the bathroom mirror, and it would occur to me that my hair might look nicer with the blue ribbon tied in it. So I would, and almost invariably, it did.

Something along those lines happened one morning when I had planned a trip to Tachikawa. Tachikawa wasn't downtown Tokyo, but it was more of a city than Nishi-Hachioji, a twenty-minute ride on the inbound train. My goal was to buy a small, blue plastic mirror. I had wanted one for nearly a year and a half, since I had first seen Mitsuki's, but had never gotten up the nerve to drag myself into town to find the same one. Tachikawa had enough department stores, though, that it should be easy to find such a thing. I could go in my school uniform if I wanted; there were enough schools in the area that it wouldn't stand out. I just had to set aside a day and search.

I arrived in Tachikawa shortly after one. It was a brilliant Sunday, and the area around the station was crowded. There were dozens upon dozens of weekend shoppers, all coagulating together in the September humidity. With tall buildings towering over narrow streets, it was impossible to get anywhere.

I clambered up some stairs and into a department store. Everything was white tile and fluorescent lights. I consulted a map and made my way directly to the section which seemed most likely to have a pocket mirror. The selection was extensive. I couldn't find an identical mirror to Mitsuki's, but there were plenty of small mirrors that were just as good. The crowd and lighting already weighing on me, I made a decision to buy a different mirror, something in white metal, and brought it to the register.

I was in line when I decided to give the mirror one last check. I couldn't buy anything that was cracked. I opened the pocket mirror and stared into the glass. There was another mirror over my shoulder, attached to a nearby wall, and the two reflected each other infinitely. I stopped,

fixated by the reflection of my reflection. An infinite number of not-quite-Mitsukis. The cashier asked me if I was ready to pay. I raised my head, closed the mirror, and stopped short.

There were three middle-schoolers wearing their uniforms, walking by the other side of the register. I can't say why, but one reminded me of Mitsuki. There was something in the way she moved, in her mannerisms, that was unmistakably familiar. I handed the cashier a five-thousand yen bill. I remember putting the change in my wallet, but nothing after that.

The next thing I knew I was standing, hidden behind a row of lockers outside the train station. I could hear a faint voice that sounded like Mitsuki's. I was sure it was Mitsuki's. The girl it belonged to, however, looked almost nothing like her. There was no blue ribbon, and her hair was dyed brown. The uniform was the same as the girls I had seen by the register. But it wasn't the same group. Or was it? I couldn't tell. My eyes were on the girl who might have been Mitsuki.

“What are you doing?” It was the voice of a police officer. I guess I must have stood out from the crowd, lurking behind the lockers like that.

“Nothing,” I answered in Mitsuki's voice. A perfect mimic.

The officer sighed. “You know, miss, people only say 'nothing' when they're up to something.”

I fidgeted, unsure of how to position myself in front of him. I inclined my head to the side, picturing how Mitsuki would do it, the effortless way her eyes would lilt.

“Do we need to go down to the station?”

I turned and saw that they were watching me. The one that looked like Mitsuki made a sour expression. Her face contorted that way, she had none of Mitsuki's beauty. It shouldn't—couldn't—have been Mitsuki. Mitsuki would never make that sort of expression.

“She’s hitting on cops?” one of the girls muttered, staring at me. “Gross.”

The policeman kept interrogating me, even as the three of them walked away.

One night in autumn, Mother never returned home.

The morning was the same as usual. She said goodbye in her normal way, and walked out the door. She hadn't worn perfume since I broke the bottle. She always left completely unadorned.

I waited until four in the morning, but eventually figured she must have had to go out for a drinking party or something similar. It wasn't too odd for someone to stay out all night every once in a while. She would be back eventually. I went to sleep and thought nothing of it. Mother still hadn't returned by the time I got up in the morning, and I grew worried. But still, I went to school, as though nothing was wrong.

When I returned home in the evening, I found a letter addressed to Shirakami Shiki in the mail. No return address, just ours and the name “Shirakami Shiki.” I opened it. What was inside was so short it could have been written on a post-it: *I'm sorry. Please, just contact your grandfather.* A telephone number followed. No name, no identity.

I looked at the address again. The intended recipient was indeed “Shirakami Shiki,” but Shiki was written with a single character.

I sniffed my hands. The smell was a nauseating mix of perfume and rot.

The letter sat on the low table in the living room for several days. I wasn't sure what else to do with it. I toyed with the idea of calling the phone number often. I didn't have much money in my wallet, and I quickly realized that it wouldn't last much longer if Mother didn't come back. No,

Mother wouldn't come back. I was quite sure of that by then. I just hadn't quite worked out what I planned to do about it.

Once, I brought the letter and my cellphone into the bathroom and dialed. The phone rang three times before a woman's voice answered. I nearly spoke, but nothing came out. Instead I just stared at myself in the mirror, my mouth dangling open like a dying fish. It was so horribly unattractive, so unlike something Mitsuki would do. I hung up the phone.

I began to have frequent visitors, too. All men in dark suits. They would knock on the door three or four times, and either I would answer or they would leave. They would always ask roughly the same questions: there had been a mix-up at the ward office, and they needed to know such and such fact about me. Sometimes I answered, sometimes I didn't, and sometimes I answered, but I lied. I think most of my answers were lies. There were so many questions that they all just gradually jumbled together and mixed, illegibly. None of it seemed to matter either way.

On the sixth day after Mother vanished, a man in a dark suit asked me a question I hadn't been expecting: "Why, if you don't mind me asking, Ms. Kurihara, does your nameplate say Shirakami?"

"Just a coincidence. I guess the last neighbor left it."

"Is that so," the man muttered, and continued with his questioning.

That evening, I once again tried to dial grandfather's phone number, but I never made it beyond the fourth digit.

On the eighth day after my Mother disappeared, I took what was left of my money and boarded a train bound for Ome, further out of the city. I purchased a ticket, went through the barrier, and

sat in a quiet corner. I waited for a full half-hour. The train ducked through tunnel after tunnel, each leading to a valley filled with trees in different shapes. When I reached Ome, I thought I might go ever further, and boarded a train bound for Okutama. I paid the 200 yen difference for the ticket and walked out of the station. This was a weekday, and Okutama was empty. There were no tourists bumbling about, just long swaths of open air and empty concrete.

I walked to the edge of town, where there was a river, and tied a blue ribbon in my hair. Staring at myself in the water, hours melted away. Soon it was dark, and the full moon shown down brightly on the surface.

I dialed the number from the letter on my cellphone. The line rang forever.

“Houjou,” an old man answered the phone.

I said nothing.

“Houjou,” the old man said again. “It's Houjou Shiki, isn't it?”

Unable to do anything else, I simply said “yes.”

“It's time to come with us. Your grandfather is waiting, little miss.” It was a voice without joy or malice, but still somehow terrifying.

In the water, the moon was nearly ink-dark, but against its frail light I could trace the contours of my face. Cold, static even on the rippling surface, a sculpture made of smooth alabaster.

“Yes.” I watched my mouth smile Mitsuki's smile. “I can't be here forever, now, can I?”

FACTS CONCERNING MY FATHER'S DISAPPEARANCE

1. My father disappeared at 6:30PM on a Sunday. Since then, I've been fascinated by disappearances.
2. No one else I know has ever disappeared. People sometimes go missing. People sometimes die. But no one else has vanished into thin air.
3. I once read a newspaper article about a hotel where small items started vanishing one by one. At first they thought it was the work of thieves, but gradually the items started reappearing in strange places—they found staplers in guest room showers, a large selection of bathrobes on the roof. My favorite incident involved a giant swordfish disappearing from the restaurant's walk-in freezer. A live one was found in the swimming pool three days later.
4. The working theory is that the disappearances were part of an elaborate prank, but I think that's a boring answer. Mysterious things happen every day.
5. My father had told us he was going on a business trip to Akron, but he came home a day early to surprise us. My sister opened the door for him. He walked up the stairs and into his bedroom to change and never came out. When we opened the door, all that was left was a suitcase. A faucet in the bathroom was still running.

6. My father worked for a factory that made tiny giraffe sculptures. He was fond of saying that they were only ten years from being able to build real ones. He made a lot of bad giraffe jokes when he was still around. He liked to call them giraffe gaffes.

7. The contents of my father's suitcase:

-Three pairs of argyle socks

-Two polo shirts, orange

-One pair of khakis

-Fourteen individually wrapped wintergreen Lifesavers

-One toiletry pouch containing a toothbrush, razor, and travel canister of shaving cream

-One United States Passport, expiration date June 5th 2017

-A Peruvian cookbook, wrapped as a gift

8. I still wonder who the cookbook was for. No one in our household has ever liked to cook.

9. I was seventeen when my father disappeared. My sister was sixteen. Our mother was digging wells in Botswana.

10. Once in a while we receive a letter from Africa. The contents tend to be the same: my mother describes a harrowing experience undergone by someone she has met in Botswana; she describes a terrible marriage or a terrible disease, and tells us how sad she is that she can't solve all the problems she is seeing. She tells us that she might come home next month. She usually includes

a photo of herself. In the photos, she is always smiling among the villagers she has most recently saved. Her teeth are always very white.

11. We are also sad about the things my mother writes about in her letters. We understand but we miss her anyway. We are probably bad people.

12. After my father disappeared, I went from part-time to full-time at the grocery store down the road. Most of my work involves unloading and rearranging produce. Every once in a while, I take something small—an orange, an onion—just to see if someone will notice that it's missing.

13. No one ever does.

14. Most of the people who come into a grocery store don't consider the possibility that their produce could disappear.

15. I sometimes wonder if invisibility is the same as vanishing. There are lots of superheroes who become invisible, but none that I know that have the special ability to vanish. The problem with vanishing, maybe, is that you can't picture it. One second it's there, and the next it's gone.

16. I think my sister took the disappearance the hardest. In the weeks after my father vanished, she rarely ate. She rarely slept. Some nights I would walk to the kitchen to get a glass of water, and I would see her in the living room. She would be sitting on the couch in the dark. Her eyes

would be fixed on an empty part on the wall. It was as though she could see something that I couldn't.

17. There are a lot of things, I think, that I'm incapable of seeing.

18. A magician at our local zoo once made a tiger disappear. He worked the whole town into a frenzy over the act. It was, he insisted, going to be something earth-shattering. Those of us that were lucky enough to see it would never feel the same way about the world again. When we watched his act, however, all that happened was that the tiger was moved from one part of the cage to another with a whirl of his cape. There were many plausible explanations for this fact. Everyone forgot about the trick shortly after.

19. I sometimes wonder how the tiger felt about the whole thing. Even when I visit him now, he mostly looks bored.

20. When my sister was six, she asked my mother to send her a picture of a tiger from Africa. "There aren't any tigers in Africa," I tried to explain, and she started crying. She thought that Africa was filled with all sorts of dangerous animals, so *of course* our mother could take a picture of a tiger for her. My sister didn't speak to me for a week after that.

21. I can't remember if my sister saw the magic act with the tiger, but if she did I'm certain she doesn't remember much of it either.

22. My sister asked my mother about it when she was home for Christmas. My mother said no, no there aren't any tigers in Africa. "But there are giraffes," my father said, beaming.

23. Throughout our house there are a large number of tiny giraffe sculptures made of plaster. My father had always been proud of what he did, so I suppose it makes sense that he would have wanted to show them off to guests. All of the giraffes are in exactly the same pose. The only difference is in the name of the zoo written at the bottom of the sculpture. I haven't gotten rid of any of them yet.

24. I did, however, manage to break the statue from our local zoo shortly after my father disappeared. I went to the gift shop to try to replace it, but they no longer carried statues of giraffes. Now my desk has a tiny statue of a tiger on it instead.

25. When she turned fourteen, my sister asked if I thought our mother would ever remarry. I said that I didn't know. You can't replace people the way you can replace objects.

26. My sister has asked me many questions that I don't know the answers to. Other favorites include *will it rain today?* and *what happened to the cat?*

27. What happened to the cat is probably this: it ran away from home. Like all cats do sometimes. He might come back, and he also might not. He was an orange cat and we cared about him a lot. When my sister was six, she tried to paint black stripes on him so he'd look like a tiger.

28. Whether it's a tiger or a giraffe, it's always sad when something you love disappears.

29. I tried to talk to my sister several times after our father vanished. I explained that the universe is mysterious, that we can't control these things, and that it's all we can do to learn to live with them. She said that I was crazy for being okay with everything. All I could say was that I wasn't.

30. One night, while my sister was asleep, I tried reenacting my father's disappearance. I walked in the door with his suitcase, slipped off my shoes, and carried his things up the stairs. I closed the door, took off my shirt, and turned on the faucet in the bathroom. I stood in the middle of the bedroom and stared out the window. The sky was covered by clouds, and stained a dark amber from the light pollution. Everything was quiet. I closed my eyes and waited.

31. I waited forever.

32. I have a lot of ideas about how my father's disappearance must have looked. There was probably a glowing portal, or a puff of smoke, or at the very least a mysterious humming. My father must have stepped through the portal, fallen through to another side in another universe. Or else it was like a blink. One second he was there, and the next he wasn't.

33. We received a letter from my mother recently. It said she would be home for the holidays, and might stick around a month or two longer than usual. She included a polaroid photo of herself with a lion plodding along in the background. "Sorry it's not a tiger" was written on the back.

34. I suspect my sister worries that one day my mother and I will disappear too. This is probably inevitable; there are many things that can drag a person away from the people that they love. But with our mother so far away, it's all I can do to say "I'll be here." And I will be. Even when a person disappears, they always leave something behind.

35. The other day I discovered that the tiger statue had disappeared from my desk. I asked my sister if she knew anything, but she said that she hadn't had anything to do with it. I tore my room apart looking for the statue, made and unmade my bed, even pulled the books off the shelves. No matter how much I tore the room apart, the statue was nowhere to be seen.

36. This morning I found a small giraffe statue on my desk, where the tiger used to be. On the bottom, where the name of the zoo is usually written, the word "HOME" is scrawled in capital letters.

37. I've decided not to question where it came from. Mysterious things happen every day.

MY SISTER, NOZOMI

I grate a piece of wasabi, open the window, and pretend to ignore the phone when Nozomi calls. I don't want to talk to her—not yet, anyway—and once I start cooking I hate to stop. There's something sad, I think, about walking away from a meal when it's half-finished. Even if you come back to it later, the focus is different: the precision and the timing are all lost. Finishing a meal like that isn't worth the disappointment.

Nozomi knows that the phone isn't the best way to reach me. She's seen me ignore it enough. If Nozomi really wanted to hear from me, she'd show up at my apartment doorstep unannounced again. If it's important she'll leave a message. That's the way it's always worked. It's just that Nozomi can get stubborn. It's easier for her to call than it is to take the train out here from Chiba. Plus, she can't always lie to our father about where she is. Everyone gets caught eventually.

The phone buzzes again—Nozomi must have left a voicemail—and I scrape green paste from a container, watch it fall into a ceramic dish. The paste reshapes against my fingers. Wisps and indentations mar the edges. I set the dish aside, wash my hands and the grater, spray and wipe the counters, and check on the rice in the cooker. The timer has about fifteen minutes left. A filet of pike is crisping in the broiler while tofu simmers in a broth of dashi and mirin, topped by ginger and scallion slices. By the time I stop moving I've made a nice little meal for one: tofu, pickles, grilled fish, rice, and a small bowl of miso soup.

I open the fridge, reach over bottles of soy sauce and salad dressing. It's still early in the day, but I grab a can of Sapporo and pour it into a glass. Foam rises and settles. I polish off everything quickly—I always make sure to eat everything—and wash all the dishes by hand. Then the phone rings and I continue to ignore it. Some calls just don't need answering.

I call Nozomi my sister, but it's not like we've ever lived in the same house. She's my father's daughter, but we have different mothers. It's an ordinary story. My mother was a hostess at a small bar by the station. My father hadn't married Nozomi's mother yet, but I guess he might have already been dating her. I don't know the specifics; all I know is the ending: my mother knocked up and living on her own, my father married to the daughter of a wealthy family and taking over their business.

The rest isn't very important. Nozomi's mother died when she was young, and the two of us met some time after her funeral. My father invited me to dinner one night, as a way of reaching out to the family he had grown distant from. His secretary must have drafted the letter, but at nineteen, I was intrigued. Wasn't it an *ordinary* thing to want to meet your father? Why shouldn't I feel the same way?

On a Thursday evening, I slipped on my only jacket and tie and took the train all the way to Tokyo. There were three transfers just to get to Shinjuku, and once more to get to the restaurant in swanky Aoyama after that. The menu in the window failed to list any prices.

A waiter with dark shoes that probably cost twice my salary led me to a private room in the back of the restaurant. My father, his secretary, and Nozomi were all seated on cushions at the far end of a low table. The room smelled faintly of tatami. A moth-patterned tapestry hung at the back of the room. It seemed slightly out of place, and I found myself distracted, unable to focus on my father's expression and greeting. He waved me over, as he might a frequent guest in this sort of establishment, and motioned for me to sit near the door, next to Nozomi. I sat, somewhat stiffly, and was handed a menu.

“Anything you might like is fine,” the secretary said. “We’ve already taken care of it.”

I glanced over at Nozomi and caught her staring at me. Her face turned red at the edges, and her head shot straight down to her empty plate. I smiled. Kids have to be nervous in these sorts of situations.

A chain of waiters appeared and handed us drinks. A garish blue cocktail was sat on a napkin before my father. He sipped it slowly, and I wondered how long it would take for his tongue to stain that color.

Worried that I might order the wrong thing, or that I would request something too expensive, I asked my father to order for me, and he nodded and lit a cigarette. He didn't seem to have much interest in talking. At one point, a call came, and my father and his secretary excused themselves to deal with a work situation. Nozomi and I were left alone.

“How old are you?” I asked, unable to think of other questions to ask a kid her age.

“Ten.”

I nodded. “That’s a good age, ten. I remember liking it.”

She stared at her plate. Clearly I was making a muddle of things.

“Is there anything you’d like to ask me?” I couldn’t think of anything else. “Why I’m here or anything?”

She shook her head.

“Really? Nothing at all?”

“Do you have a car?”

I was taken aback for a second.

“A car? Why?”

“So you don't have a car?”

I shook my head. “The train gets me where I need to go.”

Nozomi bit her lower lip. A confused expression flickered across her face.

“But I thought everyone in the countryside had a car.”

My father and his secretary re-emerged from the hallway and sat down. Nozomi stared at me expectantly.

“Not everyone has a car in the countryside. It isn't always important.”

“But you live in a house, right?”

I laughed. “More people do out there, I guess. But I don't need much space, so it's just an apartment.”

“We live in an apartment too. It's big, but it's an apartment. There isn't a yard. Do you have a yard?”

I looked over at my father, but he just took another sip of his cocktail. The moth tapestry fluttered as a nearby door opened. The fabric's trembling made them look as though they might fly right out of the fabric.

“Not really. There's a lot, with some grass and gravel, that the apartments share. And a shed with a coin-powered washing machine. But that's about all. It's near the beach though.”

“The beach? With surfers? In Ibaraki?”

My father stayed silent for the rest of the evening, chewing his way through the conversation while Nozomi besieged me with question after question, all of which I answered dutifully, even after I had lost the ability to pay attention.

Nozomi had been obsessed with the idea of having an older brother for years. She was ecstatic to find out she had one all along. But she also must have been disappointed. A 10-year-old girl probably wouldn't want a 19-year-old part-timer as her older brother—much less an older brother

who only cared about cooking and listening to old Happy End albums—but she seemed happy about it anyway. Unrealistic dreams always make you happy when they come true, regardless of whether or not they're what you actually wanted. It was probably something like that.

Nozomi began to come to my house about once a week after that dinner, nearly four years ago now. The first time it was sudden: the bell rang, and when I opened the door Nozomi was standing there, still in her school uniform, with a red backpack on and everything. Her nose was red from the winter cold.

“Nozomi?” I asked.

“I'm running away from home,” she answered.

“What?”

“I'm going to live here.”

Nozomi ducked under my arm and into the entryway. She took off her shoes and lined them up neatly on a small rack by the door. The main flap of her backpack was undone, and a Snoopy pencil case was peeking out the top.

“No, you're not,” I said.

She laughed, ignored me. I shut the door and rushed inside after her. My mother was still at work and would be until the early morning. The television was on in the corner, and a variety show was playing softly in the background. Nozomi took off her blazer and scarf and hung them on an empty coathanger in the closet. She kneeled down on a cushion and unwrapped a rice cracker from the bowl on the table. Unsure what else to do, I thought about calling our father, but he was usually busy during the day, and it was a long a train ride from Chiba. Nozomi must have spent a long time on the train coming to my apartment, I reasoned. It probably wouldn't hurt to let her stay for an hour or two.

“Do you want some tea?” I asked.

Nozomi looked up at me, smiled, and nodded.

I filled our stained kettle with water and set it on an electric coil. Nozomi started flipping between channels behind me.

“Does he know you're here?”

“He doesn't care.”

I reached into the cabinet and pulled out a small bag of loose tea leaves.

“When you run away from home, you need to leave a note or something. Haven't you ever seen anyone run away on TV? If you don't, they'll think something terrible happened. They might even call the police.”

“I've never met a policeman.”

“They're usually nice.”

I shook the leaves into a pot and drizzled warm water over them. The scent filled the kitchen.

“Hmm,” Nozomi affirmed.

I brought the teapot and two cups on a small tray into the living room, set down the cups and filled them.

“You have to call him, okay? You can't run away and not tell anyone about it.”

“Okay,” she said.

Nozomi stayed the night, and I gave her money to return by train in the morning. For no particular reason, it became a routine, Nozomi running away from home on the weekends and staying with me. I was never quite sure what to make of it, but I enjoyed the company.

As she grew older, Nozomi would call or text me in the gaps between her visits. Twice, when she was studying for exams, she had to cancel the trip. She acted very upset about it at the time, but she would never admit that now.

I have no idea what our father thought of all this. He didn't seem to mind—in fact, he started paying for her trips. It always bothered me a little. From how Nozomi described him, he sounded like a very removed parent, but the negligence seemed extreme—brother or not, I was basically a stranger. Not someone to send your young, impressionable daughter to. Even now, I can't fathom it, but he must have figured that as long as Nozomi was happy, everything would be fine.

A few hours pass and I go into town to buy groceries. My first unemployment check went into my account yesterday, so I can afford to be a little less frugal. Besides, shopping keeps me busy. It's an old habit; my mother tried to buy a day's food at a time, to make certain we never let anything sit in the house and go to waste. I might as well have inherited it genetically.

The sun is low in the sky, and the breeze gives everything a slight chill. The closest grocery store is in the center of town, but it's across from the restaurant so there might be a chance of having an awkward run-in with someone from my old job. I decide to go to one a little further away, at the edge of the shopping arcade next to the stationary shop.

The stationary shop has been deserted for a while now. Mrs. Kawashima ran it for years after her husband ran away. She and my mother were two of the only single-parents in the area, and this town being as tight-knit as it is, they often relied on each other for support. I spent a few afternoons in the Kawashima's apartment above the shop, but stopped going around the time I turned seven. Her daughter and I never got along.

I grab a red-plastic shopping basket and fill it with simple things. Tofu, ginger, another six-pack of Sapporo. I add a bottle of Cutty Sark from the liquor aisle, some razor blades and shaving cream, and a tube of toothpaste (mint). On my way to the register I notice a woman bump into a display of canola oil. Her shoulder brushes against a stack of the plastic bottles. They scatter everywhere. None break.

I think about going over and helping, but one of the stockboys sees the spill and rushes over first. My phone starts buzzing in my pocket again. The cashier closest to me clears her throat—there's no one left in line—so I ignore the problem and go to check out. The cashier rings up my items one by one. The register beeps as it processes.

I take a long sigh and listen to the messages. As usual there's not anything all that substantial.

“Sorry,” I tell the cashier as I hand over the bills. “I was worried it might be important.”

The cashier smiles and shakes her head. She's not the type for smalltalk, but she seems willing to indulge me.

“She'd been calling all morning.”

“Your girlfriend?”

“Sister.”

She nods and hands over a few hundred yen. Outside, moths crowd around a vending machine and a magazine rack. The wings are simple white; faint and shimmering. It's not really the season for moths, and even though they're not particularly interesting, for a while I can't look away.

By the time I get home again, Nozomi's already sitting on my doorstep. She's wearing a green sweatshirt over her uniform. Her ears are covered with oversized headphones.

“Hi,” I decide subtlety might be the right approach. Nozomi scowls back.

“Dumbass. I've been calling all morning.”

I scratch behind my ear a few times. “Sorry. I haven't looked at my phone.”

Nozomi rolls her eyes and pulls her headphones back onto her head. I start to say something else, but before I can get the words out she presses the play button.

“Are you going to let me in, or are we just going to stand out here?”

“I don't know,” I shrug. “It's a pretty nice day.”

Nozomi makes an expression that must mean something like *you aren't nearly as funny as you think you are*.

“Whatever.”

I fish the keys out of my pocket and open the front door. My apartment smells like dashi. The hardwood is flaking in the entryway.

“Have you eaten yet?”

Nozomi walks over to the low table by the TV and plops down on a cushion. She sets her phone on the table and listens to a few songs. I set aside my shopping bags and start unpacking, throw a couple blocks of tofu into the fridge and store the whisky beneath the sink.

“Are you hungry?” I try again.

“Are you cooking?” she asks in a monotone.

“I could be.”

“Make up your mind.”

“Did you have a fight with Dad?”

She turns up the volume. It's loud enough to hear fragments of the music from across the room.

Without another word, I start washing rice in the sink. Water runs through, milky at first, but it gradually clears. I stick the rice in the central container of our antique rice cooker. I chop some mushrooms, chestnuts, and bamboo shoots and throw those in too. I add some sake and soy sauce to the water for seasoning.

“What are you making?” Nozomi asks. Her headphones are down around her neck again.

“A bit of this and that. Nothing special.”

I reach in the fridge and pull out two cans of Sapporo.

“Want one?”

She gives a noncommittal grunt, so I pour her half a glass. She takes a sip and grimaces. I pretend not to notice.

“How are things at work?” she asks.

I hesitate—given the choice, I'd rather Nozomi didn't hear about anything until I have a new job. She's a worrier; she'll probably imagine something that's worse than reality.

“I don't work at the restaurant anymore,” I say at last. Half a lie is going to be better than a whole one. “I quit two weeks ago.”

“Oh,” she says. For a moment I'm a little disappointed.

I turn on the television. We watch a commercial for Pocari Sweat in silence before a variety show comes back on. They're doing a segment about pet owners in Tokyo. The hostess struts about in heels, dragging a perfectly white toy poodle on a leash while she interviews pet owners on the street. I wonder for a bit if the poodle is even hers to begin with—it doesn't seem very attached, but then it seems unethical, somehow, to treat an animal like a prop.

“Do you need me to ask Dad for help?”

“No,” I shake my head. “I’ll be fine for a while still. Nothing’s dried up quite yet. I’ll find something new before too long.”

Nozomi takes another sip of beer, and I lean my head back and imagine tracings in the white on the ceiling. The volume on the TV is so high that I don’t notice when the rice cooker dings, and all the food at the bottom of the container chars together. But we end up eating it anyway.

When Nozomi was eleven, she once visited my mother’s apartment after school. She had gotten to the apartment before me, and had used the spare key to let herself in to wait. She was fascinated with the seed my mother had fed her canary, and had dragged the whole sack of it to the living room table. I was quiet when I entered, and I remember her scattering the seeds across our low table in the living room, the gold of them bright against the dark coloring of the wood. I don’t know why I was watching her. I was probably just curious—why would a girl like her be interested in something so mundane? Or maybe it was the way her hair fell and shook, ever so slightly, as she counted the seeds. Her mouth framed the edges of numbers, but she never spoke the words aloud.

“What are you doing?” I had asked, and even then I could sense that it was a mistake, that nothing should have been said.

“Nothing,” she said, and scooped the seeds, mostly uncounted, back into the small cotton sack where they were stored.

That sack had vanished from our apartment by the time Nozomi left. I assumed Nozomi had taken it with her, but out of some small fear for her I never told my mother anything.

Months later, I opened a small box in the closet, looking to bring out my mother's winter clothing, her heavy socks and jackets and scarves. When I opened the box, moths erupted out by the dozen, white and fluttering and somehow torrential. When the moths cleared, it was as though they had never been there. All that was left in the box was a molding bag of bird seed on top of a thick pile of fabric. The clothing had all been eaten away.

I toy with a hole in my shirt and mutter an incoherent response to a question, but Nozomi isn't paying attention. I turn out the light in the kitchen and the television is the only illumination left. Irregular flickers of blue light rush across the ceiling. I open and close my right hand. In the half-light the motion is distorted, as though I'm moving in a dream, and my hand isn't really mine.

“Have you called Dad?”

She shakes her head.

“Are you staying here tonight?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

“I'll lay out your futon in a bit.”

“Thanks,” Nozomi says, and she sounds like she means it.

I wake up earlier than Nozomi and decide to take a walk. It's cool out. The breeze is rough by the water. My route cuts across a small parking lot, over the sea barrier and down onto the beach. It's low tide, and something is reeking. Driftwood and seaweed are piled unceremoniously by the waves.

I pull on the cuffs of my sweatshirt a bit and stuff my hands into my pocket. The motion forces me to hunch. My eyes stay locked on the ground.

Around eight I get a text message from Nozomi. She says she'll call home and then make breakfast, so I should 'definitely' be back home in an hour. I text her back saying it'll be two, and that she can eat on her own if she wants. I don't really have a reason to say that, and I feel like a jerk, but for some reason I can't put my finger on it also feels necessary.

At the edge of the shoreline I climb a staircase and turn right onto a grassy cliff which overlooks the ocean. Someone installed a stone bench there, ages ago. The sort of thing that's only built to seat one, but looks like it could handle another person or two. I sit down and scratch my head and remember the pile of tattered clothing again. It was really more my fault than Nozomi's. I'm glad I didn't let her get the rap for it. I don't think she deserved it. Maybe I didn't either.

I start to remember all the times I'd let something get ruined. Once I unplugged the refrigerator before we left town for two days. By the time we got back, all of the food in the freezer had thawed and spoiled. I can't remember why I did it, but I must have had a good reason. My mother was livid all the same.

There was also the time I broke my calculator. I had to buy a special one for some class or other, and it was terribly expensive. I remember the strain on my mother's face when we went into the shop and saw the prices. I kicked my bag down a flight of stairs later, out of frustration with something unimportant. When I took out the calculator to work, the screen was cracked.

My phone rings. I expect it's Nozomi complaining, but I see my father's name on the caller ID.

“Hello?”

“Naoki? It's me.”

“What do you want?”

I cross my legs, prop an elbow up on the back of the bench, and lean my head into my palm.

“Nozomi said you might need some help,” my father says at last.

“I’m fine without it.” I pull the phone away from my ear, let my thumb hover above the button to cancel the call, but for some reason I can’t seem to let myself do it.

“Are you sure?”

The volume is high enough to hear the voice over the waves and the nearby road. I bring the phone back to my face but stay quiet.

“Listen, Naoki, I might have a deal for you. Just hear me out for a moment.” Waves crash in the distance. The sound is almost like static.

“Naoki? Are you listening?”

“I’m listening.”

“Good. Now, I don’t know how you feel about this, but it seems to me that lately, you take more care of Nozomi than I do.”

“I don’t do anything.”

“Don’t be modest, Naoki. You do plenty.”

I clutch my forehead, even though he can’t see me over the phone.

“You’ve got to be joking.”

“You can tell where I’m going with this, then. I’d pay you. Enough to make it worth your while. More than enough. Nozomi needs a role model, especially at such a delicate age. For whatever reason, she seems to like you. Why not let her live with you for a few months? I’ll pay for everything you two might need. You won’t need to look for a new job. If you really want one,

of course I could find you something at the company too. It sounds like a promising proposal, doesn't it?"

I can feel something violent surging in my gut. But Nozomi wouldn't want me to say anything. Not now, and certainly not like this.

"I'll think about it," is all I can manage. And I suppose I won't be able to help myself. Now that he's said it, I can't *not* think about it. The carelessness of it all.

After breakfast, I offer to walk Nozomi to the station. It's a bright sunny day, perfect for walking, and even if I've already been outside for a while, Nozomi could probably use the company.

"You're nuts," she says. "What's so great about wandering around this town on your own?"

I smile back and ruffle the hair on the top of her head. She glares at me and straightens it out in her phone's camera.

"Jerk."

We gather her things back into her backpack and walk down the main thoroughfare. The most direct route cuts through town, right by the old restaurant, but I pretend not to notice even when we walk by.

"Are you okay?"

"What?"

"You seem stiff."

I shrug. "Sometimes it's natural to be stiff. Your body can't be loose if you have nothing to compare it to."

"You are so weird. I hope I'm not like you when I'm older."

I shake my head. A light wind crawls across the road.

“You know that I'm going to be all right, don't you?”

Nozomi nods, but doesn't saying anything else.

“Just make sure that you can take care of yourself, Nozomi. I'm here if you need me, but I don't think that you do. You're old enough to know who you need to rely on. I can't be the one to help you with everything. But I can be your dumb, deadbeat older brother all you want.”

“Is that all?” She sounds a bit disappointed.

“Yeah. That's all for now.”

“You can rely on people too,” Nozomi says quietly. “I'm here too, you know.”

Despite her protests, I buy Nozomi a ticket when we get to the station. It's not that expensive, and she'll be happy with the extra spending money. She takes it from my hand reluctantly, almost as if she's worried I might bite if she gets too close, and then darts away quickly. She stares at the ticket in her palm until we reach the turnstiles. The color of it almost matches her skin. It seems strange to print a ticket like that—why choose a color that can get lost inside your hand?

“Are you sure you don't need anything? Anything at all?” Nozomi seems hesitant, but I can't ask her for anything. She's at an age where she needs a real parent to take care of her.

“I'll be fine. Really. I promise.”

The train departs on time, a 10-second segment of some unidentifiable orchestral number playing from the station's loudspeakers as the doors close. I leave as the train's sliding out of the station. Faces blur in the windows as it picks up speed. My hands are thrust in my pockets, my phone turned off. For a few seconds I teeter in a dim place. I wonder if I've made the right decision, but

there are always, I figure, more opportunities to make the same decision over again. Most things that are ruined can be replaced.

The breeze picks up and drags a drop of sweat across my forehead. The sensation feels oddly real, somehow heightened by my uncertainty. I shake my head and walk out of the station, passengers rushing towards the turnstiles behind me. As I walk home, I look carefully for moths everywhere I can think to, but no matter how much I look, I can't seem to find any. The moths are nowhere to be seen.

AFTER THE MOON

月の後

We lived in a small apartment thirteen minutes from Tsukamoto station. The exterior was made of large cement blocks and supports. Some walls were covered with tiles in bright primary colors. The inside had pale linoleum flooring. There was a bedroom, an office, and separate rooms for the toilet and tub. The living room had one exterior wall that was made of opaque glass brick. The stove was gas, had three burners and a small broiler designed for use with a single piece of fish. There was no refrigerator. There were, altogether, thirty-one other units of varying sizes. None came with an air-conditioner. Pets were allowed, but carried an extra fee of three-thousand yen per month. Grace called it Legoland.

I let Grace pick where we lived. No, Grace had opinions about where we lived, and I did not. We were together because we had nowhere better to be. My concerns were: could I walk to the station? how many times must I transfer on the way to work? could our combined salaries cover the rent comfortably? Grace's concerns were: are the floors tatami and smell like the bedding in a hamster cage? does the apartment look too Japanese to be my home? is it possible to order delivery that isn't ramen or Pizza Hut? can I have a cat?

We paid the pet fee, but we never did get a cat.

We furnished the apartment like this: Grace asked what colors I liked; Grace picked furniture that paired well with those colors. We split the cost down the middle. She lent my choices additional weight in the office because I would sometimes work on my translations at home. I did most of my work in the middle of the night, while she was sleeping. I hadn't slept much in

years. Grace put a vanity in the bedroom and hung sconces on either side. We helped each other with the bedframe. I held the pieces tight and Grace pounded them together. I insisted on as many pieces of glass furniture as possible. Grace said this was impractical, but bought me a glass desk anyway. We planted basil, rosemary, and mint in metal buckets in the kitchen. I assembled a table and helped her hang a Van Gogh print above the toilet. Grace hung shelves and a painting of a cat staring at the moon in my office. I kept a bottle of Talisker on my desk and always left behind rings I had to spray with windex in the mornings. Grace hid it in the closet whenever we had parties.

We didn't meet many people. My best friend said he would visit from Tokyo once, then twice, and then pretended to be busy. We lied to our employers and said we were engaged. All my coworkers were women, and all her coworkers were men. Yuki, my 39-year-old secretary, had hands that broke out in hives whenever she was stressed. She had two children with a Swiss insurance salesman and divorced him. She was an ethnic Korean. She couldn't vote, and didn't receive child support. I was much younger than she was. We invited her to our Christmas party, tried to cook for twelve people with nothing but our three-burner stove. Everyone brought a box of cookies from the bakery by the station. My boss described the decor of my office with a Japanese word I couldn't understand. When I looked it up later my dictionary said it meant *surreal*. Yuki said we had a lovely home and that I must be very happy. She wore gloves the entire evening. They were navy and didn't match her dress. The next morning was cardboard recycling day, and I carried three empty Pizza Hut boxes to the curb.

We took a train from Osaka to Kyoto and a man in his thirties sat on the bench across from us.

He looked at Grace, at Grace's blonde hair, and then at me, and asked if we were American. Grace said that we were. He asked us how many guns we owned, and I smirked, lied and said many. He moved to another car, and Grace told me that I shouldn't make foreigners seem worse than they already are. I slept on the couch sometimes.

The insulation in our apartment was terrible. It was probably the glass wall. As soon as January hit, a chill descended on our living room. Even the floors were icy. The herbs in the kitchen withered and died. I asked Grace if we should bother replanting them. She smiled and said no, and went back to ironing her blouses. I ran late on a deadline at work and brought a stack of folders home so I could proofread. Grace was on the couch, reading her third-graders' winter break journals. I offered her a cup of tea, and she said that would be lovely. When I poured water into the cup, the heat splintered and cracked the glass. Boiling water rushed over the counter. Grace looked at me, and I looked back at her. We stared at each other for a while, not moving, steam still rushing towards the ceiling.

We began to gain weight. I told Grace to stop using butter as an ingredient in everything. She asked me to stop drinking and deep-frying. I started running in the mornings, and Grace complained that I was too loud getting out of bed. I relapsed and took up smoking again. In March, we went to go see the cherry blossoms. They were pink and white and there were petals everywhere. We bought cherry blossom ice cream. We took the train home and a man tried to give Grace his seat. When she looked confused, he pointed to a picture of a pregnant woman on the priority seating sign. Grace flushed red and shook her head. That night we went to Osaka castle and laid on a tarp beneath the full moon and the blossoms. She rested her head on my chest

and I closed my eyes and couldn't remember ever having been happy in quite the same way. Grace asked me if I would want to marry her even if I knew we would be divorced in five years. I asked her why five years, and she nuzzled her head against my shoulder and didn't say anything. We cuddled but didn't have sex, and turned on our new air conditioner for the first time. Everything in our lives felt heavier.

I went shopping and went through a pack of Seven Stars on a Thursday afternoon. I was writing a story about an astronaut, a sick girl, a urologist. I couldn't quite figure out the details. I kept recording facts about the distance between the Earth and the Moon. I lit incense and paced in the kitchen. The sun sank low, scattered orange across the flooring. A pair of sneakers dangled from a power line. I remembered that Japanese people sometimes left behind shoes as a way to indicate a suicide, but then realized no one could possibly have committed suicide on top of a power line. I felt ridiculous.

I became obsessed with works of autobiographical fiction. I reread *Norwegian Wood* eight times. I ordered the lunch special at a Turkish restaurant and tried to talk like the protagonist. The waiter looked at me like I was insane and brought me a salad covered in a sunset-colored dressing. For some reason I couldn't make myself read any new books. My boss invited the children of our employees to the office for Easter, and Yuki's daughter asked me why a rabbit brought people eggs. I didn't have an answer for her. Grace's third-graders put on a play, a theatrical rendition of Princess Kaguya. Grace teared up slightly when the princess returned to the moon. I wrapped my arm around her shoulders until it was time to applaud.

The Moon is three-hundred eighty-four thousand four hundred kilometers away from the Earth. This is equal to two-hundred thirty-eight thousand nine hundred miles. From the moon, the Earth looks as though it has phases, and half or more is often hidden by shadow. It's as though a dark cloud has swallowed half the world. I thought about the amount of time it would have taken a child to fall to earth from the moon. Magical or not, the journey seemed like it had to be infinite.

In summer I lost my appetite. It was the heat or the cigarettes or the humidity. I drank iced coffee in the morning and worked overtime. Sometimes, on the way home, I would see a family of stray cats. There was often an empty can of tuna nearby. The cats were more attached to food than I was. Grace took her students on a trip to a dairy farm in the mountains above Kobe. They learned about cheese and milk and cows and even got to milk one. They were all very excited. On the way down a kid tripped and fell on his face. Blood gushed out of his nose. Grace held his hand and stained her clothes and had to buy a men's T-shirt from a Lawson's in Sannomiya. She wasn't cut out to be a teacher, she said. I should have disagreed, but I was tired.

I went to Tokyo to visit my friend. His life had gotten busier. We went to a reception at an art gallery and drank unfiltered sakè. A soundless loop of footage from the moon landing was projected on a wall. My friend said this was progressive, but images of the past seemed more regressive to me. The video shivered like air in summer. I spent a long time staring at the blackness on the horizon. I couldn't make out any stars and couldn't settle on a reason why. On the bullet train I tried to read *Norwegian Wood* again but never got past the first chapter. I couldn't tell if fiction was reminding me of reality, or if I just wanted it to.

Our contracts ended and we decided not to renew. I put in for two weeks of vacation, planned to cash out early. Yuki told me she was sad to see me go. On my last day, she gave me a glass calligraphy pen. She told me I would have to buy the ink myself. I had never owned a calligraphy pen, so I asked what kind of ink I needed. All she said was Saa. We gave notice at our apartment complex, tried to sell as much furniture as possible. Grace took photos of all the rooms and posted advertisements on Craigslist. The bookshelves, paintings, the couch and the rug. Everything but the bed frame disappeared in short order. A man in dark glasses knocked on our door. He was with the guarantor company, he said, and wanted to make sure we paid our last month's rent on time. I told him this wouldn't be a problem. He crushed a cigarette under his heel and left it on our doorstep. It smoldered slightly on the concrete. We made arrangements for the air conditioner to be taken away last.

I finished my story, but it wasn't about an astronaut anymore. I wrote five pages of facts about the moon, wrote and deleted a page about Soviet space dogs. I wrote that love was like an accidental collision between satellites that become trapped in one another's orbit, but I wasn't sure if that was something that was physically possible. I tried to write a second draft with the pen Yuki gave me, but the ink kept running out and my writing was barely legible. Instead I saved the document on my computer under the title TIDES. Grace said this wasn't a great title but that she couldn't think of anything better. I asked her what she wanted to eat, and we gave up and ordered Pizza Hut again. There wasn't anything else that would deliver at midnight anyway.

We had to get rid of the bed frame. It was too late to pay for sanitation to take it away, so we would have to abandon it. I suggested the riverbank down the road, but Grace thought it was

unconscionable to litter in a public space. That was the word she used—*unconscionable*. We decided to leave it hidden behind the apartment complex. We waited until one in the morning and broke it into pieces. We lost the IKEA tool and smashed wood apart with a hammer. We crept down the stairs, through the thin gravel yard beneath the first floor apartments. I ducked so no one would see me if they looked out the window. We left the wood stacked in a square outcropping, surrounded by empty beer cans and weary blades of grass. The fragments and splinters seemed appropriate to leave there, somehow, in a gravel lot surrounded by gray. Cicadas wound up and wound down. The wind picked up and cleared away the clouds. Moonlight reflected off the tile on the side of the building, and I stared at Grace. She stared back at me. For a brief moment, the night was dazzling.