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村上春樹の短編集「中国行きへのスロウ・ボート」の英訳：「中国行きへのスロウ・ボート」、「貧乏な叔母さんの話」、「ニューヨークの炭鉱の悲劇」

A Select English Translation of Murakami Haruki's Short Story Collection "A Slow Boat to China": "A Slow Boat to China", "A Poor Aunt Story," and "New York Mining Disaster"

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## 序文 Preface

Before I set out with an idea of what I would do with this project, I knew I wanted to translate something into English. I just love reading things in Japanese. At first, I looked through some manga I owned, thinking that would be a fun challenge. It probably would not have been as easy as it first appeared, as I would have to learn all the slang and contemporary Japanese manga is known for, but nothing really inspired me. After talking with Qiu Sensei, she recommended her copy of Murakami's "A Slow Boat to China," and I finally felt an inspiration. I have enjoyed reading some of his more famous works both in and outside of class, but always in English. To have the opportunity to work through his literature in the original Japanese seemed like an opportunity I could not pass up. Even though I thought at first it might be beyond my ability, I was encouraged by Qiu Sensei to give it a try and I quickly became enraptured.

The three stories I translated were "A Slow Boat to China," "A Poor Aunt Story," and "New York Mining Disaster." All three I have never heard of before. The first is about a man trying to make sense of his relationship with China through recollections with three Chinese people he met in Tokyo during his life. The second is a story about an author who wants to write about a poor aunt, and then finds one attached to his back. The last is a story about a man surrounded by death and his friend who likes to go to the zoo when it rains. As I will go on to explore more in my reflections on each, they all tell the story of a man trying to figure out his place in world, but through very interesting means. And I think that is the appeal of Murakami's work. While using standard Japanese, he pushes it to its limit, trying to convey these complex, absurd ideas within the confines of language. When translating it, the challenges were two-fold. First, does the literal Japanese say? Second, what does Murakami mean? When I first started, I tried to translate as literally as possible, but as the stories grew more absurd, more liberties needed to be taken. And the two were often intertwined, as only a full understanding over every single grammar point in each sentence would the meaning be somewhat clear. And often time there was nuance that could not be one to one translated into English. But that being said, I did try to keep some of the strangeness of his works, as trying to eliminate that to make the translation flow better would lose some of the effect of reading Murakami.

Overall, this project was a pleasure to complete. I learned so much just about how to form interesting sentences and how to use countless new words. But above all I think I showed myself that I am capable of reading and understanding Japanese literature in Japanese, something I have always wanted to do. As a capstone project showing my growth as a student here, who could not even read kana four years ago, I truly take pride in this work. With more time and experience, perhaps these translations could be more polished, more accurate, but right now, I could not be happier with how they turned out.





## A Slow Boat to China

“I want to give you a ride on a slow boat to China. A reservation for just the two of us...” - An old song

1

I wonder when I met my first person from China.

This essay will, in a way, depart from the archeological doubts that surround me. Already much analysis is being done labeling various artifacts, dividing them into different categories.

So, when did I meet my first person from China?

I estimate that it must be around 1959 or 1960. Either works. There is no point in comparing the differences between the two. One is not more accurate than the other. I find that the years 1959 and 1960 resemble a pair of ugly twins, both wearing matching suits that hardly fit them. Even if I could ride in a time machine to return to those years, I feel it would take a great deal of effort to distinguish one from the other.

Even so, my work patiently continues. The borders of the dig site ever expand, but now in small numbers some new artifacts have begun to surface.

Yes, it must have been the year when Johanson and Patterson competed for the heavyweight championship title. If that's the case, I would just need to head to the local library and flip to the page in an old newspaper almanac. Then this can all be over.

The next morning, I rode my bike to the local library.

For some reason next to the entrance was a small chicken coop. The five chickens inside were in the middle of eating a somewhat late breakfast or a somewhat early lunch. It was such a nice day I decided to take a seat on the pavement before I went inside and lit up a cigarette. As I smoked, I watched the chickens eat their feed. The chickens quite hurriedly picked at their food trough. They were so restless the scene of their meal resembled an old newsreel with too few frames.

As I finished my cigarette, I was certain something changed within me. I don't know why. But while I was unsure why, the new me, separated by five chickens and a cigarette, posed two new questions for me.

The first: who really cares to know the exact date I met my first person from China? And the other: is there anything else I should share with that newspaper almanac left in the sunny reading room?

They were reasonable questions. I smoked one more cigarette in front of the chicken coup, and then got on my bike, bidding farewell to the library and the chicken coup. And that's why, like the birds who fly through the skies unburdened by names, my recollection need not be burdened with dates.

However, my memory usually lacks dates. My memory is awfully unclear. It's so unclear, there are even times I feel I'm trying to prove something to someone. But, when I finally figure out whatever the hell I was going to prove, I have no idea what it is. Maybe it is impossible to convey what my uncertainty is trying to prove?

Anyways, perhaps I should say in that kind of state my memory is startlingly vague. It also can turn the former into the later, replacing reality for the imaginary, and mixes together my eyes with the eyes of others. I might not be able to call this thing a memory. That's why out of

all the things I saw and experienced throughout my time in grade school (during that six year period of the comically tragic sun set of the post war democracy), there are only two things left I remember. The first, a story about a Chinese person; the second, a baseball game that took place on an afternoon of summer break. That game I played center and suffered a concussion in the bottom of the third. Of course, I have no idea why that happened suddenly. Our team could only use a corner of the field at the local high school, which is the main cause of my concussion. Essentially I chased after a fly ball over center at full speed and my face crashed into a basketball hoop.

I awoke on a bench under a grapevine, with the sky already getting dark, as the smells of the water sprinkled across the dry field and the leather of my new glove serving as my pillow reached my nose. Then came the weak pain from my head. I heard I was chatting about something. I have no idea. My friends who remained to wait for me embarrassingly told me what happened after I passed out. This is what I said: *I'm fine, if We are just brushing off dirt, we can still eat it.*

I still don't know where those words came from. Maybe I dreamed about them. On the other hand, it might be the dream where the bread I brought for lunch tumbled down when I was halfway up the stairs. Other than that, there are barely any other scenes that seem to be related to those words.

Since then, twenty years have passed and even now that phrase rolls around in my head.

*I'm fine, if we are just brushing off the dirt, we can still eat it.*

As I keep this phrase in my head, I try to think about the path I must take as a person with my own singular existence. And these thoughts naturally lead me to one point --- death. For me

thinking about death seems awfully vague work. And yet for some reason, death makes me think about the Chinese.

2

There was an elementary school for Chinese children on the hillside of a portside city (I have completely forgotten the name so I will call it the Chinese elementary school from now on. I hope you will allow me to use this fine name). I went there because I was assigned that hall to take mock exams. The school was far from the other locations, and I was the only one selected from my class to go to it. I do not know the reason. I wonder if it was an administrative error. The rest of my class was assigned to closer locations.

Chinese elementary school?

I tried asking around everyone I could find if they knew anything about this school. No one knew a single thing. The only thing I know is that it took thirty minutes by train to reach it from our school district. As I was not the kind of kid who would get on a train alone at the time, that must have essentially felt like going to the edge of the world.

The Chinese elementary school at the edge of the world.

A Sunday morning two weeks later, I sharpened a dozen pencils in an awfully dark mood, and stuffed a boxed lunch and a pair of slippers into a plastic school bag as usual? It was just a bit too warm for an autumn day, but my mother still made me wear a bulky sweater. I rode the train alone, standing by the door as I paid close attention to the view so I wouldn't miss my stop.

I could find the Chinese elementary school without looking at the map printed on the back of my testing ticket. All I had to do was follow the flock of students with boxed lunches

and slippers packed in their bags. There were tens, hundreds of students all walking in the same direction up the steep hill road. The more I thought about it, it was truly a marvelous sight. No one was kicking a ball along the ground, or pulling on a younger kids cap. They all silently walked along. Their bags brought to mind an uneven perpetual motion machine. As I walked up the hill, I started to sweat under my heavy sweater.

As opposed to my vague expectations, it looked practically the same compared with my elementary school, in fact it was even more refined. The long dark hallways, the musty air...all these images that were packed into my head during the past two weeks were completely unfounded. We passed through a fancy iron gate to a stone path lined with shrubbery that gently arched across to the entrance, next to a pond whose water glitters with the light of the sun at nine in the morning. Trees lined the side of the school building, each bearing a sign with a Chinese explanation. There were characters I could read and characters I couldn't. The entrance faced an enclosed, patio-like square sports field and in the corners stood a bust of someone, a white rain gauge, and an exercise bar.

I removed my shoes at the entrance as instructed and went to my assigned classroom. There were exactly 40 pretty fold-up desks lined up in the sunny classroom, each with a piece of paper attached by cellophane tape with our testing numbers written on. My seat was in the front row by the window, or in other words I had the lowest number of everyone in the room.

The black board was fresh, deep green, and on the teachers, podium lay a box of chalk and a flower vase which held a single white chrysanthemum. Everything was clean and in its proper place. On the bulletin board there weren't any drawings or essays hanging up willy-nilly. Maybe they were taken off to not distract the test taking students. After I sat down and lined up my pencils and desk cover, I rested my head on my hands and closed my eyes.

The proctor came in carrying the answer sheets under his arms just fifteen minutes later. He didn't look over forty, but he walked in, slightly dragging his left leg across the floor as he grasped a cane. The cane was made of Sakura wood with a rough finish, something you would buy at the souvenir shops at the beginning of a mountain trail. Then his way of limping appeared too natural, so the only thing that stood out was the shabbiness of his cane. When the forty elementary students saw the instructor, or rather the answer sheets, they instantly fell completely silent.

The proctor went up to the podium and placed down the bundle of answer sheets. Then he rested his cane on the side of the podium, which made a slight sound as it hit the stand. He confirmed there were no empty seats, let out a single cough, and then glanced at his wrist watch. Grabbing the front of his desk to straighten his posture he looked directly up, and for a moment gazed at the corner of the ceiling.

Silence.

That silence continued for just 15 seconds. The nervous elementary school students all gulped as they stared at the answer sheets on the desk while the proctor with the lame leg gazed motionlessly at the ceiling. He was wearing a light grey suit with a white shirt, and a tie so unimpressive you could not help but forget the color and pattern the moment after you saw it. He then took his glasses off, wiped them with a handkerchief, and put them back on.

"I will humbly serve as your proctor." He said humbly. "After the answer sheet is distributed, please place it upside down on your desk. Do not turn it over. Please place both hands on your lap. After I say start, turn over the test so you can see the questions. I will say when there are ten minutes left. Please check your work before you turn it in. The test is over when I say over. Turn your test over and place your hands on your lap. Do you understand?"

Silence.

“Please write your name and testing number first so you do not forget.”

Silence.

He once again checked his watch.

“Well then, we have just ten minutes left. I would like to say something to you all in the meantime. No need to worry. “

The class gave out a sigh of relief.

“I am a Chinese teacher at this Chinese elementary school.”

Ah, yes, that was the first time I had ever met a Chinese person.

He did not seem much like a Chinese person. However, that's a natural thing to say. Until this point, I had never met a single Chinese person.

“In this class room,” he continued, “Chinese students have studied with all heart just like you all. .... As you all know, China and Japan are neighboring countries. And to live well we should all be friendly with our neighboring countries, don't you agree?”

Silence.

“Of course, our countries have many things in common, and many things that are not. There are things we share a mutual understanding on, and things that we do not. Do you not think even the same applies to your friends? Even among the best of friends, there are things you cannot understand about each other. Don't you think so? Even between two countries that is the same. However, I believe that only with great effort, can we surely become good friends. But in order to do that we must first respect each other. That is the first step.”

Silence.

“For example, think about it like this. Suppose a few Chinese children came to your school to take a test. So just like you are now, the Chinese children will all be sitting at your desks. Please think of it like that.”

Hypothesis.

“Monday morning you all come to school. You sit at your desks. What then? The desks are covered in graffiti and scratches, chewing gum sticks to the bottom of the seats, and one of your slippers is missing from inside the desk. How would that make you feel?

Silence.

“For example, you” as he pointed directly at me. Me, who had the lowest testing number. “Would you be happy about that?”

Everyone was looking at me.

My face turned bright red as I shook my head in a panic.

“Can you respect Chinese people?”

I once again shook my head.

“That's why,” he began as he once again faced the class. Everyone's eyes also turned back to the podium. “You cannot do things like graffiti the desk, stick gum under the seat, or play with the items underneath the desk. Do you all understand?”

Silence.

“Chinese Students usually respond louder than that”

“Yes,” replied forty elementary students. No, just thirty-nine students. I could not manage to open my mouth.

“If it's alright, please raise your head and sit up straight.”

We raised our heads and sat up straight.



“Now hold onto that pride”

Twenty years later, I completely forgot the results of that test. All I can recall are the shape of the elementary school children walking up the hill slope and the words of the Chinese professor.

After that, during the fall of my third year of high school, six to seven years later, I walked up the same slope on a similar relaxing Sunday afternoon with a female classmate. I had fallen for this girl. I did not know what she thought of me. Anyways this was our first date, walking back after we had gone to the library together. Right around the midpoint of the path we went to a cafe and drank coffee. Then I told her the story of the Chinese elementary school. When I finished my story, she giggled.

“Weird,” she said. “I also took a test the same day at the same school.”

“No way.”

“Really,” she said as she poured cream over the side of the thin cup. “But it must have been a different classroom. There wasn’t a speech like that.”

She took her spoon and stirred her coffee a few times, looking deeply into the cup.

“Was the teacher proctoring your exam Chinese?”

She shook her head. “I don't remember. But I wasn’t really thinking about that.”

“Did you draw any graffiti?”

“Graffiti?”

“On the desks.”

With her lips attached to the rim of the cup, she thought about it for a few moments.

“Huh, I wonder. I can’t really remember,” she said as she faintly smiled. “It really was a long time ago.”

“Yeah but, was it a really pretty, shiny desk? Do you remember?” I asked.

“Yeah, I think it might have been”, she replied seemingly without any interest.

“I mean, didn’t it have a “shiny” smell? You know, in the classroom? I can’t really put it into words, but it was like there was a thin veil. So...” I say, as I grab my spoon with my right hand, and think a little. “Then there were forty desks, all shiny and clean, and the black board was a pretty shade of green. “

We say nothing for a few moments.

“You really think you didn’t draw any graffiti? Can you remember?” I once again ask.

“No, I really can’t,” she says smiling. “When you say that I feel that maybe I did, but it was so long ago...”

Perhaps what she was saying was correct. No one would remember if they drew any graffiti on a desk, they sat at a year ago. And it's such a long time ago, it doesn't really matter why she can't remember.

After I took her home, I closed my eyes on the bus and tried to recall the shape of a younger Chinese boy. A Chinese boy who Monday morning would discover someone's graffiti on my desk.

Silence.

3

Because my high school was in a port town, there were a fairly high number of Chinese people around. Not that they were any different for us. Nor did they have any real characteristics clearly in common. In the sense that they were all each incredibly different, were we and them

the same. I always feel that the strangeness of individuals surpasses all categorizations and stereotypes.

In my class there were some Chinese people. There were some with good grades and some with bad. Some were jovial and some quiet. Some who lived in mansions and some who lived in dark, single room apartments. However, there was no one I ever got close with. Generally speaking, I was not the kind who could get close with just anyone. No matter if they are Chinese, Japanese, or anything else.

There is someone who I ran into ten years later, but I think I will save that story for later.

The scene shifts to Tokyo.

Continuing on, or in other words, ignoring the Chinese students in high school I never really talked to, the next Chinese person I got to know was this quiet female college student over the course of a part time job during the spring of sophomore year. She was nineteen like me at the time, petite, and one could say she was very attractive. We worked together for three weeks.

She worked passionately. This made me also work passionately, but whenever I looked to the side, I always felt the nature of our enthusiasm was completely different. Or in other words, where I thought whenever doing anything, there is value in doing it with passion, her passion reaches closer to the root of human existence. I can't explain it clearly, but her passion had a sense of strange urgency to it, as if it was the only thing holding her everyday life together. Most people can't match her pace and get frustrated halfway through. I was the only one who could work with her without getting into a fight.

That being said, we were not especially close. The first time we really talked was a week after we started working together. That afternoon, she fell into a panic thirty minutes in. It was the first time she got like that. At first, she just made a little mistake, but soon it grew bigger and

bigger in her head and before long it turned into an unstoppable, chaotic mess. The entire time she did not say a word, standing in place, unable to move. She gave me the impression of a boat slowly sinking into the evening sea.

I stopped everything I was doing, sat her down in a chair, opened her clenched fingers one by one, and made her drink a cup of hot coffee. Then I explained she did not do anything wrong. It was not a serious error, and even if she needed to correct it, it would not mean she was falling behind in work. As she gulped down the coffee, she seemed to calm down a little.

“Sorry,” she said.

“It's fine,” I said.

After that we would chat a little. She told me she was Chinese.

We worked in a dark, narrow storehouse for a small publishing company. Simply put, it was very dull. I would receive the order slip and carry the indicated number of books to the front. She would bind the books with a rope and check the inventory. That was really it. To make matters worse, there was not a shred of central heating, so we had to constantly fidget and move around to avoid freezing to death.

When we had lunch break, we would take our hot meal outside, and pass the hour skimming the newspaper or magazines as we warmed our bodies up. Sometimes we felt like talking. Her father ran a small importation business out of Yokohama, where most of the goods were articles of clothing bought cheap from Hong Kong. Even though she was Chinese, she was born in Japan, and had never been to China, Taiwan, or Hong Kong. The elementary school she went to was Japanese, not the Chinese elementary school. She was enrolled at a women's university and hoped to be an interpreter. She coexists with her older brother who has an apartment in Komagome. Or rather, to borrow her expression, she tumbled into his apartment. It

was because she could not see eye to eye with her father. That's approximately all the information I could get out of her.

The second week of March, we had freezing rain mixed with hail rain down. On the evening of our last day, we accepted our salaries from the accounting section, and I invited the girl to a disco I had been to many times in Shinjuku. Just five seconds after she tilted her head, she happily said, "But I don't really know how to dance."

"It's easy," I said.

We first went to a restaurant and after we slowly worked through some beers and a pizza we danced for just two hours. A nice warmth rose throughout the hall, as the smell of sweat and someone's burnt incense drifted about. When we sweat, we sat down and drank a beer; when we stopped sweating, we went back to dancing. Sometimes the strobe lights would flash on. she looked great in the strobe light, like a photograph out of an old album.

We left the disco after we danced to many songs. March nights were still cold, but even so a hint of the coming spring could be felt there. Our bodies were still warm, so we walked aimlessly around town with coffees in hand. We peaked inside a game center, drank our coffee, and started walking again. There was still half of spring break left and above all else we were nineteen. We might have walked all the way to the Tamagawa River.

My watch just turned to point to ten twenty, and the girl said she needed to go back soon. "I need to head back by eleven."

"That's really strict."

"Yeah, my older brother is annoying."

"Don't forget your shoes."

"Shoes?" She walked five, six steps before she gave an embarrassed laugh.

“Ah, Cinderella. I'll be fine and won't forget.”

We climbed the steps of Shinjuku station, and sat on a bench, sitting side by side.

“Can I ask you out again?”

“Yeah.” While biting her lip she nodded a few times. “I don't mind at all.”

I asked for her phone number and wrote it down on the back of a paper match from the disco with a ballpoint pen. The train came and picked up the girl, and we said goodbye. This was fun, thanks, see you again. When the doors closed and the train took off, I lit a cigarette and watched the edge of the green train disappear.

Leaning on a pillar I finished my cigarette. As I smoked, I don't know why but I noticed something off in my mood. I stamped out my cigarette with the sole of my shoe and then lit another. Various sounds of the city oozed out of the pale gloom. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and slowly shook my head. But even then, my feeling did not return to normal.

There should not have been anything wrong. Even if it wasn't perfectly excluded, for a first date, I think it went pretty well. I at least went through the process properly.

But even so, there was something mixed up in my head. It was a small something, something I couldn't put into words. Something that is certainly off somewhere inside me. That's what I understood. Something was off.

It took fifteen minutes for me to realize what that something was. It took fifteen minutes, and at least I finally noticed I made an awful mistake. A foolish, meaningless mistake. But it was just as grotesque as it was meaningless. In other words, I accidentally put her on the Yamanote line in the wrong direction.

I had no idea why I did that. My lodging was in Mejiro, so if I put her on the same train that would have been fine. Was it beer? That might have been it. Or perhaps I was thinking too

much about myself. Anyways, something flowed to the wrong direction. The station clock pointed to ten forty-five. She probably won't make it before curfew. If she could just notice my mistake before I did and switch trains... but I had a vague hunch that this was probably not the case. Even if she noticed sooner, no, even if she noticed it before the doors closed....

The girl showed up at Komagome station just ten minutes after eleven. When she saw me on the other side of the stairs, she gave a feeble laugh.

"Looks like I made a mistake," I said to her as we faced each other. She was silent.

"I don't know why, but I made a mistake. I can't believe it."

"..."

"That's why I waited. I wanted to apologize to you."

With her hands thrust into her coat pockets, she pursed her lips.

"Was that really a mistake?"

"Really... of course it was. This wouldn't have happened otherwise, you know."

"I think you did it on purpose."

"Me?" I had no idea what she was trying to say. "Why do you think I would do such a thing?"

"No idea."

It seemed like her voice was about to vanish at any moment. I took her arm and sat her on a bench, and then lowered myself next to her. The girl stretched out her legs, staring at the tip of her white shoes.

"Why do I think I did this on purpose?" I tried to ask one more time.

"I think you might be mad."

"Mad?"

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because... I said I needed to go back early.”

“I would not be healthy if I got upset every time a girl said she needed to leave early.”

“Still, I think our time together was boring.”

“Not at all. Wasn’t it I who invited you?”

“But it was boring. Wasn’t it?”

“No, it wasn’t boring at all. It was a lot of fun. I’m not kidding.”

“Yes, you are. Spending time with me wasn’t fun at all. Even if that wasn’t a mistake, you wanted to do that deep down. “

I let out a sigh.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said. “This wasn’t the first time this happened, and it definitely won’t be the last.”

Two tears gathered under her pupils, and her coat made a soft sound as it dropped onto her lap.

I had no idea what the hell I should do. With our posture unchanged we remained silent. That silence would be punctuated by the coming of countless trains spitting out their passengers. Then their figures would disappear at the top of the stairs, and silence would once again return.

“Please. Let me be alone.”

Without saying a word, I continued my silence.

“Really it’s fine,” she continued. “Honestly speaking, my time with you was a lot of fun. It’s been a while since I’ve had this much fun. That’s why I’m really glad. I think many things seemed to go really well. And when I was placed on the wrong side of the Yamanote line, I felt



that it was ok. That it was some kind of mistake. But..." She got choked up on her words, and her teardrops began to stain the coat on her lap black. "But you know, after I passed Tokyo Station, I just got fed up with everything. I didn't want to go through these things any longer. I don't want to dream any longer."

This was the first time she spoke for this long. After she finished, another silence descended between us.

"I don't think that's good," I say. The chilly evening wind blew through the evening papers, dispersing them off the edge of the platform.

She brushed aside her bangs wet with tears and smiled. "It's fine. In the first place this isn't the place I should be anyways."

I had no idea whether this place she spoke of referred to somewhere in the country called Japan, or a hunk of rock floating around in the surrounding darkness of space. Staying silent, I took her hand, placed it on my lap, and gently placed my own hand on top of it. Her hand was warm, and her palms were damp. That meager warmth awoke some old memories within my heart that had long been forgotten. I boldly opened my mouth.

"Hey, want to try one time to start over from scratch? ... I barely know anything about you. But hey, I would like to learn, I think. I bet the more I know about you, the more I'll come to like you.

The girl did not say a word. Only her fingers in the center of my hand moved a little bit.

"I think it will still go well," I say.

"Really?"

"Probably," I say. "I can't promise anything. But we will work together. And also, I think I want to be more honest."

“What should I do?”

“I want to meet you tomorrow. How about that?”

She silently nodded in agreement.

“I’ll call.”

After she wiped away the remains of her tears with her fingertip, she returned both hands to her coat pockets. “..... Thank you. Sorry about everything.”

“There’s no need for an apology. It was my mistake.”

Then, that night, we split up. Sitting alone on the bench I lit my last cigarette and threw the empty box into a wastebasket. My watch was already close to pointing towards twelve.

I noticed the second offence I committed nine hours later. It was too foolish, too fatal a mistake. In addition to the empty box, I threw away the paper match where I jotted down her phone number. Her number did not appear anywhere: not on the registry at the part time job, not in the phone book. I have not seen the girl since.

The girl was the second Chinese person I ever met.

4

Now for the story of the third Chinese person I met.

He was, like I wrote before, an acquaintance from high school. A close friend of a close friend. We talked occasionally.

Our meeting wasn’t dramatic in any sense. It wasn’t as dramatic at the meeting of Stanley and Livingston, nor was the light and the dark divided like in the chance meeting of Admiral

Yamashita and Vice-Admiral Percival, nor was it full of glory like the chance meeting of Caesar and the sphinx, nor did even sparks fly like with the chance meeting of Goethe and Beethoven.

If I was to give an example of some historical meeting (though I heavily doubt if one could even call my meeting historical), the closest would be the meeting of two soldiers on the island of a fierce battle in the pacific theatre I read about in a magazine a long time ago as a young boy. One soldier was Japanese, one was American. They both strayed from their home units into an empty clearing in the jungle and bumped into each other. Both were so stunned they could not even raise their guns, until one of the soldiers (which one I wonder) suddenly gave the other the two-finger boy scout salute. The other instinctively saluted back. With their gun lowered, they each silently returned to their unit.

I had turned twenty-eight. Six years had passed since I got married. In that six-year period we buried three cats. Some hopes had burned up, some anguish had been wrapped in bulky sweaters and buried. All of this occurred in the vague, enormous metropolis of Tokyo.

It was a December afternoon that felt like it was wrapped in a chilly membrane. Even without any wind the air felt chilly. Occasionally even the light that spills from between the clouds could not drive away the dark grey shadows of the city. On my way back from the bank, I stopped inside a quiet cafe with a glass facade on Aoyama Street, ordered a coffee, and flipped through the pages of a novel I had just bought. Once I was bored with the book I raised my head, saw a car relentlessly run down the street, and then I returned to my book.

“Hey,” said that man. He then said my name.

“That's you, right?”

Surprised, I raised my eyes from my novel and said that I was. I did not have a recollection of his face. He looked about the same age as me, but even though he was dressed

neatly with a very nice navy blue blazer and a colorful regimental tie, he gave the impression that everything was unraveling bit by bit. His looks were the same. He seemed well put together, but under closer inspection he was lacking something. The expression on his face looked as if he had to forcibly scrape it together from pieces strewn across somewhere for the occasion. That's what I felt. Like plates lined up unevenly on a makeshift party table.

“Mind if I sit?”

“Please,” I said. I said nothing else. After he lowered himself as we faced each other, he took out a cigarette and a lighter from his pocket, and without lighting it he placed them on the table.

“Do you not remember?”

“No, I don't,” I confessed without giving it any further thought. “I’m sorry but its always been like that. I have trouble remembering people’s faces.”

“That’s you wanting to forget past things. You are definitely subconsciously trying to forget, you know.”

“That might be true,” I recognize. That certainly might be the case.

When the waitress brought the water over, he ordered an American coffee. He said to make it very light.

“I have a weak stomach, so much so that my doctor told me to stop drinking coffee and smoking,” he said. As an impeccable, refreshed smile floated on to his lips, he tinkered with the cigarette box on the table. “Yes, continuing our conversation from before, I ,for the same reason as you, I can’t help but remember everything. It's such a strange thing. As I hopelessly try to forget more and more, steadily more and more comes back to me. It's awful.”

Half of my consciousness was being bored by this interruption to my time alone, while the other half was starting to be pulled into the conversation.

“Furthermore, I actually remember things quite vividly: from the weather, temperature, to even the smell. Sometimes I don't even understand what's going on. I sometimes think, where in the world is the true me living? Do you ever feel like that?”

“Not really,” I didn’t intend it like that, but my words came off sounding cold. But he did not seem bothered. After happily nodding in agreement a few times he continued to talk.

“Because of that, you must actually remember things really well. When I was walking across the street, and I took one look at you on the other side of the glass I knew immediately. Did my calling out to you bother you?”

“No,” I said. “But why can I not remember? I feel awful about it.”

“Don't worry about it. I was the one who forced myself on you. I don’t want you to worry about it. When the time comes, you’ll remember. I’m sure.”

“Could I have your name? I don’t really like being quizzed.”

“It's not a quiz. Or in other words, it's the same if I didn't even have a name. I'm certain I had a name back then. The shiny and unspoiled one,” he said, with a big chuckle. “Maybe you’ll remember, maybe you won’t. Honestly speaking, whichever one you decide on has barely anything to do with me.

The coffee was brought over, and he continued, sipping it unappetizingly. I could not grasp the true meaning behind his words.

“Too much water flowed under the bridge, right? It was in our high school English textbook. Remember?”

High school?

“So many things change in a decade. Of course, the person I am today is only possible because of the person I was ten years ago, but I can't really put my finger on what changed.

Somewhere something seemed to change within me. What do you think?”

“I don't know.”

He crossed his arms and sat back in his chair, and this time an expression that said “How can I explain this to him” appeared.

“Are you married?” he inquired of me as he sat with this posture.

“Yes.”

“Kids?”

“None.”

“I have one. A boy.”

The talk of children ended with that, and we then sat in deep silence. When I took a cigarette to my mouth, he lit it for me with his lighter.

“By the way what kind of work do you do?”

“I do a little bit of business,” I responded.

“Business?” he said after a few moments of leaving his mouth gaping open.

“Nothing really important though,” I said, slurring my words.

“But I'm so surprised. You, doing business? You never looked the type though.”

“Really?” I said.

“Weren't you always reading books back then?” he mysteriously continued.

“I mean I still read now,” I said with a wry smile.

“Encyclopedias?”

“Encyclopedias?”

“Yes, do you have any?”

“No.” I shake my head, still not understanding why he was asking this.

“You don’t read them?”

“Well, I guess I’d read them if I had them.”

“Actually, I’m selling them door to door right now.”

The half of my heart that was interested in him up to now vanished within an instant. I let out a sigh and smothered my cigarette in the ashtray. I felt my face growing red.

“Oh, I’d like to, but I have no money now. I just started paying off a loan.”

“Hey, hey, for Christ’s sake. There’s no need to get embarrassed. I’m also poor. We are both looking at the same sky. I’m not trying to sell you an encyclopedia or anything. As a matter of fact, I’m not supposed to sell to Japanese people. That’s the agreement.

“Japanese people?”

“Yeah, I’m focusing on selling to Chinese people. I pick out all the Chinese families living in the Tokyo metropolitan area and go door-to-door to everyone. I don’t know who came up with it, but it’s a great idea. And the sales aren’t bad. I ring the doorbell and pull out a business card. That’s it. What to call it, our shared connection in a foreign place...”

A key suddenly flipped inside my head.

“I remember!”

“Really?”

I said the name that suddenly came to mind. My Chinese acquaintance from high school.

“I still don’t understand why I ended up in this situation of selling encyclopedias door to door to Chinese people.”

Of course, I didn't understand. From what I remember, his upbringing was not bad, and I was pretty sure he got better grades than me. He was also more popular with the girls.

"That was a long, dim, unremarkable story. You would rather not hear it," he said.

I bowed my head silently.

"I don't know why I called you. I must have been out of my mind. Or maybe I was born lacking in the capacity for self-compassion. Whatever it was, wasn't it annoying?"

"No, it's fine. Not a pain at all." We made eye contact across the table. "We will meet again sometime."

We both sank into silence for some time. I smoked what remained of the cigarette, and he sipped what remained of the coffee.

"Well then, I guess I should be going," he said as he tucked away his cigarettes and lighter into his pockets. "I can't afford to waste too much time I've got other things to sell."

"Do you have any pamphlets?"

"Pamphlets?"

"The encyclopedia."

"Oh," he said absentmindedly. "I don't have any right now. Do you want to see it?"

"Yeah, I'd like to take a look."

"I'll mail it to you then. Could you tell me your address?"

I tore out a page of a notebook, wrote my address down and passed it to him. He carefully folded it four times and placed it in his business card case.

"It's a pretty good encyclopedia. A lot of colored pictures. It will definitely be helpful."

"I don't know how long it will take, but I'll definitely buy one when I can."



“That would be great,” A smile like one you would find on an election poster once again appeared on his lips. “But I might have cut ties with the encyclopedia company by then. Maybe I’ll be selling life insurance. Still to Chinese people.”

5.

As a single man who has already lived past thirty, if I ran into a basketball hoop at full speed again, and once again woke up under the grape vines on a baseball glove pillow, what would I call out? I do not know. No, actually, I might say something like this:

“Oi, where am I??”

I realized this on the Yamanote train. I stood in front of the door, tightly gripping my ticket so as not to lose it, staring out at the scenery on the other side of the glass. Our city..., for some reason that scenery was darkening my heart. It's the hazy darkness, like murky coffee jelly, that city dwellers fall into every year like an annual event. The buildings and homes crowded together, and the faintly cloudy sky. The crowds of cars lined up scattering gas about. Cotton curtains line the windows of poor, narrow, wooden apartments (not unlike my own home), and inside there are the activities of countless people. Boundless pride and self-pity. This is the city.

The city was no different from an advertisement hanging inside the train car. It was a copy of an ad offered up to this season's new lipstick. There was no substance anywhere. Just short selling and buying on margin supported by an ever-expanding empire of brokers...

“In the first place,” the girl said, “This is not the place I should be.”

China.

I have read many books about China, from *Shiki*, the historical records of ancient China to *Red Star over China*. Even so, my China is just for my sake. Or, just for myself. That is also my New York, my St. Petersburg, my earth, my space.

The yellow China on the globe. From here on, I doubt I will ever go there. That is not the China for me. I probably won't go to New York or Leningrad. Those places are not for me. My wandering will take place in the back seat of a subway or taxi. My adventure will occur in places like a dentist's waiting room or a bank teller window. Because I can go anywhere, I can go nowhere.

Tokyo.

Then, on that day, in the train car of the Yamanote line, even the city of Tokyo suddenly began to lose its reality. Yes, this was not my place. Words will at some point disappear, and dreams will at some point crumble. As if the boring adolescence that seemed to last for an eternity disappeared somewhere. After everything falls into ruin and their forms disappear, all that will remain is a heavy silence and infinite darkness.

Mistakes..., mistakes are, as the female Chinese college student said (or as a psychiatrist would say), perhaps a paradoxical desire. There's no way to get out.

Still, stuffing my little pride as a faithful and loyal outfielder into the suitcase, I will sit down on the stone steps of the harbor, look off to the horizon, and wait for the form of the slow boat to China that might appear. Then I will think of the shining roofs of China, and their green meadows.

That is why I am no longer afraid of anything. Just as a clean-up hitter is not afraid of an inside shoot ball, and a revolutionary is not afraid of the gallows. If that's really what it takes...

My friends...

My friends, China is too far away.

## 「中国行きへのスロウ・ボート」の感想

「僕」が最初の中国人に出会ったのはいつのことだったろう？「僕」の記憶によるとそれは一九六〇年ぐらいに中国小学校の先生に出会った時だそうだ。しかし、何のためにこの文章が書かれていたのだろうか？最初の質問への答えは簡単に書かれているが、「僕」が書くことに誰が興味を持つ？誰もいない。では、この文章の目的はナレーターの質問に答えることではなく、題名の「中国行きのスロウ・ボート」で中国人と分かり合うことができるようにすることであると思う。

文章の中で「僕」は三人の中国人との偶然の出会いの体験談を語った。それぞれの出会いは「僕」は中国人の相手をわかるように聞いたり相談したりして、結局もう一度も会わないで不確かな記憶しか残っていない。日本と中国の同じことと違うことがあるということと中国人の小学生が日本人の小学生のように学校に通うことが、中国人小学校の教師の話から分かった。十九歳の同級生の中国人女性から、教師から聞いたように踊りに行くとか中国人と一緒に楽しいことをしたという分かり合えることもあるが、その彼女が東京に「居るべきじゃない場所」と感じるという分かり合えないこともあると知った。高校の知り合いから、彼女のように中国人が東京にいても自分の共同体に囲まれていることが分かった。「僕」はこの記憶からできた「中国行きのスロウ・ボート」で中国への距離を渡ろうとしたが結局中国はまだ遠い、「あまりにも遠い」。

でも、この行きたがっている中国は地球儀の中国ではない。つまり、同級生の彼女が東京に居るべきじゃないと感じるように、「僕」にとってその中国は「僕の場所でもない」。行きたがっている中国はむしろ「僕の中国」、あるいは「僕のための中

国」。もしかしたらこの 中国も題名のように記憶と経験からできているのかもしれない。世界中の人は行ったことのない国をメディアや会話、自分の経験などでわかろうとするけれども、文章に書いてあるように結局それぞれのイメージが不完全である。恐らく完璧な分かり合いは無理である。

それでも、日本人として具体的なテーマがあると思う。「僕」は戦後民主主義の六年の間育てられて、小学校の先生が四十歳ぐらいなのにびっこを引いていた。この頃第二次世界大戦の思い出はまだ新たなものかもしれない。教師のびっこが戦争によって起こされたかもしれない。文章に書かれていなかったけれども、「僕」は死から中国人のことを思い起こす。確かなことはわからないが、それは第二次世界大戦の理由であると思う。それ以外に死と中国人は何の関連がある？その戦後の時代に日本人にとって？

「僕」の育った時代は日本の戦中の行為の幽霊が立ち込めていたに違いない。しかし、「僕」は文章の中で中国と日本の関係のところに取り組んでいなかった。第二次世界大戦を考えずに中国人と分かり合えるようにするのは無理である。それで「僕」が文章の最後まで中国はあまりにも遠いと感じていると思う。もしかしたら中国と日本の分かり合いができるかもしれない。それは第二次世界大戦の取り組みさえすればできることだ。

## A Poor Aunt Story

1

It all started on a sunny July afternoon. An extraordinarily nice Sunday afternoon. Even the crumpled piece of chocolate wrapping paper that was thrown on the lawn glittered proudly like a crystal in the bottom of a lake in this kingdom of July. The gentle, opaque light of the pollen looked shy as it slowly danced to the ground.

Coming back from a stroll, my partner and I sat our hips down in the square outside the art gallery and looked up absentmindedly at the bronze statue of a unicorn. The fresh wind of the rainy season that had just begun blew through, unsettling the green leaves and making waves on the surface of a shallow pond. At the bottom of the clear water a few rusted cola cans lay submerged, bringing to mind the ruins from an ancient city long ago. Things like grass-lot baseball teams that all wear the same uniforms, dogs, rental bicycles, and foreigner youths in their jogging shorts crossed before the two of us sitting at the edge of the pond. We could faintly hear a pop song that was as sweet as coffee with too much sugar that rode the wind from a radio someone left on the lawn. It was about things like love lost, or love that seemed to be lost. The light of the sun was soaked in by our arms.

I don't know why that poor aunt impressed me so much that day. She wasn't even around. Even so, in the span of a few hundredths of a second, she became the center of my heart, and the strange, cool feeling has yet to leave it.

The poor aunt?

After I looked around one more time, I looked up at the summer sun. Words blew through the late Sunday afternoon randomly like the wind, or perhaps like the clear trajectory of

a ball. The beginning is always like this. It existed all within that moment, and in the next moment it was gone.

“I want to try to write something about that poor aunt” I tried to say, facing my companion.

“The poor aunt?” She seemed a bit confused. After she took that phrase “The poor aunt” in her palm and rolled it around a few times, she shrugged her shoulders as if she did not understand. “Why about the poor aunt?”

Why the aunt? I had no clue. It was just that something past right through me, something like the shadow of a small cloud.

“I just thought of it. No reason.”

We went silent for a while, searching for words to say. Only the gentle sound of the earth’s rotation bound our two hearts together.

“Are you going to write the story of a poor aunt?”

“Yes. I am going to write the story of the poor aunt.”

“No one is probably going to want to read that story.”

“That might be the case,” I said.

“Even so, are you going to write it?”

“Can’t be helped,” I justified. “I can’t explain it clearly.... Certainly, I might be making the wrong decision. But still, I am the one who is making it. In other words, that's what I mean.”

She silently smiled. I straightened out a crumpled cigarette from my pocket and lit it.

“By the way,” she said, “is this poor aunt your relative?”

“No,” I said.

“My family has one poor aunt. Really. We lived together for some years.”

“Yeah.”

“But I don’t want to write anything about her.”

A different song began playing from the transistor radio. Something about the world being filled with lost love or love about to be lost.

“Well, you don’t even have a single poor aunt,” she continued. “Still, there is something you want to write about a poor aunt. Do you not think that's strange?”

I nod. “Why?”

Just slightly tilting her head, she refrained from responding. While turned around, she let her thin fingertips swim through the water for a long while. I felt like my question trailed her fingertip and was being sucked up by the ruins at the bottom of the pond. Still, even now, I think without a doubt that my question mark lies submerged, being gently polished like a piece of metal, shining vibrantly. Perhaps, it still showers those cola cans with that same question to this day.

Why? Why? Why?

“I don’t understand,” she muttered after a while.

Resting my chin in my hand and taking another puff from my cigarette, I once again looked up at the bronze statue of the unicorns. The two of them faced the flow of time that abandoned them somewhere, raising their four forelimbs over their heads.

“All I know is that people cannot balance a tray on their head when they look up to the sky,” she said. “Like you.”

“Could you be a bit more specific?”

After wiping off the finger she ran through the water with the hem of her shirt a few times, she turned towards the front. "I feel like there is nothing the current you can do to save anything. Not a single thing."

I let out a sigh.

"Excuse me."

"No, it's fine," I said. "Right now, I probably still can't save a cheap pillow."

She smiled once again. "Besides, you don't even have a poor aunt."

That's right. I don't / even have a poor aunt.

This is just like a line from a song.

2

You probably do not have a poor aunt among your relatives. In that case, we will have "not having a poor aunt" as something in common. A strange thing to have in common. A similarity just like a quiet puddle in the morning.

However, at someone's wedding, you have probably caught a glimpse of the figure of a poor aunt. Just like any bookshelf has a book always left unread, or every wardrobe has a shirt that is never put on, every wedding has a poor aunt.

She is barely introduced to anyone and is spoken to by few. She never gives a speech. All she does is sit properly in front of the table like a bottle of old milk. She will make a small, vague sound and eat the consumed soup, use the fish fork to eat the salad, struggle to eat the green beans, and there will not be an ice cream spoon left for her. If you're lucky you should be able to easily stow her present away in the closet, and if you're not you might have to throw it out with the bowling trophy riddled with dust when you move.



She should even be in the wedding albums occasionally pulled out, and look like a vague, weak corpse.

Who is this woman in the photographs here? Hey, she's wearing a pair of glasses in the second row...

“Ah, it's nothing,” the young husband would reply, “it's just my poor aunt.”

She does not have a name. She is just a poor aunt, nothing else.

Of course, we can say names disappear at some time.

But there should be many ways one can make a name disappear. First, there is the type where a name disappears at the same time as a death. This is simple. “The rivers dry up and the fish die out,” or perhaps, “The flames envelop the forest, burning the birds,” ...we mourn their deaths. The next type is like an old television, where it wanders around as it flickers on a white screen, until one day it suddenly disappears in an instant. This is also not bad. It will leave footprints like a lost Indian elephant, but it's certainly not bad. And finally, the last type, where one already loses their name before they die, such as the poor aunts of the world.

But, sometimes I even fall into this poor aunt-ish situation of name loss. In the throng of people in the terminal in the evening, my own destination, address, and the same suddenly disappear from my head. Of course, it's only for a short time, just ten or fifteen seconds.

There are also times like this:

“You can't even remember your name no matter what you do?” someone asks.

“It's fine. Don't worry about it. First of all, it's not that important of a name to begin with.”

He pointed to his Adam's apple a few times. “No, your name is right there.”

At that time, I felt as if I had been buried in the earth, with only my feet sticking out of the ground. Someone then stumbles sometimes at that, and then begins to apologize. “No, that was rude. To only vaguely remember it...”

Now, where did the form of lost names disappear too? In this maze-like city, their chance of survival is without a doubt exceedingly small. Some of them will get run over by transport trucks and end up flattened on the street, some will end up dying on the side of the street because they just did not have any pocket change hand to board the train, and some still will sink to the bottom of a deep river with just their pockets full of pride.

However, those that do survive might finally reach the city of lost names and build an inconspicuous community there for each other. A truly, truly, small city. Then, this signboard will still probably be standing in the entrance:

“Those with no business here **Must Not Enter**”

Those that finally enter without any business will, of course, receive their own modest punishment.

Or, otherwise, they might be prepared, meager punishment for me. There is a small poor aunt that is attached to my back.

I first noticed her existence around the middle of august. It's not that anything happened that made me notice. I just suddenly felt something one day. I just felt the poor aunt on my back.

That was definitely not an unpleasant sensation. It was not like she was an incredibly great weight, nor did she spit out awful breath behind my ears. It was just like she clung to my back like a bleached shadow. Others would have to be paying close attention to notice her clinging to me at all. Even the cats I lived with had observed her with suspicious eyes the first

two or three days, but when they realized she posed no threat to upsetting their territory they got used to her presence.

Some close friends seemed unsettled by the sight. Because sometimes, as we face each other during the height of our drinking, she will take a fleeting glance with her face from behind my back.

“I feel a little uncomfortable.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “She’s not going to hurt you.”

“No, I know that. But still. I feel a little down.”

“Yeah.”

“Where the hell did you carry that thing on your back??”

“Nowhere in particular,” I said. “It’s just that I’m still thinking about some things. That’s it.”

He nodded and gave out a sigh. “I get it. You’ve always been like that.”

“Yeah.”

We half-heartedly continued drinking our whiskey for about an hour.

“Hey,” I asked. “Why are you feeling down?”

“To put it simply, I feel like I am being watched by my mother.”

“Why?”

“Why...” He said troubled. “It’s because the one attached to your back is my mother.”

Some people when they try to formulate those kinds of impressions (because I cannot see her figure), it seems the poor aunt attached to my back is not fixed to a specific form but made of some aether-like substance that forms according to the mental image of each viewer.

For one friend, it was the shape of their Akita dog that died last year of esophagus cancer.

“He was 15, already a feeble age for a dog. But still, esophagus cancer is just an awful way to go.”

“Esophagus cancer?”

“Yeah, cancer that formed in the esophagus. It's awful. Wouldn't want that happening to me. My dog was crying every day, but his voice couldn't come out.”

“Huh?”

“I thought about euthanizing her, but my mother was against it.”

“Why?”

“Who knows. It must have been something with not wanting to dirty her hands,” he said, sounding not the least bit amused. “Anyways for just two months he subsisted off an IV. On the floor of the storage room. It was hell.”

And with that he shut his mouth for a moment.

“It wasn't a valuable dog. He was a coward who would squeal at the sight of people. He was useless. Always making a racket. He also contracted skin disease.”

I nodded.

“He probably should have been born a cicada rather than a dog. He wouldn't be hated even if he chirped, and it's not like cicadas can get esophagus cancer.”

However, the woman behind me was a dog as expected, with a plastic tube protruding from her mouth, attached to my back.

For a real estate agent, the woman was their female elementary school teacher from a while back.

“I think it was 1950, right around when the Korean war started,” he said as he wiped away some sweat from his face with a thick towel. “She took charge of our class for two years. It's pretty nostalgic. Nostalgic, or perhaps, I actually just forgot most of it.”

Looking like he was trying to figure out if I was some kind of relative or something to his female teacher, he offered me his cold barley tea.

“When I try to think about it, she was a pitiful person. She got married in 1943, and her husband got drafted into the army, and then BOOM. And she taught at the elementary school like that, and then got burned by an air raid the following year. It burned her from her left cheek to her left arm.” After he traced a line with his finger tip from his left cheek to his left arm, he took a sip from his barley tea and once again wiped some sweat off his face with the towel. “She looked like she would have been pretty back then, but then she just looked pitiable... her personality also changed somewhat. If she was still alive, she'd be approaching sixty. Huh, 1950.”

This is how a map of streets or seating chart for a wedding is made. The ring of poor aunts centered on my back steadily expands outwards.

But at the same time my friends left me one after the other, like I lost some important things in my life.

“It's not that he's a bad guy,” they say. “It's just every time we meet him, we have to see the annoying face of our mother (or old dog who died of esophagus cancer, or female teacher with burn scars”)

I felt like I was stuck in a dentist's operating chair. It's not that I am appreciated, nor am I despised. Even so they avoided me, and even if we happened to meet coincidentally and they

tried to look for a dignified excuse, they would appear as if they desperately wanted to leave. A girl once honestly told me that being alone with me was pretty uncomfortable.

It wasn't my fault.

"I understand," she said with a pained smile. "If what you're carrying on your back is an umbrella stand or something, I think you can still manage."

Umbrella stand.

Its fine, I thought. I've never been good at socializing, and anyways if I think I have to go on living with an umbrella stand on my back, might I be better off now?

So instead, I found myself dragged into interviews for a few magazines. They would come every other day and take a photo of me and the aunt, and when they said she doesn't photograph well they got angry, inundated her with a mountain of off the mark questions, and left. But I personally would not open a magazine with such an article in it. If I read it I would surely want to strangle myself.

I've even been on TV morning shows. I was roused from my bed at six in the morning and taken by car to the studio and was made to drink some suspicious coffee. The host was a middle-aged announcer who looked like he could see through to the other side of the camera. He must brush his teeth around six times a day.

"And this morning's guest is Mr..."

Applause.

"Good morning."

"So, Mr.... has unexpectedly found himself with a poor aunt clinging to his back, so if I may, could you tell us a little bit about your experience and hardships with this?"

“Actually, I haven't had any hardships at all,” I say. “She’s not heavy at all. She doesn't even eat or drink.”

“Well then, as for stiff shoulders...”

“Not stiff at all.”

“How long, in other words, has she hung from your back?”

I tried to shorten my story about that clearing with the bronze statue of the unicorn, but the host seemed like he didn't completely comprehend it.

“So in other words,” he said after clearing his throat, “the poor aunt lay hidden in the center of the pond you were sitting at, and then haunted you?”

I shook my head. In the end what they wanted was either a funny story or second rate ghost story.

“She's not a ghost. She's not hidden anywhere. She's not haunting anyone. That was a turn of phrase, so to speak,” I said, being fed up with the interview. “It's just a word.”

No one uttered a word.

“In other words, a word is like an electrode that links our consciousness together, so through that link as long as the same stimulus is being sent a reaction will certainly be produced. Of course, the kind of reaction will differ based on the person, but in my case it is a kind of presence that supports itself on its own. It's exactly like the feeling of your tongue steadily expanding in your mouth. So, in the end, that which hangs from my back, are the words ‘poor aunt.’ There it has no meaning or form. I dare say it's like a conceptual symbol.

The host looked a bit troubled. “You say it has no meaning or form, yet we clearly see something on your back, and that generates a meaning for each of us.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Isn't that also a symbol?”

“That would mean,” the young female assistant asked, attempting to understand the situation as best she could, “If you think to yourself that it disappears, then by your own will, you can freely erase its image and existence?”

“That would be pointless. This thing that has been created continues to exist on its own, with no relation to my will.”

The young assistant, reluctant to agree, continued her questioning.

“Then for example, I also have the ability to turn general concepts into symbols like you said before?”

“You have the possibility,” I reply.

“Suppose I,” the host cut in, “repeat these ‘conceptual words’ every day, countless times. Might a ‘conceptual’ figure also appear on my back?”

“Perhaps.”

“So ‘conceptual’ words bring about the appearance of conceptual symbols.”

“Exactly.” My head began to hurt from the strong studio light beaming at me.

“By the way, what kind of form do these ‘conceptual’ things have anyway?”

I told him I don't know. That a question beyond the bounds of my imagination, and one poor aunt clinging to my back was already more than enough for me.

Of course, the world is full of buffoonery. Can anyone really run away from it? From a television studio illuminated by its strong lights, to a hermit's home in the heart of a dark forest, not a single thing changes. And I continued to tread through that kind of world with a poor aunt on my back. Of course, within the buffoonery of this world mine is unequaled. As you see, I do have a poor aunt hanging from my back. I might dare say, like the little girl said, that it would be better to have an umbrella stand hanging on my back. If that were the case people might want to



include me among their friends. I would repaint the color of the umbrella stand at regular intervals during the week, dropping by every party.

“Hey, your umbrella is pink today” someone would say.

“Yeah, you’re right,” I would respond. “I was feeling like having a pink umbrella stand this week.”

I might even hear the voice of that cute little girl, “Hey, your umbrella stand is pretty nice.”

Women always find great experiences crawling under their bedsheets with men with pink umbrella stands hanging from their backs.

However, sadly only a poor aunt hung from my back, and not a pink umbrella stand. As time passed, people began to lose interest in me and the poor aunt on my back. In the end, all that was left was just a little malice. In the end (as my companion said) no one really has any interest in a poor aunt. Once that little curiosity at the onset travels its path and disappears, all that's left is a silence like the bottom of the sea. A silence like me and the poor aunt merged together.

3

“I saw the television program you were on,” my companion said. We were sitting on the edge of the pond like before. It was the first time in three months, and fall had begun.

“You seem a bit tired.”

“Yeah.”

“You don’t seem like yourself.”

I nodded.

On top of her knees the woman folded the sleeves of her sweats many times.

“It finally seems like you were able to take care of your poor aunt.”

“It does, yeah.”

“So, how do you feel?”

“Like a watermelon that fell to the bottom of a well.”

Like a cat she gently caressed her folded, tender sweats upon her knee and laughed.

“Did you come to understand anything about her?”

“Little by little.”

“Then, could you write a little?”

“No,” I said, slightly shaking my head. “I couldn’t write anything. Even now I still doubt I could write anything.”

“You’re timid.”

“Somehow, I don’t even feel like there’s a point in writing a novel anymore. It’s like you said some time ago, if I can’t save a single thing...”

She stayed silent, biting her lip.

“Hey, try asking me a question. It might be helpful.”

“As an authority on poor aunts?”

“Yes.”

Some time passed before I could think of where to start from.

“Sometimes, I wonder what kind of people become poor aunts,” I said. “I wonder if poor aunts are born like that? Or perhaps their situation comes about from being swallowed up from holes that suddenly appear on the streets, like those of antlions, and swallow passersby, turning them into poor aunts?”

“I’m sure it’s the same for both,” the girl said.

“The same?”

“Yeah. In other words, poor aunts might have poor aunt-like childhoods and poor aunt-like youths. Or they might not. But either way is fine. The world is surely overflowing with tens of thousands of reasons. Tens of thousands of reasons to live, tens of thousands of reasons to die, all dirt cheap and easy to get your hands on. But what you want isn’t something like that?”

“Yes,” I said.

“A poor Aunt just exists, that’s it,” she said. “Afterwards you either accept it or you don’t.”

Without saying a word, we still lay sitting on the side of the pond. The transparent autumn light cast a small shadow on the profile of her face.

“Could you ask me ‘what do you see on my back?’”

“What do you see on my back?”

“I don’t see anything,” she said laughing. “All I can see is you.”

“Thanks,” I said.

Of course, time strikes down all people equally. Like that coachman beats his horse to the point of death on the street. But because it’s such a terribly quiet thrashing, few ever notice being struck.

But even so, we can see such a moment jumping around before our eyes through the glass of the aquarium called the poor aunt, so to speak. In the cramped glass case, time squeezed the poor aunt like an orange. There wasn’t a drop left. What attracted me was that perfectness at her center. *There really isn't a single drop left!*

Yes, like a corpse imprisoned in a glacier, that perfectness sat above the center of the existence of the poor aunt. A glacier as splendid as stainless steel. That glacier would probably only be melted after ten thousand years under the sun. but Of course, that doesn't mean the poor aunt would be alive after ten thousand years, so she will live together with that perfectness, die with that perfectness, and be buried with that perfectness.

The poor aunt with perfectness under the ground.

Then, after ten thousand years, the glacier will melt in the middle of the darkness, and the figure of that perfectness might emerge from the surface of the earth, like its grave has been pushed out of the ground. The surface of the earth will surely be completely changed. But, if that rite called a marriage ceremony still existed, then that perfectness left by the poor aunt will be invited, sit at a magnificent table, finish her meal, stand up and give the congratulations that fills its heart.

But that story is just a conjecture. In the end that's just a matter for the year 11980 AD.

4

The poor aunt let go of my back at the end of autumn.

I remembered the chores I needed to get done before winter came, so I got on a train to the suburbs with the poor aunt. There were so few passengers on the afternoon train you could count them. It had been such a while since I last went on an excursion like this. I never lost interest in looking out at the scenery from the window. The air was crystal clear, the mountains almost supernaturally green, and the trees lining the tracks were bearing red fruit here and there. On the way back a mom in her mid-thirties with her two kids sat across the aisle. The older daughter wore a one piece navy serge that resembled a kindergarten uniform, and a green felt hat

with a brand new red ribbon. The brim of her cap gently curved upwards; it was like there was a small animal gently resting upon her head. The young boy, who seems like he just turned three, sat between the two, looking incredibly bored, like he was trapped. Just the average mother with her kids you would see on any train. Not particularly beautiful or ugly. I wouldn't go so far as to say she was rich but having said that I do not mean she was poor either. After letting out a yawn I once again emptied my head and gazed at the scenery opposite me with my head turned to the side. It was only a matter of moments before something began between the three of them. I started to make sense of the broken scraps of the conversation between the mother and daughter. It was already approaching dusk, and the family looked yellow under the old train lights, like they were from an old photograph.

“But mom, my hat...”

“You already know, so calm down.”

The girl swallowed the words trying to leave her mouth and went silent with a look of dissatisfaction. The boy sitting right between them grabbed the hat that had until then been placed atop the girl's head and was pulling it with his hands with all his strength.

“Hey, he hit me and took it.”

“I said be quiet.”

“But he's crumbling it.”

After the mom took a quick glance at her son she gave out an exhaustive sigh. I imagined she was surely tired. This woman of the dusk must be completely crushed by monthly payments, dentist invoices, and time that passes far too quickly.

The boy continued to pull at the hat. The rim of the hat, as round as if it was drawn neatly with a compass, was now just half ruined, and the prideful, red ribbon attached to the side was

rolled up in the hands of the boy. His mother's indifference only encouraged him. By the time he was finished with his work I doubted it would still hold onto its appearance as a hat.

It seemed that the girl reached the same conclusion I did after worrying about the situation. She suddenly reached out her arm and thrust her brother's shoulder away, using his flinching as an opportunity to smoothly snatch her hat, and placed it above the seat so his hands couldn't reach. At this all occurred within an instant, it took a deep breath before her mom or brother could process what just happened. The brother with a loud cry burst into tears, while at the same time her mother slapped her exposed knee.

"But mom, he started it..."

"Children who make a racket on the train are no longer children of mine."

Biting her lips, the daughter turned her face away, and continued to stare sharply at the hat above the seat.

"Go over there."

The mother pointed to the empty seat beside me. Averting her eyes, the daughter tried to ignore her mother's extended finger, but her mother's finger remained frozen in the air, continuously pointing to my left without end. "Now go over there. You are not my child anymore."

Looking as if she finally conceded, the girl grabbed her hat and bag and left her seat, slowly crossed over the aisle, and sat down next to me concealing her face. She seemed reluctant to decide if she had actually been cast out of her family. She continued to stretch the brim of the hat that lay in the center of her lap like she was deeply brooding on its wrinkles. If I've actually been expelled from my family, she thought, where can I go? Then she looked up at the side of

my face. But the real bad kid was him. He was the one who crumpled my hat this badly...I could see a trickle of tears run down her red cheeks.

She was a girl with ordinary features. I could say her face was enclosed by her surrounding dullness like a cloud of smoke. By the time she reaches puberty, the sense of transparency unique to girls of this age, which drifts across her plump face, will have completely disappeared from her dull flesh. I could imagine her like that, growing from a little girl to an adult, as the wrinkles on her hat stretch along.

With my head leaning on the glass window, I closed my eyes, and tried to picture the faces of some of my female friends I've had in my life. Then I tried to think of the broken words they left behind, the innocent gestures, the tears and the shape of their ankles. Those girls, what kind of life are they leading? Or maybe some of them are unknowingly following a dark path, like children running away in the dark and being sucked deeper and deeper into the forest at night. Such vague sadness was dancing like moths' silver dust in the yellow light of the car's interior lights. I spread my hands in my lap and looked at their palms for a while. My hands were dark and dirty, as if I had sucked in a lot of blood from countless people.

I wanted to put my hand on the shoulder of the girl convulsively crying beside me, but I was certain it would frighten her. My hand hung like this for an eternity, unable to save a single person. They can't even fix the brim of her gray cap.

When I got off the train, the winter winds were already blowing around me. Sweater weather was over, and the season of thick coats arrived in town.

I descended the stairs and left the ticket barrier and was released by the spell of the evening suburban train, the spell of the yellow interior lights. It was a strange feeling. Like something cleanly fell out of the center of my body...Leaning by a pillar next to the ticket gate I

gazed out for a while, watching the crowds of people flow by me like a river, each covered in a husk of varying hues. Then I suddenly noticed. Without realizing it the poor aunt had disappeared from my back.

She took her leave just as she came: with nobody noticing. I didn't know where to go from there. Like a meaningless signpost that stands solitary in the middle of the desert, I was completely alone. I tossed all the change in my pockets into a pay phone and dialed up her apartment. It rang eight times and on the ninth time she picked up.

"I was asleep," she said with a faint voice.

"At six in the evening?"

"I have been busy with work since yesterday evening and finally just finished up two hours ago. "

"Sorry to wake you then," I said. "I just wanted to check if you were really alive. I can't really explain it clearly."

"Yes, I'm alive. I am working with everything I have to keep living, and because of that I am about to die of tiredness."

"Want to grab a meal together?"

"I'm sorry but I don't want to eat anything. I just want to sleep now. That's it."

"I'd like to talk sometime."

She was silent on her end of the phone. Or she might have just yawned.

"Later," she said, hoping to end the conversation.

"How much later?"

"Sometime *later*. Let me rest a little. Once I rest and wake up, we will figure everything out, ok?"



“Ok,” I said. “Night.”

“Good night.”

Then she hung up. After gazing at the yellow receiver in my hand for a while I quietly placed it back. I felt horribly hungry. I wanted to devour something. If *they* offered me food, I might have groveled on the ground, go so far as to lick their fingers.

Sounds good, I could lick your fingers. And then afterwards, we would sleep soundly like rain soaked railroad ties.

I'm leaning against a window of the terminal building, lighting a cigarette.

If, I thought, if in ten thousand years a society of just poor aunts emerged, would they open the gates for me? There they would have a government of poor aunts chosen by poor aunts, trains run by poor aunts for poor aunts, and novels written by poor aunts.

No, they might not feel the need for such a thing. For governments, for trains, for novels...

They might wish to make giant jars of vinegar and live quietly inside of them. If one was gazing from the sky, they could see tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of jars lined up across the surface of the earth as far as the eye could see. That must be, without a doubt, a marvelous sight.

If there was a place in this world for a page of poetry, I can write it. A poet laureate for the poor aunts.

It wouldn't be bad.

I will recount the sun shining on the green glass jar and the sea of grass glistening with morning dew at my feet.

But in the end, that is a story for 11980 AD. And ten thousand years is too long to wait.  
In the meantime, I have several winters I need to get through.

## 「貧乏な叔母さんの話」の感想

出る杭は打たれる社会で人に理解されるというのはどういう意味だろう？今こそ、どうやってできるだろうか。その質問を調べるために村上春樹は「貧乏な叔母さんの話」を書いたと思う。

まず初めに、語り手の「僕」の貧乏な叔母さんというのはいったい何？僕によると「概念的な記号」だそうだ。偶然に現れて意味もなく形もなく重さもなく存在していた。なぜこの「概念的な記号」を貧乏な叔母さんと呼んでいるかわからないが、多分意味がないと思う。つまり、貧乏な叔母さんは記号なので、重要なことは貧乏な叔母さんではなく、叔母さんが示すことだ。しかし、この叔母さんが具体的に何かを示さないのか、あるいは示すのかは理解できない。「僕」の伝えたい貧乏な叔母さんはほかの人物にも小説の読者にも理解できない考えだ。

「僕」は普通の人ではない。雑誌やバラエティーショーが好きではなく、この変な理解できない考えのせいで「僕」は知り合いもいなくて寂しくなる。この人は「貧乏な叔母さん」を見ると悲しくて会いたくなる。叔母さんが風変わり過ぎるからだ。しかし、「僕」は自身の考えを信じた。バラエティーショーで説明してみたり、彼女と相談したりした。分からないが、社会の一員は「貧乏な叔母さん」に何だか興味を持った。だが時間が過ぎれば物珍しさがだんだん消えた。

電車で「僕」はついに諦めた。小説で少女が登場する。少女は「僕」のように社会に認められない願望がある。自分の帽子を欲しがっている。帽子を取り戻したものの母に放逐されてから一人で座っていた。彼女にとっては家族が社会だ。彼女は小さな願いにより「僕」のように自分の社会で騒ぎを起こした。出る釘のように目立った。この理由で「僕」は隣に座っている少女に同感した。しかし、結局、何もしなかった。慰めたがっていたがきっと少女を驚かすに違いないと思った。彼女が言う通りに「僕」は「何ひとつ救えない」（60）。何ひとつ救えなく、何ひとつ気持ちが届かないから、貧乏な叔母さんが消え去った。少女さえ救えなかったから背中に貼りついている貧乏な叔母さんは無意味だ。社会で一人で生きられない。貧乏な叔母さんしか残っていなかったのに彼女は消え去ってしまった。そのあとで「僕」は「ひとりぼっち」だと感じた。そしてすぐに彼女に電話した。彼女にまた気持ちを届けることができた。もう一回社会に入ることができる。

しかし、この貧乏な叔母さんという、人によって理解できないこの考えは無意味というわけではない。この考えの「完璧さ」はこの社会を超え、一万年後もまだ残っている。一万年後はおそらく変な社会で私たちがわからない社会だが、結局、そこに残っているのは貧乏な叔母さんしかいない。

## New York Mining Disaster

“Maybe someone is digging underground

Or have they given up and all gone home to bed”

“New York Mining Disaster” - Lyrics by the Bee Gees

For a decade, a man has kept up the relatively strange custom of making his way to the zoo every time a typhoon or torrential rain comes. He’s my friend.

When a typhoon approaches a town and normal people shut their storm shutters and make sure they have a transistor radio and flashlight at hand, he clads himself with his official US Armed Forces Issued poncho from the height of the Vietnam war, thrusts some cans of beer into his pocket, and heads out.

When his luck is bad, the gates of the zoo are locked shut.

**Due to Today's Weather the Zoo is temporarily closed.**

Ah, that's reasonable. Who in their right mind would come to the zoo to gaze at giraffes and *zebras* the afternoon of a typhoon?

He would happily give up and sit in front of the stone squirrel statue standing in front of the gate, and head home after drinking his can of beer that had gone a little lukewarm.

When he's lucky the gate stands open.

He pays the entrance fee and goes inside, meticulously going around to see each animal one by one while working hard to smoke a cigarette that had immediately gotten soaked.

The animals would absentmindedly watch the falling rain tucked back in their exhibits from their windows, jump up and down excited by the gusts of strong wind, be frightened by the sudden changes in atmospheric pressure, and lose their tempers.

He would sit in front of the Bengal tiger's pen (because it was always the most agitated during a typhoon) and drink one can of beer, then he would go to the gorilla's exhibit and drink his second beer. In most cases the gorillas were not bothered by the typhoon at all. They would always pitifully gaze at my friend, sitting like a merman on the concrete drinking his can of beer.

"It's like coincidently being stuck on a broken elevator with someone," he said.

If you just ignore the afternoon's typhoon, my friend was a very *normal* person. Not particularly famous, he comfortably worked at a pleasant little foreign trading company, lived alone in a tidy apartment, and swapped girlfriends about every six months. I couldn't comprehend it. All the girlfriends looked the same, as if they were born from the same cells.

For some reason many people assumed he was more normal and boring than they should, but he did not seem bothered by that in the slightest. He had a used car that went in too bad a shape, the complete collection of Balzac's works, and black business suit, black tie, and black leather shoes for going to funerals.

Whenever someone died, I would give him a call so I could borrow his suit, tie, and shoes. The suit and shoes were both one size too big, but of course I did not have the luxury of saying anything.

"Thank you so very much," I would always say. "It's another funeral."

"It's no problem at all," he would always say.

It takes me just 15 minutes by taxi to get to his apartment.

When I arrived at his place, the necktie and suit were already neatly arranged on the table, the shoes were shining, and half a dozen cold foreign beers were in his fridge. He was that kind of guy.

"The other day I saw a cat at the zoo," he said, popping open a beer.

"A cat?"

"Yeah, just two weeks ago I went to Hokkaido for a business trip, so when I tried to stop by the local zoo, I saw a placard with "cat" written on it in front of a small exhibit, and there inside was a sleeping cat."

"What kind of cat?"

“A quite normal cat. It had brown stripes, a short tail, and I might say it was a bit fat. Just like that it lay *sprawled* on its side.”

“Cats must be rare in Hokkaido,” I said.

“Impossible,” he said.

“First of all, why shouldn't cats be in a zoo?” I tried asking. “Isn't a cat an animal?”

“Habit. Or it's because cats and dogs are *common* animals. Not animals people would pay to see,” He said. “Just like people.”

“I see,” I said.

After finishing half a dozen beers, he neatly packed the necktie, the suit in a plastic cover, and the shoebox in a big bag. It felt like we could even be going on a picnic.

“As always, thank you,” I said.

“Don't worry about it,” he said.

Just three years ago he finished making that suit himself, but he's barely had any time to wear it.

“No one dies,” he said. “Ever since I made it, not a single person has died.”

“I'm sure that's just the way it is.”

“I agreed,” he said.

☆

That year was full of dreadful funerals. Good friends and past friends were dying left and right. It was like gazing out over a cornfield during a summer drought. I was 28.

All my friends around me were dying at similar ages: 27, 28, 29...inappropriate ages to die.



A poet died at 21. A revolutionary and Rock'n'roller died at 24. Most of us predicted if we could just get through that, things would go on fine somehow.

We got through to the light at the end of that damp tunnel because we passed through that legendary game of “Dead Man’s Curve”. That afterwards if we ran at full speed to our goal down a six-lane road (even if we didn’t want to continue) we’d be fine.

We cut our hair, and every morning shaved our beards. We were no longer poets, revolutionaries, and rock’n’rollers. We quit getting drunk and falling asleep in telephone booths, eating a bag of cherries on the subway, and listening to our records of “The Doors” till four in the morning at max volume. We took out life insurance, started drinking at hotel bars, and started to get our reimbursements from the dentists.

As you can see, we were already 28...

This happened right after the unexpected massacres. You could call it a *surprise attack*.

We were in the middle of changing into some western clothes without a care under the rays of the spring sun. The suit barely fit, the shirt’s sleeves were inside out, my right ankle fit fine in the trousers while my left ankle could not. It was quite a sight.

The massacre came with a gunshot.

It was like someone placed a metaphysical machine gun on top of a metaphysical hill and fired a hail of metaphysical bullets in our direction.

But in the end, death is only death. Putting it in other words, whether a rabbit jumps from your hat or a wheat field, it is just a rabbit. A kamado stove is just a kamado stove, and the black smoke that rises from the chimney is just the black smoke that rises from the chimney.

☆

The first of us to cross that dark abyss that lies between reality and unreality (or unreality and reality) was my friend during college who worked as an English teacher at a middle school. It was three years after he got married, and his wife had gone back to her home in Shikoku to give birth to their child since the end of last year.

On a January afternoon that was far too warm, he bought a razor from west Germany sharp enough to cut the ears off an elephant from the department store's hardware shop and two bottles of shaving cream, and then went home and heated up a bath. Then he took some ice out of the fridge and after emptying a glass of scotch whiskey he slit his wrists in the bathtub and died.

Two days later his mom found his corpse. Then the police came and took countless pictures of the scene. If one only added a potted plant for decoration, it would look like a scene you could shoot a tomato juice commercial in.

The police officially declared it suicide. All the doors in the house were locked, and the person in question did that very day buy a razor.

But no one had a clue why in the world he purchased shaving cream (two whole cans) he had no chance to use.

He may not have really gotten used to the thought that he could have been dead in a few hours. Or perhaps he was afraid the clerk at the department store would see through his desire to kill himself.

There was no suicide note or last minute scrawling anywhere. All that was left was the bowl with the empty whiskey bottle and ice, and the two shaving cream bottles on top of the

kitchen table. While waiting for his bath to get hot, he surely must of been gazing a those bottles of shaving cream as he poured glass after glass of Haig's on the rocks down his throat. Then, he must of thought of this:

**“I won't have to shave again.”**

A death at the young age of 28 is somehow melancholic like a winter rain.

☆

After that, within twelve months four other people died.

One died in March on the oil fields in either Saudi Arabia or Kuwait, and two died in June. One from a heart attack and another from a traffic accident. After a peaceful season from July to November, another died also from a traffic accident in the middle of December.

If you ignore my first friend who died by suicide, most of them died in a blink of the eye without a second to realize it. A feeling like absentmindedly walking up a familiar staircase when a single step has been removed.

“Could you take out a futon?” my male friend asked. The one who died in June of a heart attack.

“There's this rattling sound in the back of my head.”

He slipped under the futon, fell asleep, and never again woke up.

The girl that died in December was the youngest casualty, and at the same time the only girl who died. She was 24, the age of being a revolutionary and rock'n'roller.

One day, before Christmas, at dusk during a chilly rain, she was pulverized, tragically, in a space between a beer company's transport truck and a telephone pole (that was exceedingly normal otherwise).

☆

A few days after the last funeral service, I returned to the owner of the suit with it in hand and a bottle of whiskey as thanks.

"Thank you so much," I said. "This really helped me out."

"Don't worry about it. Anyways it's not like I have any use for it," he said laughing.

Half-dozen beers sat cooling in his refrigerator, and his comfortable sofa faintly smelled of the sun. A recently washed ash tray and a potted Poinsettia used in Christmas decorations laid on the table.

When he received the suit in the plastic covering, he softly took it in his hands and gently placed it inside his drawer like a bear cub returning to its den just after hibernating.

"I hope the suit isn't covered in the smell of a funeral," I said.

"The clothes are fine. That's their purpose. What worries me is on the inside."

"Yeah," I said.

"Anyways, there have been so many funerals recently," he said, stretching his legs on the sofa, pouring his beer in a glass. "How many people has it been?"

"Five," I said, trying to spread out the five fingers on my left hand. "But I think it's over."

"You think so?"

"I feel it," I said. "Enough people have died."

“It sort of feels like the curse of the pyramids. When the stars go around the heavens, and the shadow of the moon covers the sun...”

“That kind of thing.”

After we finished the half a dozen beers, we moved on to the whiskey. The winter’s evening sun shone in our room like it was a gentle hill road.

“You’ve been looking down recently,” he said.

“Really?” I said.

“You think about *things* too much at midnight.”

I laughed and looked up at the ceiling.

“I have stopped thinking about *things* at midnight all together,” he said.

“And how do you do that?”

“When I feel down, I do some cleaning. I do things like use the vacuum, shine the windows, wipe dry the glasses, move the table, iron all my shirts, and air out the cushion.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Then when it turns to eleven, I pour myself a drink and fall completely asleep. That’s it. In the morning I wake up refreshed, put my socks on, and forget practically everything from the night before.”

“Really.”

“People come up with all sorts of things at three in the morning. This and that.”

“They might.”

“Think of *things* like going to the zoo,” he said like he just remembered that. “Have you ever been to the zoo at three in the morning?”

“No,” I faintly respond. “Of course not.”

“I have. Just once. Asked an acquaintance to do it. Really shouldn’t have.”

“Uh-huh”

“It was a strange experience. I can’t put it into words. It felt something like the earth was being torn apart everywhere, and something was crawling out of it. And then, in the middle of the darkness, something unseeable crawled up from the bottom of the earth and was jumping around. Like a lump of chilly air. Invisible to the eye. But the animals felt *it*. So, then I felt *it*, what the animals were feeling. After all, the ground we walk upon has all passed through the earth’s core, and so the earth’s core has sucked up an unbelievable amount of time... Isn’t that strange?”

“No,” I said.

“I haven’t thought of going again. To the zoo at midnight.”

“Is it better during a typhoon?”

“Yes,” he said. “A lot better.”

The phone rang.

Like usual, it was his girlfriend born from mitosis, and they had a mitosis-like endlessly long phone call.

I gave up and turned on the television. It was a 27 inch colored television, and with a light touch of the buttons on the remote nearby it soundlessly changed channels. It comes with six speakers, so it felt like being in an old movie theater. A theater that would play the news and animated movies.

After flipping through the channels up and down twice, I settled on a news show. There was an international border dispute, a building caught on fire, fluctuation in currency. There was also something about automobile import regulations, a winter swimming competition, and a

family suicide. I felt like somewhere each of these events was connected somewhere, like middle school graduation photos.

“Anything interesting on the news?” my friend inquired as he came back.

“Well,” I said. “It's been a while since I watched television.”

“Television has at least one good thing,” he said after thinking it over for a while. “I can turn it off when I want.”

“Don't turn it on in the first place.”

“Oh, come on,” he laughed happily. “I'm still a warm person.”

“You seem like one for sure.”

“Listen here,” he said, turning the remote off. In an instance the image disappeared from the screen. The room went *deathly* silent. The building lights outside the window began to shine.

For a straight five minutes we drank our whiskey without touching the subject. The phone rang again, but this time he pretended not to hear it. Once the ringing stopped, my friend turned on the tv like he remembered something. In an instant the image reappeared, and a commentator was pointing to a line graph in the background with a stick talking about the fluctuations in gas prices.

“He doesn't even realize we turned off the television for five minutes.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Why?”

I shook my head as thinking was too much trouble.

“The moment you turn it off, one of us is reduced to nothing. Either us or him.”

“There are other ways of thinking about it,” I said.

“That might be true, there are millions of different ways. Palm trees grow in India, and they scatter political prisoners from helicopters in Venezuela.

“Yeah.”

“I don’t want to talk badly about anyone,” he said. “But there are ways to die in this world that don’t involve a funeral. Deaths without a smell.”

I silently nodded. Then I toyed with the green leaves of the poinsettia with my fingers. “It’s already Christmas.”

“I actually have some champagne,” he said with an eager face. “It’s a quality brand that came in from France. Want some?”

“I take it this is from some girl.”

He placed the cooled bottle and two new glasses on top of the table.

“You don’t know?” he said. “Champagne has no use. It’s just *something* to uncork.”

“I see.”

We took our glasses.

Then we talked about the animals in the Parisian Zoo.

☆

Around the end of the year there was a small party. It happens every year on New Year's Eve in a store we rent out near Roppongi. It's a carefree gathering with good food and drinks and a piano trio that's not too bad. And since you don’t know anyone, you can just sit around and relax.



Of course, I was introduced to a few people. Hey, nice to meet you, oh really, of course, yeah, well something like that, but that would be nice, etc.... I grinned, adding some natural pauses to the conversations, and occasionally got a second glass of the watered-down drinks and went back to my seat where I would continue to think about the capitals of South American countries.

But that day, the woman I was introduced to brought two watered down drinks to my seat.

“I asked to be introduced to you,” she said.

She wasn’t eye-catchingly beautiful, but she had a good feeling about her. She stylishly wore a fairly expensive blue silk dress. She looked around 32. She could have tried to look younger if she wanted to, but she didn’t seem to think there was a need. She had three rings across both hands and a smile like a summer evening on her lips.

I smiled back as I couldn’t think of anything to say.

“You look just like someone I know.”

“Really,” I said. It sounded like a start to a student’s pick-up line, but she didn’t look the type to try something like that.

“From your facial features and stature to your way of speaking, you are exactly the same. I have been watching you since you came in.”

“I’d like to meet someone if they resemble me that much,” I said. This also sounded like a line I heard somewhere.

“Really?”

“Eh, I feel like it also might be a bit scary too.”

Her smile deepened for a moment and then returned to how it was before. “But that would be impossible,” she said. “He died five years ago. He was around your age.”

“Huh,” I said.

“I killed him.”

The piano trio seemed to have finished their second set, as there was the clatter of halfhearted applause all around.

“You seem to be getting to know each other well,” the hostess of the party said as she came up to us.

“Yes, we are,” I said.

“I’d say so,” she added amicably.

“Do you have any requests for the band?” she asked.

“No no, I am enjoying it fine just sitting here. How about you?”

“I’m also good.”

The hostess grinned and went off to the next table.

“Do you like music,” she asked me.

“Only if it's good music listened to in a good world,” I said.

“There is no good music in a good world,” she said. “The air in a good world doesn’t vibrate.”

“I see.”

“Did you see that Warren Beatty movie where he plays the piano at a nightclub?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Elizabeth Taylor played a guest. It was a poor, miserable role.”

“Really.”

“So, Warren Beatty asked Elizabeth Taylor if she had any requests.”

“And then what did she request?” I asked.

“I forget. It was an old movie,” she said, shining her ring as she drank the watered down drink. “But I hated her request. I felt somehow miserable. Like when you borrow a book from a library, the moment you start it you know you must give it back.”

The woman took out a cigarette and I lit it for her.

“Well,” she said, “it's time to talk about the person you resemble.”

“How did you kill him?”

“I threw a *beehive* at him.”

“That can't be true.”

“No, it's a lie,” she said.

Instead of sighing I took another sip of my drink.

“Of course, there is no such thing as a legal murder,” she said. “Nor is there a moral murder.”

“There are no legal or moral murders,” I tried to summarize even though I did not feel like doing it. “But you murdered someone.”

“Yes,” she said happily nodding.

“Someone who looked like you.”

The band started playing. It was a song so old you could not recall its name.

“It didn't even take five seconds,” she said, “to kill him.”

A silence hung for a while. She seemed to be thoroughly enjoying it.

“Have you ever thought about freedom?” she asked.

“Sometimes,” I said. “Why are you asking about that now?”

“Can you draw pictures of daisies?”

“Probably... This is starting to sound a lot like an IQ test.”

“Close,” she said, laughing.

“Well, did I pass?”

“Yes,” she responded.

“Thanks,” I said.

The band started to play “Auld Lang Syne.”

“Eleven fifty-five,” she said after taking a fleeting glance at the gold watch on the end of her pendant. “I love ‘Auld Lang Syne.’ How about you?”

“I prefer “My Home on the Mountain Pass,” with the serows and buffalo that appear.

She grinned once more.

“It was a pleasure talking to you. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye,” I said.

☆

The lantern is blown out to conserve air, and the surroundings are covered in a pitch-black darkness. No one opens their mouths. The only sound to reverberate in the darkness was the drop of water from the ceiling every 5 seconds.

“Everyone, try not to breathe. We don’t have much air left.”

So said an elderly miner. He had a quiet voice. Still, the stone slabs on the ceiling made a faint creaking sound. The miners huddled in the darkness, straining their ears, waiting for just a single sound to be heard: the sound of a pickaxe, the sound of life.

And so they continued to wait like that for countless hours. Little by little reality was dissolved into the darkness. Everything seems to take place long ago in a world far away. Or it seems everything would take place in the distant future in a world far away.

**Everyone, try not to breathe. We don't have much air left.**

Of course, there are people outside digging out a hole. Like a scene out of a movie.

## 「ニューヨーク炭鉱の悲劇」の感想

村上春樹の「ニューヨーク炭鉱の悲劇」では生死のテーマについて書いてある。

「僕」は生死の境で存在している。まだ生きているが死に囲まれているようだ。去年、友人が五人なくなってしまった。友人のスーツを借りて葬式に行くことが多い。「形而上な機関銃」に撃たれたようだ（99）。死から逃げられない。忘年会で「僕」に似ている知り合いを殺した彼女に会った。彼女はそれ以上に説明しなかったが「僕」を知り合いと比較した。曖昧な話なので知り合いと「僕」の間にある境界の限界が見えなく、本当に「僕」は彼女の知り合いと同一化しているようで、もう死んでいるようだ。

最後の坑夫の場面はこの気持ちを表している。坑夫は崩落し、暗闇に囲まれて死か援助を待っている。残りの空気を保ちながら待つことしかできない。自分の生存をコントロールできない。そのように「僕」は生きている。ぼんやりとテレビを見、静かにパーティーに座り、社会をうろうろしている。それで死に囲まれている。息ができるが本当に生きているというわけではない。つまり、生きるのではなく、ただ生き残っていることだ。しかし、生き残っているだけの人は結局、失敗する。死は迫っていて、死はいつも勝つ。

それに比べて「僕」の友人は存在をコントロールできる。社会の常識と関係なく台風の際に動物園に行ってゴリラの前に座ってビールを飲むとか、奇妙なことをしている。何か気になる時、掃除して寝る。翌日までに気になることは忘れている。テレビと必要なく、勝手にする人だ。だから、社会での死に囲まれていない。最近葬式に行っ

たことがない。動物との付き合いが好きで、「地球の芯」と関わっている。命が好きな人だ。目的があるというわけではないが、「僕」と比べて悩みがなく命を楽しんでいる。

世の中で普通に生活することは簡単だ。ぼんやりとテレビを見たり、あまり仲良くない知り合いのパーティーに行ったりすれば目的はないが、悪くない生活ができる。しかし、これはただ生き残ることだ。生き残るとは結局死に繋がるものだ。どこへ逃げて行っても死に囲まれている。だから、「僕」の友人のように自由に生きるべきだ。台風の際に動物園に行くとか社会の立場から変に見えることをしても元気に生きることができる。死から逃げることはできないが、せめて社会に立ち込めている死の雲あるいは天井が崩れた炭鉱ではなく、一生晴れている空の下で生きられる。