

Let's Meet in a Dream

Haruki Murakami and Shigesato Itoi

Disclaimer — Important info

- This work was only available in japanese. I hired a professional translator, who translated it to portuguese so I could read it. Then, I translated to english based on her work. I know this isn't a best practice, but it was the best I could do to make it available in english.
- Some short stories are nonsensical, so keep in mind that it might not be a translation's problem.
- If you see any translation error, feel free to contact me on reddit: [u/Difficult_Tax1044/](https://www.reddit.com/user/Difficult_Tax1044/)
- Eventually, I'll keep bringing other projects to english.
- This translation's objective was solely to make this book available in english. If only you really want to help me out with costs (buying the original book + paying the original translator), you can send me BTC.
But before sending to me, consider donating to charity or someone who needs more:
 - Bitcoin Network:
bc1qumxwrm333a3vjxsc7y3gm225lxrttu5mcxj2ze
 - Lightning Network:
lnbc1p5rym3lpp5p2490n4764q6q6ukmx8rkctfge4eshhufgqr
aqrwqed03u8ppq3qdqqcqqzxsqrrsssp5fgqupwt6s2x6q3rsty2
rcqr6w2e325dx2jnwfq25lrlvfa3u0y9q9qxpqysgqmfluut3rhag

5fhk49djwxm9u3p8x42k6xwgx9cxvgn sax6pgn23xsygmypcqj
up95c5v9jj44z2vyqq6yzz5xr7df2mse78tnmrqpucq5r370g

Before You Read – Haruki Murakami

I sometimes hear people say, “It seems Mr. Itoi and Mr. Murakami published a collection of conversations together called *Let’s Meet in a Dream*¹, right?” But that’s clearly a mistake. *A Meeting in Dreams* is not a collection of dialogues—although, if you were to ask me what it actually is, even I wouldn’t be able to give a precise answer. It’s not a short story collection, nor a book of essays, nor a miscellany of drafts. Well, to put it simply—it’s an enigmatic book.

Come to think of it, this book has always had something mysterious about it from the very beginning. In any case, Mr. Itoi and I selected and lined up words in katakana, and then paired each word with a story or essay—an idea that, in hindsight, might be called either unique or contrived, governed by an incomprehensible logic. Why we chose to use foreign words remains a mystery as well. But somewhere in this world, there’s a vast underground plant called “the course things take”—and it’s

¹ The original Japanese title 夢で会いましょう (*Yume de Aimashō*) literally means an invitation, such as: “Let’s meet in a dream” or “Let’s meet in our dreams.”

thanks to that invisible mechanism that this book was completed and brought into the light of day.

I believe the result turned out to be **very interesting**, don't you think?

Personally, I had a lot of fun creating this work and sharing it with Shigesato Itoi.

Mr. Itoi is the one responsible for the title *Let's Meet in a Dream*, and I myself don't know exactly what it means. Maybe it's a suggestion for the reader to read it before going to sleep. Or maybe it was Mr. Itoi and I who met in a dream. In any case, it's a rather enigmatic book—from the title all the way to its concept. At the end of each piece, you'll find the initials *i* for Itoi and *m* for Murakami. But I don't think you'll need to check them to figure out who wrote what.

ア

アイゼンハワー | eisenhower (or the place of the year 1958 in postwar history)

On the evening of September 26, 1958, as the Brooklyn Bridge dimmed beneath the twilight haze, Sonny Rollins² was practicing musical scales alone on his tenor saxophone.

– Hey, mister, what are you doing? asked a man passing by Sonny Rollins.

– I’m fighting an atomic monster, Sonny Rollins replied.

– Liar! said the man.

Around that same time, deep in the deserts of New Mexico, a grand battle of life and death was unfolding, in which President Eisenhower led the army against a real and terrifying atomic monster with four enormous pincers.

– Mr. President, at this rate the Earth will be completely annihilated. Our weapons are no match for that thing, reported the Secretary of State, his voice worn out from the ongoing battle.

² Sonny Rollins is an American saxophone player, regarded as one of the most important jazz musicians.

– May God forgive us. We unleashed on this world a being that should never have been born, murmured the President.

² Sonny Rollins is an American saxophone player, recognized as one of the most important jazz musicians.

The atomic monster advanced, unleashing piercing cries as it crushed tanks and artillery troops.

– Hey, are the donuts ready yet? I shouted at my mother’s back in the kitchen, nine years old.

m

アシスタント | assistant

The assistant must not eat the meatloaf the professor set aside to enjoy later, quietly, without permission.

The assistant must not scheme to avoid bringing that young woman to the professor’s office just because she happens to be very beautiful.

The assistant must not make distinctions as he pleases—such as using older tea leaves when preparing tea for the professor and saving the fresher ones for himself.

The assistant, when addressing the professor, must not begin with something like “So, uh, like...”

The assistant must not wish for a higher salary than the professor’s, nor hope to sit in a chair more comfortable than the professor’s.

The assistant must not take it upon himself to print words like “company president” on his business card.

For these reasons—and in light of them—I have no intention of becoming an assistant, not now, not ever.

i

アスパラガス | asparagus

Of all the things that could have happened—we had gotten lost in the middle of an asparagus field. The plan had been to reach the nearest town after lunch, so we set out early in the morning. But before we knew it, we were surrounded by an endless expanse of asparagus, and the sun was already sinking in the west. A distinct chill rode the wind, and all around us lingered the ominous smell of asparagus.

I pulled a compass and map from my backpack, trying to figure out our current location, but in the end, I didn't get very far. There was no mention of any asparagus fields in this area on any map.

– In any case, let's head in the direction of a town. As long as we're headed the right way, we'll make it through the field somehow – I said.

My younger brother, who was lighter, quickly climbed a tall stalk of asparagus and, clutching the stalk with one hand like a little monkey, looked around.

– I don't know. I can't see anything. There's no light at all – he said, turning his neck.

– What do we do? – asked my little sister, her voice trembling, on the verge of tears.

– It’s okay, don’t worry – I said, giving her a few reassuring pats on the shoulder. – You two gather plenty of firewood. Enough to keep a fire going through the night, alright? In the meantime, I’ll dig a trench around us.

With towels covering their noses and mouths to keep from passing out, my brother and sister did as they were told, earnestly gathering dry asparagus branches. As for me, I dug a trench about a meter deep with the help of a shovel. A dry trench a meter deep might seem like a feeble defense, but it was better than nothing. At the very least, it would help calm my frightened siblings.

The full moon hovered clearly in the sky, and its light turned the milky vapor rising from the asparagus roots a deep shade of blue. Many little birds that hadn’t escaped in time dropped to the ground, flapping their wings in distress. Before long, once the moon rose high above, they would likely be seized by the asparagus’s tentacles. Tonight—of all nights—had to be a full moon.

– We have to stay low, with our heads beneath the gas. No sleeping. If we fall asleep, the tentacles will come for us – I said.

A long night was about to begin.

m

アパート | apartment

Mr. Yoshirō Kodaka wrote a book titled *How I Became a Manager*—but unfortunately, his debut was released just after *Do THIS to Become a Department Head*, authored by his colleague Mr. Takao Ōyama. As a result, sales didn't prove very profitable.

To bring the disheartened Kodaka back to the cheerful family man he once was, his wife, Mutsuko, called for reinforcements: her mother and sister-in-law.

The three women — the one who used to be Yamamoto, the one who had recently become Yamamoto, and the long-time Yamamoto — pasted stickers bearing the kanji for “Chief” directly after the word “Manager” wherever it appeared in Kodaka's book.

Kodaka's wife, the former Yamamoto, was a woman with a remarkable ability to maintain unwavering enthusiasm.

Once the sticker pasting reached the fifty-hour mark, her mother and sister-in-law timidly asked if they could be given train tickets back to the Yamamoto home.

– But the household I belong to now is the Kodaka's – Mutsuko said with a look of resolve, and without even saying goodbye to the two women, she continued applying the stickers.

This operation went on for over twelve years.

Perhaps it would have been wiser to publish the corrected manuscript straightaway—but then, it wouldn't have been possible to restock the shelves immediately if the first run sold out.

Each of the three thousand first-edition volumes was altered, and after the publication dates in the endnotes were corrected, the books were redistributed to bookstores. That day, Mutsuko reread her husband's book—the one that had consumed so many years of her life—and shed tears of emotion.

Mr. Yoshirō Kodaka was in the bath when he heard his wife's sobs and rushed to her, still dripping wet. By that point, he had already been promoted to department head. The middle-aged man, naked except for a wet towel around his waist, embraced his wife awkwardly as they both wept uncontrollably.

Mr. Kodaka had kept one secret from his wife: he had already sent his second manuscript to a trusted printer—*How to Succeed at Apartment Management*.

His old rival, Mr. Takao Ōyama, had happened to publish a book the day before, titled *Get Rich from Rent!*

Mr. Kodaka could never bring himself to ask her to paste “homes” over “apartments.”

He gently stroked his wife's stiff, permed hair as silent tears streamed down his face.

Mutsuko, crying as well, suddenly felt something in her husband's touch that, after all this time, reminded her of his warmth—and slowly, she slipped off her skirt.

アルバイト | arbeit

There was a certain healthy young man, though already with one foot in rebellion.

The father of this young man sold his son's sexual desire to an old man he had met by chance at the prize exchange counter of a pachinko parlor³.

In return, he received two packs of Mild Seven cigarettes, a can of roasted seaweed, a battery-powered toy car that could change direction automatically when approaching a wall, two grapefruits, and a shoulder bag printed with a steam locomotive galloping majestically across the fields of Hokkaido. That last item, in particular, had not been something the boy's father had asked for.

– What a generous man – said the father, deeply moved.

Even after handing over all the items listed to the boy's father, the old man still had Keiko Takeshita's latest album, a Dunhill lighter, a tin of persimmon seeds, another of Nescafé Gold Blend, and sugar cubes.

The father estimated that his son's libido was worth about the same as one of the tins of seaweed. At first, he feared the extra items were a bad sign—that the old man might demand something excessive in return. But after seeing him wash his hands with liquid soap and climb the stairs with renewed vigor, he felt reassured.

³ *Pachinko* is a type of gambling game played on slot-like machines, very popular in Japan.

Many people are even better at pachinko than that old man. But in terms of personality and refinement, it could be said that no one else compared. Those who merely gamble and exchange prizes to feed their own greed have something flawed in their philosophy of life. The boy's father tried to reflect on that, but midway through the thought his head began to ache, so he ended up just nodding with a look of admiration.

The young man had no idea that his own father—his flesh and blood—had sold his sexual desire. Not even a week later did he suspect a thing.

It was the father who became concerned, since his son's appearance hadn't changed at all.

He tried to bring it up indirectly with the boy.

The young man didn't seem to grasp the meaning of the question; he shouted in anger and hurled the ashtray at the television.

– Kiyomi is a good girl, got it?!

They had moved into that house four years ago, but that outburst—followed by the crash of the television breaking—surely ranked first and second among the ten loudest sounds ever heard there. Upon hearing the commotion, the boy's mother, who had left and was living away from home, returned. It was a bit troubling that she brought with her a newborn baby just a few months old, but even so, the father welcomed her warmly.

Another week passed. The mother asked the healthy young man—with one foot in rebellion—about his sex life.

– What the hell are you talking about?! – the boy shouted again, but this time it wasn't such a big deal.

No objects were thrown.

When the father heard this story from the mother, he thought:

“I'm going to look for that old man again, and this time I'll sell all the sexual desire in this house!”

i

アレルギー | allergie

That allergy of mine was a terrible thing.

Even the doctor said it was unbelievable I'd spent ten months in my mother's womb, considering how severe my allergy to women was.

There was a circular area around me with a radius of about two meters. If a woman stepped into this circle, papules would erupt across my entire body. My tear glands would swell, my eyes would turn bloodshot, and tears would begin to fall. Itching would spread everywhere, and without thinking, I would start scratching, trying to find relief. The scars from all that clawing would redden, swell, and deepen. I'd rub my head until I couldn't anymore. I'd tug at my hair to stop the itching, and it would fall out in clumps. Then came the sneezing, and mucus flew from my nose.

Breathing became difficult due to a swollen trachea. Inhale, exhale—each breath came with a high-pitched wheeze, like a whistle.

Just having a woman approach within two meters would trigger a sneezing fit—a sign that I needed to back away immediately.

But now, those are just memories. After all, my allergy to women is completely cured.

It's in my nature to like women. Maybe that's exactly why I was able to dedicate myself entirely to the treatment.

Surely, among the readers, there must be someone else who suffers from an allergy to women, just as I once did.

In the hope of bringing happiness to those people, I'll share how I managed to overcome my dreadful allergy to women.

The principles are extremely simple.

Just like people who can't handle alcohol build resistance by drinking a small cup of sake each day, this method worked similarly.

In my case, I started with scent. At first, all I could manage was standing near a woman while staying upwind. Later, I'd ask a friend to place a fan behind a woman, so the scent would blow toward me more strongly. Once that stopped making me dizzy, I pushed further. I began trapping a woman's scent in a plastic bag and holding the bag's opening over my nose and mouth, inhaling deeply. It was a method not unlike the one delinquents use to sniff paint thinner. The first time I tried it, I passed out after the very first breath. But I faced down my own weakness and refused to give up, pressing forward day after day.

My training continued for a month. Near the end, I was able to get within millimeters—nearly touching—and breathe through my nose. I even became able to stick my face under a skirt, so you could say my perseverance truly paid off.

However, while I had built confidence with scent, I was still far too weak when it came to touch.

For this stage of the treatment, I began applying small flakes of sunburned, peeling skin—the kind that comes off after a day at the beach—across the surface of my body. At first, of course, the areas that came into contact with that skin would redden, and I'd feel itchy and nauseated. But now, with the experience I had gained through conquering scent, I felt certain I could do it again, without fear.

Eventually, I was able to hold hands. Then I could hug—first clothed, then unclothed—until I improved so much I couldn't go without that sensation anymore. This led many women to begin avoiding me, and in some cases, I became the cause of allergic reactions in them. I even came close to being arrested just for stepping within a two-meter radius.

i

アンチテーゼ | antithese

On the Night Specials section of the menu, I came across a dish of antithesis.

“Fresh Normandy-style antithesis with garlic sauce”—so it said.

– About this “antithesis,” is it really that fresh? – I asked the maître d’, eyeing the menu.

– Yes, absolutely—there’s no doubt about it – he replied, his tone slightly wounded, as if the question had offended him. – We’ve been in this business for thirty years, and not once has our menu disappointed a customer. When we say “today is Monday,” it is one hundred percent Monday; and when we say “today’s antithesis is fresh,” then it is one hundred percent fresh. Literally just picked. Almost like it might bite you at any moment.

– Forgive my ignorance. It’s just that I haven’t seen fresh antithesis around lately, so I instinctively got cautious...

The waiter narrowed his eyes and nodded, understanding.

– Exactly as you said. For the past ten years, it’s become nearly impossible to harvest large, fresh antitheses; what most restaurants serve now are small, frozen imports from India. But that can hardly be called antithesis. Barely any broth, and utterly lacking that subtle trace of suffering that gives it elegance.

– Yes, I completely agree...

– However – the waiter cut in, continuing – However, there’s no need to worry. We serve only authentic antithesis. And tonight’s offering is a rare one, the kind we only prepare once a year. The cost is a bit high, true, but your satisfaction is guaranteed. The antithesis is peeled and sliced quickly, exposing that natural firmness that defines real antithesis, and then we pour over it a garlic sauce so hot it nearly burns. As for the peel, we fry it in oil until crisp—it pairs beautifully with the salad.

– Well then, that’s what I’ll have. With a dry white wine, which goes well with antithesis, please – I said.

The price seemed a bit steep, but there was no helping it. After all, there’s no way to know when I’ll next come across a genuine antithesis.

m

イ

インタビュー | interview

May 12. Reception room of the Sanseidō publishing house, located inside the Laforet department store in the Harajuku district of Tokyo. The interviewer was a young woman who arrived half an hour late.

– Well then, I’d like to ask you what you eat on a daily basis, Mr. Murakami. Let’s start with the morning.

– In the morning, first...

– Oh, sorry. I forgot to turn up the volume on the recorder. Please go on, sorry about that.

– Vegetables, in the morning...

– Ah, right. And what time do you usually wake up?

– I wake up at five. Then...

- Five? Five in the morning?
- We’re talking about the morning, aren’t we?
- Well, yes, but... How do you manage to wake up at five in the morning?
- I get up and go for a run. It’s not like I go out to steal women’s underwear or anything.
- Ha ha ha... So, around what time do you go to sleep?
- Nine-thirty or ten. Anyway, weren’t we talking about food? Sorry, I’m actually in a bit of a hurry—some people are waiting for me.
- Oh, right, right, sorry.
- I usually have breakfast after my run, around five: a bowl full of vegetables, a roll, two cups of coffee, and then a fried egg.
- That sounds very healthy.
- It’s just that vegetables are really cheap near my place.

(At this point, coffee is served.) *Clang, clang, clang...*

- Well then, before you know it, doing this and that, it must be lunchtime, right?
- Yes.
- What do you usually have for lunch?
- For lunch, generally... Hey, the needle on your recorder isn’t moving, is it?
- Aah, you’re right. Oh no! What happened?

Crack, crack, crack...

- It's not turned on. Look, it's switched to OFF.
- Ah... I could've sworn I turned it on.
- So? Should I say everything again?
- No, it's okay. I remember perfectly. You wake up at five, go out for a run, eat a bowl of salad, a roll, and eggs with ham.
- Fried egg.
- Right, right, fried egg.
- And two cups of coffee.
- Two cups of coffee.
- You really remember?
- No problem. I've got a great memory.

Mr. Murakami's mornings start early. He wakes up at five o'clock and goes out for a run. "Ah, that makes it sound like I go out to steal women's underwear, ha ha ha!" he says, a little embarrassed. The menu is salad and eggs with ham and, of course, two cans of beer...

m

インディアン | indian

That friend of mine, truth be told, had quite a bit of money stashed away. Even he didn't know exactly how much. He owned several companies, and each of those companies was tightly interlinked with others, like a jealous animal with multiple legs. The basic setup was that Company A would lend money to Company B, which would extract what it could from Company C, which in turn cleverly deceived Company D... Because of that, not even he knew how much profit the whole system was generating.

Once a week, his accountant—whose face bore a striking resemblance to a correction pen—would come in, punch numbers into a calculator at lightning speed, scribble figures with a thin ballpoint pen, and draw magnificent line graphs to explain how the profits were going.

– I'm planning to transfer this money over there – the accountant would say.

– Yes – he would reply.

– Though of course, it would only be on paper.

– Yes.

– But even on paper, it could cause problems with taxes once we move the money.

– Yes.

– However, if we don't transfer it, the difference in profits between this year and last year won't seem natural.

– Yes.

– So when we do move it, we'll also record nominal gains and losses.

– Yes.

That's how it went. It was very much like walking through a forest, poking tree trunks at random with a stick. In the end, you had no idea which trees you'd hit and which you hadn't. Even so, he managed to make money.

No one could understand how he got so rich. He wasn't a particularly remarkable man, and truthfully, his results weren't all that impressive. He wasn't especially clever or cunning. He wasn't even what you'd call a good person. In fact, he hardly had a personality at all.

So when people heard he'd gotten rich, no one believed it. It sounded like a cruel joke.

– That's a lie – one of our friends said. – If that guy got rich, I've been flying through the sky for years.

But the facts were the facts. He had amassed more money than any of us—or rather, more than the combined income of all of us.

– A long time ago, I saw this slapstick Western comedy – my rich friend said one day. – The story was basically about a steam train being chased by Indians. They were burning all the coal they could to escape, but ended up dropping more than half of it and ran out of fuel along the way.

– Hmm.

We'd run into each other by chance at some hotel bar, after many years with no contact. I was there for a wedding ceremony (whose was it, again?), and he had just come back from a company party.

– Once they ran out of coal, they tore off the seats and roof, threw everything into the train's furnace. Then they were about to strip off their clothes and burn those too.

– I see.

– In other words... well, it was slapstick comedy. So you get the picture.

– I do.

– So they even burned their clothes. And after that, there was nothing left. But the Indians were still after them. Total dead end, you know?

– I know.

– But there was still one suitcase. It was full of money, basically. The train was carrying bundles of army cash. Enough to fill five Santa Claus sacks.

– So they were going to burn the money too?

My friend nodded, expressionless.

– Well, life is irreplaceable, right?

– That's true.

– But whatever, you know. It's just a movie, in the end – he said, putting a cigarette to his lips. The bartender lit it immediately with a lighter. – The problem was the way they burned the stuff.

– What do you mean?

– Basically, they took the money bundles with a shovel and tossed them into the furnace. Piled them up and chucked them straight into the

flames. Just picture that scene. The fire doesn't matter—just imagine the shovel.

– I'm picturing it.

– What do you think?

– Nothing in particular.

He held his empty glass about ten centimeters forward, and twenty seconds later, a fresh drink appeared with a pleasant clink.

– How much do you make a year? – he asked.

I told him the amount, honestly.

– Before or after taxes?

– Before – I said.

– That's all?

– That's it – I said. It was a blunt question, but strangely, it didn't bother me.

– You're a writer or something, right?

– According to the tax office definition, yes.

– And that's why you make so little?

– Well, it's not exactly a high-return profession.

– Yeah, seems that way – he said, sounding bored. He had the look of a solo golfer forced to pair up with a beginner. I felt a bit self-conscious.

– I feel like I finally understand what it means to shovel money – my rich friend said.

– And what does it feel like?

– Like I’m being chased by Indians.

m

インテリア | interior

Interior design is probably one of those topics you’ll find in guides about how to socialize.

The bowed-leg coffee tables; the sleek Italian-style shelving units; the “UNDER CONSTRUCTION” sign stolen in the high of a drunken night out; the bookshelf arranged so the spines of only the most intellectually daunting titles are visible; or even the pair of panties pinned to the wall under the pretext that they’re “cute” or something like that—all of it, every item, exists not just for ourselves but for others.

The way a room is designed stands quietly in the background of conversation, filling in what its host leaves unsaid. The guest looks around and tries to guess—gently or provocatively—what the host is really thinking.

And the host, already knowing the answer, notices the guest's gaze lingering on some detail in the decor, lets the conversation pause, and creates a silence there.

– This is a lovely room.

– But everything in it is cheap...

– It's charming; it really suits you.

– Ah, look at the pattern on that curtain. If you look closely, it's a squirrel holding a nut.

– Oh, you're right. The little squirrel's cute. Kind of reminds me of you.

– No it doesn't. Ah, stop it... ah... hm...

As we can see from the exchange above, interior design plays a decisive role in social interaction, supplementing what we say aloud. Of course, there are also people who never receive guests and yet still hang squirrel-print curtains or buy plants just to quietly observe them. But that's a bit like writing in a diary; it's perfectly natural. Some forms of interior decoration have nothing to do with socializing.

Then there are those who lean toward, "I love red, so my room is all red!"—which is a bit like throwing a wild party every day. Even those skilled in the art of socializing might find that a bit much.

What interests me at the moment is this: where does interior design draw the line when it comes to decorating a Buddhist altar?

ウ

ウエスト・コースト | west coast

Anyone looks foolish standing under a cherry tree in full bloom.

When someone takes a commemorative photo on the West Coast, it may seem obvious that every face in the shot was just smiling and saying “cheese” moments earlier. But often, that’s just a misunderstanding on the part of whoever’s looking at the photo.

On the West Coast of the United States, it’s easy to assume everyone walking around is performing joy; but in a way, I think some of them are performing melancholy too.

Now, writing something under the title *West Coast*, I feel somewhat uneasy—as if a cherry tree were blooming quietly above my head.

i

エ

エチケット | etiquette

How lovely you were back in those days when you attended etiquette school.

You sipped soup without a sound, and played the piano so gently.

When you bowed, your reverence was deeper than the ocean.

The chopsticks you used barely got more than two millimeters dirty. When you finished eating fish, the leftover bones looked so neatly arranged I almost wanted to have them mounted.

Your bra covered your chest completely, and the elastic band of your pants sat well above your belly button.

No bad breath, your hair brushed smooth and shining, a faint scent of soap drifting from your entire body.

Why did you leave etiquette school?

I was the one who used to say that etiquette was nonsense, but you always corrected me — very modestly — saying you didn't see it that way.

Lately, I've started brushing my teeth for three minutes, three times a day — morning, afternoon, and night.

I also make a point to greet people with full energy: "Good morning!" "Good afternoon!" "Good evening!"

I've completely stopped watching TV during meals, and I always wash my hands and rinse my mouth when I get home.

Maybe it's rude to dwell on things like this, but I'm worried; I think you have a boyfriend.

I overheard you talking on the phone, accidentally.

What does "if it's second base, it's fine" mean? What is second base? Is it a kiss? Sorry for thinking about weird things like that.

Let's talk properly when you get home, okay?

I'm off to work.

7:30 a.m.

Your father

i

エリート | élite

The guy I went on a date with the other day is part of the elite.

Naturally, he's an undergrad at the University of Tokyo.

– I graduated from a pretty modest school – was all he said, but I could tell by the way his fingers idly played with a maidenhair fern leaf.

We sat together on a bench in the park and talked about ourselves.

When my shoulders trembled from the cold, he took off his own coat and wrapped it around me. On the back, I saw a label that read *Burberry*.

His father is a major executive at that giant steel company, Shin Nippon Seitetsu. That's something I figured out thanks to women's intuition. I just had a vision, out of nowhere.

– You're very perceptive – he laughed. He had sharp instincts too. He guessed right away that I worked as a beautician.

At the Tsubaki House nightclub, he asked me out sweetly:

– Want to go on a date?

His car is a Benz. When I saw the logo on his keychain, I asked him cautiously:

– Is that a Benz?

– Yes, it's a Benz – he answered.

We talked endlessly about Shakespeare, a favorite of ours. He said he especially liked Olivia Hussey.

When he wanted to get more intimate with me, he said:

– I won't force you into anything.

“Elite people really are so kind!” I thought.

Even when he was naked, he gave off that elite aura—maybe even more than when he had clothes on.

Although he tried very hard to hide it, tattooed in enormous letters across his back were the words: E L I T E.

エレベーター | elevator

- Please state your floor – said the elevator attendant.
- 176th floor – said the middle-aged man.
- 176th floor, understood.
- 328th floor – said a young woman. She had stunning legs.
- 328th floor, understood.
- 413th floor – I said.
- I’m sorry – said the attendant, looking truly apologetic. – This elevator only goes up to the 390th floor.
- Oh no – I said. – I happened to forget three pairs of socks on the 413th floor.
- Then come to my place – said the beautiful-legged young woman, in a sweet voice. – I live on the 328th floor, but I have at least one pair of socks.

Exactly what I needed.

Her room was wonderful. The lighting, the choice of furniture, the background music, the air conditioning, the softness of the carpet—everything was just right. Everything matched my tastes as if she had researched my preferences in advance. If I were James Bond, I would have suspected something. But luckily, I wasn’t James Bond. I

wasn't Mark Hammer either, or Lew Archer, or Ma Helm, or Philip Marlowe.

How wonderful it is to be an ordinary citizen!

We talked for hours over chilled champagne about music, literature, sports, and how to care for tropical fish. Our tastes were so perfectly aligned, it felt almost miraculous. The only thing that bothered me a little was the thought of the three pairs of socks I had left on the 413th floor.

– Ah, yes, the socks – she said, taking my hand and leading me to another room. She gently opened a drawer of a large mahogany wardrobe. Inside were around two hundred pairs of socks in all colors, folded and arranged with care, like jewels.

– Do you like them?

– They're perfect – I sighed. – Truly magnificent!

– You can have them all, if you want.

I pulled her toward me and pressed my lips to hers. Her nightgown slipped softly to the floor.

Now I have two hundred pairs of socks.

m

オ

オイル・サーディン | oil sardine

Hey, ump

where are you looking?

Yesterday I ate a can of sardines,
and they were still better than you.

10/4/1981

**From the Special Anthology of the Yakult Swallows⁴*

m

オール・ナイト | all night

When it comes to a Mr. All-Night, Tsuneyoshi has to be mentioned.

There are other gigolos who stay up all night, but they can't be called Mr. All-Night.

Every night, when the 11 p.m. Professional Baseball News ends, Tsuneyoshi exclaims:

“Oh!”

⁴ The Tokyo Yakult Swallows is a professional Japanese baseball team, of which Haruki Murakami is an honorary member.

The “I’m heading out!” that would normally follow is left unsaid. Yet the strangest thing is that there’s no one around to hear that “Oh.”

Mika is still at work, occupied with various kinds of services. As for the nature of these services: spreading bath lotion, offering a little favor when the client's instrument surfaces from the bathwater... things along those lines.

Even while working, when it's time for that “Oh!”—Mika responds with an “Ah!” A single “Ah!”—private in nature—won’t bother anyone amid her duties. So far, none of the clients have paused in confusion to ask, “Ah! What?”

Tsuneyoshi is Mika’s private gigolo. She was the one who proposed he take on that role. He thought it would be a one-time favor and generously agreed. Mika often wonders whether she loves Tsuneyoshi or not. These thoughts come especially during work hours, which naturally runs the risk of distraction and getting scolded by the manager. Her feelings for Tsuneyoshi are clearly a personal matter; they’re not something she should be thinking about while lathering up a client’s body or offering a happy ending to an eager patron. Still, neither Yamazaki, her manager, nor the clients submerged in hot water with their business hanging between their thighs, nor those napping on the mats—none of them understand what goes on in Mika’s heart. So long as it doesn’t truly interfere with her work, no one complains.

Tsuneyoshi triggers the building’s very secure electronic lock with a click and starts tapping his feet. His eggplant-colored running shoes make noise against the red carpet in the hallway. Tsuneyoshi doesn’t take the elevator; instead, he leaves through the spiral emergency stairwell. It’s

nearly the end of autumn, and he can already see his breath turning white in the air.

Tsuneyoshi feels deeply pleased about the crushing victory of the Yomiuri Giants. He had moved in with Mika in April, just as the professional baseball season began. The Giants had already crushed the Chunichi Dragons early on. Come to think of it, it had been drizzling that day too, just as cold as today. He and Mika would still be together when the weather warmed up again, and when it turned cold once more. That much, he was sure of. Not because of the Giants, even though he was a devoted fan. That was clear. Still, would they be living in such happiness if the Giants were in third place? Tsuneyoshi thinks maybe not.

By the time Tsuneyoshi reaches the public park halfway between the apartment and Mika's workplace, after a light jog, the "11 o'clock" hour comes to an end—playing out in a scat rhythm:

dabadadabadabadabada-dabadaba-dada, dabadaba, washu...

Seated on a bench, wiping away sweat, Tsuneyoshi looks up at the sky and calls Mika's name. At that same moment, Mika also glances at the ceiling—and thinks of Tsuneyoshi. It's a promise between them.

They do it on rainy days. They do it on clear nights too.

Unlike the other employees, Mika gets off work at 1 a.m.

Once Mika changes into her regular clothes, Tsuneyoshi stops running and signals for a taxi in front of the 24-hour pharmacy. While catching her breath in the car and sipping canned coffee, Mika jogs toward him.

They ride the taxi back to the apartment, which was the starting point of his run.

Even Tsuneyoshi isn't exactly sure how this routine began. He had simply wanted to do something Mika might enjoy—and just started running.

They return home and shower together; Tsuneyoshi reads a book to Mika. He reads softly, right near her ear. It lasts about two hours.

Then, for half an hour, he listens while she talks, as they drink beer.

A little before dawn, they make love. Mika has sex plenty during her shifts; in the hours she spends with Tsuneyoshi, she looks for comfort and lightness. So the sleepy Tsuneyoshi touches her with real gentleness, without any demands.

And then, they sleep.

Right as they're about to drift off, Mika always asks:

— Can you stay tomorrow too?

— I will — Tsuneyoshi replies. Rolling over in bed, he's already asleep.

Mika falls asleep smiling, thinking: "Could someone this good really still be here tomorrow?"

One time, an intellectual friend told her that a gigolo like that entering her life must've been due to planetary alignment.

— Noooooonsense — Tsuneyoshi had laughed.

Mika laughed too. Ha ha ha.

オニオン・スープ | onion soup

We had sex, the way Mother Nature intended.

An hour later, we had sex again — again, as Mother Nature intended.

Phew.

The first time wasn't bad, though it was nothing more than decent. How to put it? I can't deny that it felt like there was a retired lion in the next room, loudly brushing its teeth.

The second time, though, was truly wonderful.

I couldn't possibly describe how incredible it was. There's something magical about being unable to express physical sensations in words. If not for moments like that, there would hardly be a reason to live.

At one in the morning, after the second round of sex, we were smoking in bed. In the next room, the lion was heating up soup for a late-night snack.

The familiar scent of onions slipped through the crack in the door. A soft humidity wrapped around us, like one of those thought bubbles you see in comics. She rested the palm of her small hand on my chest.

m

カ

カーペット | carpet

What's the point of a tatami hidden under a carpet?

It's like the rice hidden beneath the cutlet and fried egg in a katsudon bowl. Still, few people would associate the rice in that context with the phrase "false accusation".

There's also a fleeting similarity to books titled something like "*How to Please a Woman*" — when wrapped in the branded paper from a bookstore. But those who own such books usually care more about the contents than the cover.

So what's the connection between sunglasses and eyes?

It seems few people sleep or shower with their sunglasses on, so in that sense, they're less tragic than the tatami.

Personalities hidden behind business cards? That's not quite the same, since those identities are concealed on purpose.

How about a long torso dressed in foreign-brand clothes?

That might be the closest comparison.

カーマストラ | kamasutra

— Happy birthday — she said, holding out a beautiful little box wrapped with a green ribbon.

We were at an excellent restaurant on the thirty-second floor of a skyscraper, sipping watered-down Scotch whisky and eating roast beef. It was, after all, my birthday.

— What do you think it is? Try to guess.

— A hair trimmer — I said. I was joking, of course.

When I unwrapped the gift, I found a small, shiny beige box. Inside it was a slip of paper the size of a movie ticket. On the paper, it said: *Fun Ticket*.

— You can use it whenever you like — she said.

When I got home, I opened the top drawer of my desk. Inside were 78 “fun tickets,” in different colors, given to me by 78 different girls.

I took them all out and added the latest one to the stack, bringing the total to seventy-nine.

A decent number.

I dug a hole in the garden with a spade and buried the candy tin where I had stuffed all seventy-nine “fun tickets” together. Then, I took the hose and watered the spot.

That’s just the kind of person I am.

m

カツレツ | cutlet

When “cutlets” are mentioned at the Kobe City Hall, they always mean beef cutlets. Not breaded pork, not Cordon Bleu—just the dignified beef cutlet.

Sadly, they don’t exist in Tokyo. A capital city with no beef cutlets is like Stalingrad in 1942.

As for me, I’m such an enthusiast that just thinking about them makes me want to hop on the bullet train immediately.

Beef cutlets are delicious even between slices of bread. You spread butter and mustard on two slices of sandwich bread, toast the cutlet lightly, add a couple of sprigs of watercress, and it’s ready. Pair it with unsweetened iced tea — or a Märzen beer... *aah, aah...*

If not served in a sandwich, the cutlet should be about the size of the sole of a women’s size 7 shoe.

The meat shouldn’t be too thick or too thin. If too thin, it’s disappointing; too thick, and it becomes visually off-putting. And absolutely never—under any circumstances—should it have gristle.

When frying, the coating should be a touch firmer and crispier than that of pork cutlets. The breadcrumbs shouldn’t be too fine, either.

As for side dishes, shredded cabbage is a no-go. Serving beef cutlets with shredded cabbage is like slapping a Playboy bunny sticker on a Rolls-Royce.

A bit of pasta seasoned with just salt, a few green beans, some watercress—something in that vein is more than enough. If someone dares to show up with “glazed carrots”... toss them in an ashtray.

Now we come to the rice. Ideally, barley rice would be best, but since it’s hard to find in restaurants, white rice will have to do.

I’m not a fan of those small round dinner rolls, either.

Generally, the way of eating is similar to pork cutlets. But the feeling when you slice through is completely different.

The crispiness of the crust, the tenderness that gives way to the distinct firmness of the beef beneath, and then again the crust—until your knife finally hits the plate with that dry tap.

It’s absolutely irresistible.

When I was a child, my father used to take me to the movies; on the way back, we’d always stop to eat beef cutlets. From the window, you could see the port, and beyond it, the clear silhouette of Mount Rokkō.

Whenever I read travel guides on Kobe, they only ever talk about beef steak. (Not that you even need to go to Kobe for it—with enough money, you’ll find it in plenty of Tokyo restaurants.)

But there’s not a single mention of beef cutlets.

Why is that?

m

キ

キャンプ・ファイア | camp fire

I wonder what those girls are really thinking when they laugh — ha, ha, ha — in response to someone singing, “*Hey, little lady, let’s go to the woods?*”⁵

One shouldn’t dodge questions with giggles.

If you want to go, you should say yes; if you don’t, then just say no.

I generally dislike songs about mountains⁶.

Take that one with the lyrics, “Don’t fall in love with a mountain man” — there’s no way to confirm that anyone actually did fall in love with him or what came of it, so I can’t help but think it’s pure presumption.

I also dislike lyrics like “even beauties fart and crap too”, in *10,000 Shaku in the Alps*⁷. Why go out of your way to point out that even beautiful women do those things? Leave that to those who aren’t pretty — that would be enough. I really can’t stand that kind of shock-value realism.

⁵ 「森へ行きましょう」 (“Let’s Go to the Woods”) is a children’s rhyme, while 「山男の歌」 (“Song of the Mountain Man”) is a 1962 song by the Japanese band DARK DUCKS.

⁶ The songs Ode to the Snowy Mountain, 10,000 Shaku in the Alps and Song of the Mountain Man (org. 「雪山讃歌」, 「アルプス一万尺」 and 「山男の歌」) mentioned in this tale are often sung around campfires or in connection with the sport of mountaineering.

⁷ 「アルプス一万尺」 (“10,000 Shaku in the Alps”) is also a children’s song, whose melody is based on the American song Yankee Doodle. Shaku is a Japanese unit of measurement, equivalent to about 30 cm.

That other song, “*If one day I die on a mountain...*”⁸ has something ominous about it, it weighs on the heart.

Passing by corpses — that kind of thing feels more like *The Internationale*⁹.

What other sport inspires so much music?

At most, what comes to mind are a few lines like, “*pedaling, pedaling, woohoo!, woohoo!*” or “*did you meet that little baseball player?*”¹⁰

There’s even a certain arrogance in *Ode to the Snowy Mountain* when they sing, “*we can’t live in the city anymore...*” It makes you want to say, well, if you can’t live in the city, then just don’t.

I can’t help but feel they see themselves as some kind of chosen people — it’s unsettling.

I wish they’d sing songs with lyrics more like, “*climbing mountains is pretty cool!*” or “*there are ugly girls in the mountains too, but they’ve got kind hearts, and in a way, maybe that makes them even better than the beauties!*” or “*sure, it gets cold when it snows, but let’s hang in there and keep climbing, how about it?*” — songs that show honesty and humility, without being off-putting, you know?

i

⁸ From the song 「いつか或る日」, also by the band DARK DUCKS; apparently based on a poem by French mountaineer Roger Duplat.

⁹ Internationalist anthem that gained notoriety when it became the anthem of the Soviet Union.

¹⁰ Probable references to the songs 「青春サイクリング」 (“The Pedaling of Youth”) by Kiyoshi Hikawa; and 「野球小僧」 (“Baseball Boy”) by Katsuhiko Haida.

ク

クイズ・ショー | quiz show

— Let's move on to the first question: between two Kagoshima black pigs and two goats, which ones are black?

I was the one who hit the buzzer fastest.

— The two black pigs!

— Correct! Your chair moves up one step. Now, next question. This one's super easy, so make sure to hit the button quickly, okay?

“Who is the most beautiful woman on this island? Please choose one of the following three: 1) the king's eldest daughter, 2) the king's middle daughter, or 3) the king's youngest daughter!”

What a terrible question. Even the black pigs know that all three princesses of the royal family are the biggest eyesores on the island.

None of the contestants moved, no one pressed the buzzer.

— Oh, looks like you're having trouble choosing because they're all so stunning! Then we'll have to nominate someone to answer. Number 5, go ahead.

That was my number. It didn't matter if I was right or wrong, so I just blurted out “Number 1” without thinking much. The host shouted before I could even finish my sentence:

— Yes! Correct answer. Doing well, Number 5. On to question three.

Correct? If the most beautiful woman on the island is the 45-year-old who weighs 120 kilos, then we've got a serious problem.

— Here we go: according to the old saying, when the rain frog croaks, it means rain is coming. So, what's the weather like when the fine-weather frog croaks? This question comes straight from the king!

There's no such thing as a "fine-weather frog" on this island...?

Young Number 2 hit the buzzer.

— The weather is nice! — Buzzzz. Wrong answer bell.

— Too bad! Let's pick another contestant. You there, Number 5, you seem to be on a lucky streak. What's your answer?

— Would it be... "It rains"? — I replied, exasperated.

— Perfect! Correct answer. Number 5, you now advance to the Royal Question on the third step!

"Question four. What kind of person is the ruler of this island? Choose one: 1) an admirable person; 2) a wonderful person; or 3) a magnificent person."

Even though the only TV channel on this island is the Royal Family Network, they really shouldn't be putting out a question like that.

— Oh, come on now. Number 5 already has the right answer in mind. Exactly. It's number 3), "a magnificent person." Number 5, up you go again.

I somehow manage to get all ten questions right.

The other contestants don't move a single step upward. They just smile silently in an unsettling way.

The host is practically dancing with excitement.

— Now, for Number 5, who climbed ten steps in a row without pause, with overwhelming force: a colossal gift from the king awaits!

Somehow, I get the feeling I'm being set up, but receiving something wouldn't be bad at all.

Last week, a guy from a nearby village won a black pig. And the week before that, the one who got ten questions right was awarded a white-painted canoe and apparently had to carry it over the mountains back home.

Even so, this week's *Quiz Royale: Door to Happiness* seems to be progressing a bit hastily.

At the center of the audience, our monarch — surrounded by kneeling concubines — watched the stage with a strangely radiant expression. The three ugly sisters bared their gums shamelessly, laughing nonstop.

— Now, this week's prize!

The drums beat heavily.

— Happiness will quite literally knock on your door!

Some children pulled shut the heavy curtains around the studio, dimming the room.

The spotlight lights circled around the audience, as if scanning for someone, then came to a halt.

Squinting against the brightness, the eldest daughter — the one weighing 120 kilos — stood up, stared at me intently, then looked down shyly.

(i)

クールミントガム | cool mint gum

It's been a long time, but I remember it clearly: I once saw a young woman, completely by chance, driving a dark gray Volkswagen. She wore a pink summer dress, and her well-shaped breasts pushed forward like two jet engines. She also wore white sandals. The reason I remember such a small detail about the sandals is that she parked right in front of the bench I was sitting on — and only then put them on her feet, meaning she'd been driving barefoot.

Then she stepped out of the car, walked past me, and went into a store, where she bought a pack of mint gum.

I watched her the entire time. And it was a worthwhile sight, the dress fit her perfectly. Her shoulders were smooth and round, her stomach flat like a sheet of drawing paper, and her whole body was lithe. She looked like the kind of girl who had inherited all of the summer of 1967 just for herself. It felt as though everything about that summer had been carefully stored away in her bedroom wardrobe — like underwear folded with the utmost care.

She tore the seal on the mint gum, put a piece in her mouth, and walked past me again — chewing with charming grace, chomp chomp. Then the dark gray Volkswagen slid back into the current of summer, graceful as a trout.

It's been fourteen years since then. But I still remember her every time I see a dark gray Volkswagen.

m

クラブ | club

I was watching a variety show aimed at a young audience.

In the second half of the program, there was a fortune-telling segment using playing cards — which, according to my friends, was usually spot-on.

I'm a Scorpio, and that day, apparently, my luck was at its peak.

— Looks like it'll be a lucky weekend; one of those where you stumble and find a gold ring — said a woman dressed in gypsy clothing, speaking with complete confidence.

This kind of thing used to be accurate. Feeling fully energized, I started imagining how my day might unfold.

Time to gather some courage and do all the things I normally can't bring myself to do.

I was still just a kid back then.

The woman finished by reading the fortune for Pisces.

She drew the five of clubs from the deck¹¹.

— For Pisceans: beware of after-school clubs starting at five in the afternoon.

I was still young — but as I stood up from the table, for some reason, I had the sense that this wasn't going to be such a lucky day after all.

I started that day already late.

i

クレープ・ドロップス | grape drops

When my father, a Grape Drop, died in 1806, I was only ten years old. That was how I became an orphan.

But that didn't earn me any sympathy. There were far more orphans back then than there are now, after all — and besides, I was a Grape Drop. Who would care what happened to me?

Even at the orphanage, they made fun of me. The ones who called the shots there were the Orange and Lemon Drop orphans.

¹¹ In Japanese, the word クラブ (from the English club), or club, can also mean the suit of clubs, just like the original English word.

— *Grape Drops*? Never heard of those — they told me.

So I ran away from the orphanage and became a cowboy's assistant in a traveling circus. The old cowboy was a good man; he'd share any extra food with me and listened intently whenever I spoke about the Grape Drops.

— My mother's out there somewhere — I'd say. — She's a very beautiful Grape Drop.

— Heh, heh. Want some milk? — he'd reply. The old cowboy was practically deaf.

But those happy days didn't last. The cruel lion tamer killed our cow just to eat her ribs. Lion tamers love beef ribs. The shock of it killed the old cowboy, and I fled the circus and became the mascot dog of a cavalry unit. In 1889, during the Apache Rebellion, I bit three natives to death — that's when I earned the nickname White Fang. The President invited me to the White House, but I politely declined. My goal was to find my mother.

The first time I heard anything about the Grape Drops again was in 1936, in Madrid, during the Spanish Civil War. I was drinking sherry with Hemingway.

— Hey, Ernest. What did you just say?

Hemingway was slumped over the table, completely drunk. I smacked him on the head with a revolver and splashed cold water on him.

— Grape beer! — he shouted.

— No — I said, and hit him with the revolver again.

— *Grape beer.*

Hemingway didn't regain consciousness for three days.

— Grape Drops — he finally said. — I get it now. You're the son of the Grape Drop.

— Tell me about my mother.

— No, it's better if you don't ask about that.

But when I pulled out the revolver, he began to talk.

— Last summer, your mother was violated by some rebel soldiers, and they turned her into tire sealant for truck wheels.

So I spent three years traveling across Spain, checking truck tires. But in the end, I never found my mother.

— Dear Ernest — I wrote in a letter to Hemingway. — If you've learned anything more about the Grape Drops since then, I'd like to know.

He replied that he hadn't heard anything else, and that I should try asking Steinbeck — whom I managed to catch in Stockholm during his Nobel Prize ceremony.

— Hey, John, do you know anything about Grape Drops?

— Grape Drops, huh? — Steinbeck sighed. — If memory serves, about two years ago I saw one in a small town in Texas. By that time, it had become an orthopedic belt for correcting hernias.

I'm always sucking on grape drops to cut down on the number of cigarettes I smoke. I wrote this short piece for them.

ケ

K | k

K 11th letter of the alphabet.

(Example sentence) “One morning, upon waking, K had turned into a doormat.”

One morning, upon waking, K had turned into a doormat.

— What a mess... — K thought. — And a doormat, of all things...

The first to find K transformed into a doormat was a friend who worked at city hall.

— Hey, quit messing around — he said. — Is this some kind of rehearsal for the company’s year-end party?

— No, seriously, I’ve actually turned into this — said K.

— Well, at least it’s not the worst thing. By the way, have you filed your metamorphosis registration yet?

— Metamorphosis registration?

— Your income tax will be calculated differently now, you know? When you become a doormat, there’s a roughly 10% drop in your tax deduction.

— That can’t be — said K.

— I mean it. Too bad you didn't turn into an iron. Then the deduction would've dropped by only 3%.

Next came a friend who was an art critic.

— At first glance, it looks like a doormat — he said.

— I am a doormat, in fact — said K.

— Do you have any proof of that?

— Try wiping your feet on me.

The friend wiped his feet. With that, it was confirmed that K was, indeed, a doormat.

— But why a doormat, of all things?

— It wasn't my choice.

— "It wasn't my choice?" — he repeated. — That's a line more Camusian than Kafkaesque.

Then came a friend who worked at a publishing house. She tripped over K, the doormat, and hit her head on a mailbox.

— Oh, sorry. I've been pulling all-nighters dealing with manuscripts, updating indexes, and all that... But putting that aside, why did you turn into a doormat?

— To escape reality — said K.

— Poor thing — she said. — Is there anything I can do? Maybe if I kiss you, you'll turn back into a human.

— That kind of logic went out with the 19th century — said K. — But if you could lay me down at the entrance of a women's dorm, that'd help a lot...

— That's easy. I don't mind. But I guess you won't be using your cassette player anymore, right? Mind if I keep it?

— Go ahead.

— I suppose you won't need those Boz or Paul Davis tapes either.

— I won't.

— I really like that Hawaiian shirt of yours, too.

— It's yours.

— Can I borrow the car too?

— Just change the oil now and then. And have someone check the clutch. It's been making a terrible noise.

— Sure, sure.

And so, K lived happily ever after at the entrance of a women's dorm, free of city hall, art critics, or publishing editors.

All things considered, being a doormat wasn't so bad after all.

m

コ

コイン | *coin*

A woman was kicking the automatic cold drink machine.

— Is there a problem?

— I put in the money, but nothing's coming out.

Her Villon boots, which were in fashion at the time, repeatedly flew at the vending machine. The sound of uncontrolled impact echoed through the narrow corridor where the concert was taking place. The bottles inside shook wildly on their shelves.

The woman tormented the machine persistently, but eventually gave up and walked toward the backstage area. Maybe she was a fan of one of the bands.

Once she was out of sight, the vending machine spoke to me.

— How frustrating! I want revenge.

— Are you asking for my help?

— On my lower right side, I have some money stored. It's locked, but if you push hard, it should open. I want to hire your help with that money.

I did as it said, but when I opened the compartment, there was no money inside.

— Oh. So that woman didn't even pay? That's outrageous. I'm really angry!

— Looks like you won't be able to pay my fee. Didn't anyone else buy a drink?

— Now that you mention it, someone came and collected my money earlier. Just my luck. I'm so sad.

— Seems like I'll have to become a volunteer soldier, then.

— If you do that, I'll be very grateful.

— Understood.

I searched for that woman, but in the end, I couldn't find her.

— Even if it takes a lifetime, keep searching for her for me. Hit her, kick her, shove a 100-yen coin into her... — said the vending machine, trembling.

Many years have passed since then, and I still haven't found that woman.

It's possible that the customer who made that request is no longer in this world either. But I remain in pursuit of the revenge that was entrusted to me.

i

コーヒー | coffee | café

On the front of that establishment hung a huge sign that simply read **COFFEE**. It wasn't the name of the place, nor a slogan. Just the word

COFFEE, written in black on a white background. To top it off, the sign tilted slightly upward, as if it had been staked there as a written provocation — aimed at the sky.

I really can't understand why someone would deliberately put up a sign like that. It was far too high for pedestrians on the sidewalk to see, and the font was ridiculously large. I only noticed it because, at that exact moment, I happened to be in a car, looking up at the sky for no particular reason — pure chance.

We were returning from a trip, completely exhausted. My friend, driving, yawned every twenty seconds, and his girlfriend was fast asleep in the passenger seat. The ashtray was full, and through the car speakers played a song by The Temptations about the temperature gap between February and May.

— Coffee — I read aloud.

— Coffee? — my friend asked.

— We just passed a sign that said **COFFEE**.

— You see those everywhere.

— But this one was like eight meters long, it just said **COFFEE**, and it was pointing at the sky — I protested.

— It's to avoid bombings — he said, after a yawn. — Like the Red Cross symbol. I mean, who'd bomb a coffee shop? Am I wrong?

— You're not — I said.

In a small old town along a national highway in the north, there's a café with a massive sign. Even today, people go there to have coffee. The

peacefulness unique to coffee is present there, and the drink is warm and delicious.

— Coffee — up in the sky, a young bombardier read aloud.

— Coffee? — asked the pilot.

— I see a sign that says coffee.

If it were a snowy February afternoon, it would no doubt be a breathtaking sight.

m

コーヒー・カップ | coffee cup | xícara de café

Maybe the most painful span of time in life is the hour right after you've put a girl into the taxi that's taking her home.

There's still a bit of her warmth left in the bed, and on the table sits a half-finished cup of coffee — that kind of feeling. It's an hour that resembles sitting at the bottom of an aquarium tank that's had all its water drained out. Even if you try to read a book or listen to a record, nothing sticks in your head. It doesn't even get there, really.

But I do feel a little hungry. So I eat natto with rice. I crack an egg. There's a bit of radish left, so I might as well make some miso soup. Since I'm at it, I could go for some dried fish too. Can't forget the pickled

vegetables either. And come to think of it, there are still some seaweed packs left from the Obon festival gifts.

By the time I've finished eating all that, that feeling of ennui is completely gone. It's a strange thing.

m

コカコーラ | coca cola

When it comes to the *person* who invented Coca-Cola, we really have no choice but to believe what the Coca-Cola Company claims. But if we're talking about the *animal* that invented Coca-Cola, then my research is without a doubt the most advanced in the field.

The jungles of interior Borneo are — as readers may already know — famous for the presence of the “Coca-Cola tree.”

Cutting down these “liquid trees” — which are seen internationally as natural wonders — has been taboo among the native population since prehistoric times.

Deeper within the jungle, there is a rocky hill where you can harvest “Coca-Cola caps” — It would be redundant to mention this to such well-informed readers, as it is common knowledge.

These “Coca-Cola caps” can be collected through open-pit mining or in open-air hot springs. However, since Spanish sailors in the early 16th

century had a habit of defecating near the area, the local population ceased approaching it, considering the site “filthy.” In reality, tourism around that rocky hill is discouraged due to the lingering smell of rancid olive oil.

To the north of those hills lie waterfalls, and in the pools beneath them, a dozen “Coca-Cola bottles” can be found neatly lined up; but because this natural miracle has become an object of worship for the locals, they cannot be touched or moved. It’s said that during World War II, some Japanese soldiers fled to the island and took a single bottle “to polish rice.” But according to an elder: “That’s not true. The count’s still exact”. This was reported in newspapers like *Overseas Topics*, so those who can read the news are surely aware. Still, I’ve taken the liberty of mentioning it here.

Now, how exactly did the animal who invented Coca-Cola — the “Coca-Cola monkey” — manage to extract Coca-Cola from the “Coca-Cola tree”?

Current theories suggest that the “Coca-Cola monkeys” extract Coca-Cola from the tree, pour it into Coca-Cola bottles, and seal them with Coca-Cola caps. But research has stalled at this stage. Other animals in the region — orangutans, African elephants, *Ultraman Tarōs*¹², paper wasps, and creatures resembling both pandas and Japanese beetles — all said they didn’t know. Meanwhile, the Coca-Cola monkeys merely giggled suggestively when researchers pointed a microphone at them:

— We’re not telling, heh heh heh.

¹² Main character of the 1970s Japanese television show of the same name, part of the science fiction series Ultraman.

In every TV show, that kind of laugh usually comes from the villain. So, at the international conference, it was unanimously agreed: “Based on our collective intuition built over many years, these monkeys are suspicious”.

However, when this hypothesis is reviewed in light of the research so far, it reaches at best the level of: “Well, now that you mention it... it kind of makes sense”.

Sensible readers will surely understand that such an unreliable study could never be included in a school textbook.

i

コンドル | condor

— On July 26th, you must not set even one foot outside your house — said the fortune teller.

— What about a hand? — I asked, nervous.

— A hand?

— If I don’t extend my hand outside, I won’t be able to get the newspaper.

— The hand doesn’t matter. As long as you don’t step outside with a foot.

— And if I do... what’ll happen?

- Something unimaginable will happen.
- Something unimaginable?
- Exactly.
- Like, could I get bitten by a giant anteater?
- That won't happen.
- Why not?
- Because now you've imagined it.

I see.

It's not that I particularly believed in fortune-telling, but on July 26th, I locked myself in at home and listened to all my Doors records while knocking back one can of beer after another from the fridge. Then, I tried to imagine as many unimaginable disasters as possible. As long as I could imagine them, the number of unimaginable disasters that could befall me would decrease.

But thinking about it, it's a pointless thing to do. No matter how much the number of disasters decreases, there would certainly be some "unimaginable disaster" left in the end.

Ah, whatever.

On July 26th, the weather was perfect. The sun shone down on the earth with such intensity that it felt like it was scorching the soles of your feet on a metaphysical level. You could hear the cheerful voices of children coming from the neighborhood pool.

The crisp, cool 25-meter pool...

No — there's probably an anaconda hidden there, waiting to ambush me.

I wrote in my notebook: "anaconda."

With that, the possibility of an anaconda was eliminated.

Which is kind of sad too, but it is what it is.

The clock passed noon, shadows stretched long, and evening came. On the table sat 17 empty beer cans in a row and a stack of 21 vinyl records. I was thoroughly fed up.

At 7:00 PM, the phone rang.

— Let's go out for drinks — said a voice.

— I can't — I replied.

— But today's a special day!

— For me too.

After writing "*alcohol poisoning*" in my notebook, I hung up.

At 11:15 PM, the phone rang again. A woman's voice.

— Ever since we broke up, I haven't stopped thinking about you.

— Hmm.

— And you know, I think I finally understand what you were trying to say back then.

— I see.

— Can we meet tonight?

I hung up the phone and wrote in my notebook: “venereal disease or pregnancy.”

At 11:55 PM, I got a call from the fortune teller.

— You didn’t leave the house, did you?

— Of course not — I said. — But I’d like to ask you one thing. When you said something unimaginable would happen, can you give me an example of what that might be?

— For example... maybe a condor.

— A condor?

— Did you think of condors at any point?

— No — I said.

— A condor could suddenly appear, grab you from behind, soar into the sky, and drop you into the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

Ah, yes. A condor.

The clock struck midnight.

m

サ

サーファー | surfer

I heard that people who pretend to be surfers even though they don't actually surf are called, with a certain amount of disdain, “city surfers”.

I was quite interested in how these despised city surfers reacted to this.

Perhaps they would pull a face and go catch a wave, saying:

— If that's the problem, I'll just go there, surf and that's it.

Or perhaps they would apologize, with the humility of a driver caught with a traffic violation, and stop acting.

However, a genuine “city surfer” surprised me with a completely unexpected attitude:

— It's just that we are city surfers — he replied, apparently at a loss for a way out.

Maybe at a loss for a way out is not the most accurate expression. Someone like him isn't taking offense because he's being persecuted, after all. Maybe without agitation is the most accurate expression. How do I know something like this?

I've been reading some magazines aimed at women and I've noticed that there are a lot of comments from women like, "My ideal type would be someone happy. Maybe someone like one of those city surfers." or "I've only dated college guys, but if it's casual, someone like a city surfer is better."

City surfers are probably looked down upon in men's magazines, but they're far from that in women's publications, where they're celebrated as a preferred "type."

When you go out on the streets with this in mind, you'll notice that there are a lot of young men who look like surfers. And each of them walks around with their chests open, comfortable in their own skin.

City surfers take the following attitude, without any reservations: "I like things... like surfing." And in the face of such boldness, there's no point in trying to distinguish the fake from the real.

Now that you think about it, kids have been wearing caps with the same design as professional baseball players for a long time; businessmen from such-and-such companies — with no connection to the sport whatsoever — wear imitations of the athletes' uniforms.

Maybe it was my mistake — I, who believed that city surfers had some kind of complex about real surfers.

Lately, it seems like there are people who approach girls with lines like "As for me, I'm active in nationalist groups," people who laugh and say "People who really have beliefs must have a screw loose."

Humans really are animals of wisdom...

サドン・デス | sudden death

After I started wearing glasses, many things around me became extremely clear. Although I hadn't noticed it myself, my vision had definitely become very bad—when I put on the glasses and turned around, it was as if I had been thrown into an entirely new world, a different dimension.

Some things that had been difficult to distinguish before became very vivid; and I began to see others that had been completely invisible before. Specifically speaking, the Giant Ape falls into the second category.

I have started to notice the presence of the Giant Ape on street corners around town since I started wearing glasses. It is something that has become very clear to me: until now, I had never laid eyes on anything like the Giant Ape.

According to what I recorded in my diary, I have been in the presence of the Giant Ape a total of seven times since I started wearing glasses four months ago. That is, 1.75 times per month. Separating by days of the week, there were two times on Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays, and once on Tuesdays. Of course, it is possible that this is a coincidence, but it can be assumed that the Giant Monkeys do not appear on weekends.

There are some peculiarities regarding the places where the Giant Monkeys make their appearances, so far they are restricted to the route taken by the Ginza subway line.

To describe in more detail:

(1) Around Omotesandō (three times)

(2) Around Aoyama-Itchōme (twice)

(3) Toranomom (once)

(4) Kyōbashi (once)

However, of course, these results exist under the condition that I actually happened to be there, by chance, to be able to see them — perhaps they also appear, in the same way, on the Marunouchi line. After all, in principle, the Giant Apes are free to go to Yotsuya or Korakuen Garden, as long as they go to the opposite platform at Akasaka-Mitsuke.

As for the number of Giant Apes, I cannot offer a definitive conclusion. The fact is that I may have seen the same Giant Ape all seven times; and it is also possible that they were seven different creatures. No matter how beautiful the world has become to me now through the glasses, it would be practically impossible to distinguish exactly the differences in fur of seven such similar Giant Apes. I do not like to make excuses, but is there really a human being capable of such a feat?

Of the seven Giant Apes, the one I remember most clearly is the one I saw in Kyōbashi. As I went up the stairs from the station to the streets, there it was, on the corner of the large Kimpōdō optical shop, facing Nihonbashi. It was the corner where you exited the Chūō Kōron headquarters onto the main street. In his hairy hand he held a huge wrench, patiently waiting for someone to turn the corner. The monkey was bent over, with his hands close to the ground, without moving a muscle. He was so completely still that, if it weren't for the white air that occasionally escaped from his mouth, I might have taken him for a mannequin, like those in taxidermy. However, this Giant Monkey was quite alive, and seemed about to knock someone out and kill them with the wrench he held tightly in his right hand.

That someone probably never dreamed that he would die at that moment, struck in the head. As for me, I had an important appointment that day, so I couldn't stay to watch what happened. Could it be that the Giant Monkey had succeeded in inflicting sudden death on that someone's head?

m

サラリーマン | salary man¹³

When it comes to a salary man whose hobby is watching the rain, there is no one who does not know him in the Marukomechō neighborhood.

Nobuyuki Tomita is an unusual Japanese man.

In foreign songs, one often hears lyrics like: “while watching the rain, and you this-and-this” or “the rain comes down, and I this-and-that.” Perhaps rain is something rare there, to the point that couples in love tend to stop to watch it without even realizing they are doing it.

But in Nobuyuki Tomita’s life, rain is definitely not a rare phenomenon.

Despite this, he stares at the rain. He makes it his hobby. He goes further: he announces to others that watching the rain is his hobby. On a Thursday afternoon that was alternately sunny and cloudy, he sneaked out of the office and went to a coffee shop.

¹³ The salaryman (in Japanese, pronounced sararīman), here translated as “salary man”, is a term closely connected to modern Japanese culture, bringing to mind the common Japanese salaryman, in a suit and tie, who works long hours in a company.

— A coffee. Black.

The cream and sugar are served separately, so there's no real need to announce that you're going to drink it without sugar; but Nobuyuki Tomita, without thinking, ends up saying it.

A new waitress has been working at this café since yesterday.

— What I like to do is watch the rain. — Nobuyuki Tomita said softly to the newcomer, who was bringing the coffee.

— Oh, sorry. Wasn't that coffee? — The waitress hadn't quite heard what Nobuyuki Tomita had said, so she assumed she had done something wrong.

— No, it's about the rain.

— Oh, the rain? Sorry.

Nobuyuki Tomita raised the corners of his lips, with a satisfied smile, and shook his head.

— It's nice, isn't it? The coffee here.

— Ah... yes.

The waiter at the counter — who had been working there for a long time — beckoned the waitress over with a gesture.

— That customer over there is a bit strange. You don't have to deal with him.

The older man poured himself some of the freshly brewed coffee that was still in the siphon, drinking it from a cup he had taken out of the water.

The new waitress quit her job at the café a week later, but she told everyone at her next job — at a beauty salon — about the man named Nobuyuki Tomita, who announced his fondness for rain whenever he went for coffee.

— That’s strange, huh — her coworkers said, without showing much interest. But one of the customers, whose head was covered by the professional hair dryer, opened her mouth:

— With the noise of the hair dryer I couldn’t hear very well, but I know that guy too. Isn’t his name Yoshikawa? He used to frequent a café where I worked, in Hamamatsu.

— Yes. But no, he said his name was Tomita.” By the way, Akira Yokota is an unusual Japanese salaryman whose hobby is watching the rain, and there is no citizen of Heiwa City, Aichi, who is unaware of this fact.

Changing the subject, Keiichi Ogata is a salaryman who spends his free time watching the rain, as is well known to those who live in Oimatsu.

The weather this afternoon also varies between sunny and cloudy.

It seems that there are some, or several, salarymen whose hobby is watching the rain — a rare species even in Japan, all sitting in some cafe, drinking a cup of black coffee.

シ

シーズン | season

When people who don't know much about advertising decide to actually create an ad, certain patterns emerge.

The most typical of these is the question “*How about (...)?*”

No doubt the creator of the ad does this without realizing it, starting from the following point of view: that it would be arrogant to turn to someone who has never done a certain thing and order: “*Do this!*” But if he asks “*do this, please*” — it is as if he is asking the customer to take advantage. So, in order to be able to convey to the public that by doing what the ad suggests they will be acting in their own interest... nothing is better than the precise “*How about?*”

In the window of a hair salon or barber shop, there is often a poster with a handwritten slogan such as “*How about getting a perm with an iron NOW, you too?*” or “*Hey, elegant lady! How about a perm?*”

The more timid experts exaggerate — saying that the amateurs’ eye has become sharper lately. But, after all, amateurs are amateurs. And when it comes to writing a slogan for themselves, they immediately fall to the level of “*How about...?*” — so I don’t think there’s any need to worry about this so-called “*eye*” of amateurs.

A classic slogan comparable to “*How about...?*” is “*This summer...!*”

“*This summer, it’s eel!*” “*This summer, it’s rice!*” “*This summer, it’s slippers!*” “*This summer, it’s yukata!*”¹⁴ “*This summer, it’s tea!*” “*This*

¹⁴ Yukata is a simple, lightweight kimono traditionally worn in summer, usually at festivals or informal occasions.

summer, it's meat!" *"This summer, it's reading!"* I've even seen the masterpiece: *"This summer, it's taxi!"*

There's no need to emphasize *"this summer"* about items that are already common in summer, like yukata or slippers — and I think *"this summer"* would still be closer to acceptable. Maybe they were distracted by the eel and the meat. Basically, businesses and products that go into low season when summer arrives love this *"This summer!"* If all goes well, customers who hear *"This summer!"* might think: *"Oh, really. I don't usually see these things in the summer..."* However, if they're unlucky, there's a chance that the customer will get irritated, thinking it's a bad joke. The copywriters in the city — who so inadvertently write *"this summer!"* — must really believe in the effectiveness of words. Maybe they're the type who walks into a coffee shop dripping with sweat, and while drinking an iced coffee, decides to hit on a girl with the line: *"This summer, it's Yumiko!"* Meanwhile, Yumiko says: *"It's hot today, so please don't sit next to me, okay?"* Poof, that's when they feel the true impotence of words. To rub salt in the wound, Motoharu (oh, sorry, I ended up naming the guy, by accident) says:

— But... this summer! How about a getaway with me, Yumiko?!

Impossible! Honestly, it's impossible.

シーズン・オフ| off season

We were staying at a resort hotel during the off season. It was the worst time of the year: the snow on the streets had started to melt, and everything had turned to mud.

We didn't see any guests — other than ourselves — in the spacious dining room. In fact, there wasn't a single other person staying at the hotel. There were three waiters, and each one turned his back to us in turn to let out a yawn. The left half of the dining room was completely dark; the electricity had been turned off. In the midst of this, we enjoyed a dinner of sea bass. It felt exactly like the end of the world was near.

— ...And that's it — I said to my girlfriend, across the table, as I took a bite of a roll. "What do you think?"

She stared at me for about ten seconds, in silence.

— Sorry. I was just thinking about something else — Well, whatever. I stuffed a piece of bread into my mouth, which tasted very much like an unfriendly accountant.

There is no place quite so wonderful as a resort hotel in the off-season. When you are there, it is exactly like buying — on credit — the off-season for the following year.

m

シェービング・クリーム | shaving cream

There is something peculiar about shaving cream — it reminds me of a Scottish prince. For some reason or other, he is pretending to be shaving cream. I think it has something to do with the succession to the throne or something. Sometimes when I play a Julian Bream lute record, he will say something like, “Oh, you are good at that, huh. Could you turn it up a bit?”

My guess is that the succession to the Scottish throne is so complicated to understand that he must have gotten tired of it.

So the Scottish prince — who pretends to be a shaving cream — and I are sharing a girl. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, he sleeps with her in bed; and I sleep with a blanket in the kitchen. On Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, it's the other way around. Then on Sundays, she goes back to her family home in Yokohama; the Scottish prince, who pretends to be a shaving cream, and I spend an evening playing cards together. Around dawn, I go to bed — shaved.

m

シゲサト・イトイ | shigesato itoi

To be honest, I have only met Mr. Itoi a few times, and I don't really know any detailed facts about him. Due to the nature of my work, I spend a lot of time alone, and I also tend to be shy, so I don't meet people

in general—not just Mr. Itoi—very often. As a result, I don't know any detailed facts about people in general. But often, when I'm idly flipping through a magazine, I'll see Mr. Itoi's face or texts in passing, so it's as if I'm meeting him on a regular basis.

I've always been a fan of his prose, and I've been reading and enjoying his writing ever since the time when *Chūsan Kaikyū no Tomo* was serialized in *Takarajima* magazine¹⁵ almost ten years ago. So, personally, I don't mind at all that my encounters with Mr. Itoi are mediated by the written word. There are many situations in the world where a person is a good person, but his writing is terrible; or he is detestable as a person, but he writes very well. Mr. Itoi's prose is incredibly peculiar in this respect; something about it does not easily allow for this “..., but...” twist. It is something that distinguishes him quite distinctly, in tone, from the style of novelists.

I will make a comparison with street vendors, such as those who work at festivals (a strange comparison, but...). Even when a novelist says “that's it for today” and closes his “stand,” something tends to be left behind; a body heat, or a shadow. On the other hand, when Mr. Itoi's prose tells us that “that's it for today” — it really stops there. Nothing remains, other than the empty space that was there in the beginning. It is a perfect double optionality — to exist or not to exist — and in this sense, I believe that Mr. Itoi is a genius of temporal conversion in festivals. The normal empty space of everyday life, which should have been there before, suddenly transformed 100% into the empty space of a festival — or vice versa.

¹⁵ *Takarajima* was an underground and subculture magazine that started in the 1970s. In an interview with *BRUTUS* magazine, Murakami places the collection of the *Chūsan Kaikyū no Tomo* column, originally published in *Takarajima*, as the 37th of the 50 books that he “can't get rid of”, and mentions that it was there that he read Shigesato Itoi (among other writers) for the first time.

m

シティ・ボーイ | city boy

People who know how to mask the smell of sweat with cologne. 80% of these people don't carry a pocket square.

People who know the city's alleys and escape routes very well. For some reason, they don't know the geography of the Marunouchi area very well.

People whose specialty is seducing girls who aren't *city girls*. The reason, I don't really know.

i

シャワー | shower

The fact is that the shower alone is not enough.

For starters, the shower does not warm the body. Furthermore, the water temperature is not stable. And you can't stretch out either. If the metal connections that hold the shower head in place are not in good condition, the water from the shower does not reach where the shower is aimed. It is always making a sloooooooooow noise, which is annoying.

When you use the time in the bathtub to do other things that you would not normally do there, it is as if you are making good use of your time and making a profit; but if you leave the shower on to go do something else, it is just a waste.

Showers are not excellent at all.

I get irritated when I stay in hotels abroad and the rooms only have showers, no bathtubs. I feel like explaining the situation to them: “I want to *warm up!*” It’s quite possible that they’ll just laugh at me if I ask for a bathtub because “when I do other things while in the bathtub, it’s like I’m making good use of my time” — so I have no intention of saying that kind of thing. No, that’s not it. I don’t really have any intention of doing that kind of thing either. I want to warm up, I want to let my body soften in the water, I really want to get rid of the dirt. I wish people would understand this part of the Japanese spirit abroad as well.

But then again, there’s one case that irritates me even more.

It’s when there’s a bathtub — properly supplied with hot water — but there’s no shower attached.

There’s not even a place to wash your body, nor a cauldron for rinsing water. It’s a system of total and complete chaos, where they tell you to use the soap there, wash yourself any old way, and get out.

Are people in these countries happy to use these miserable bathrooms?

How did I get over these inferior bathing conditions? I want them to know how. For the first situation: without using soap, I submerge my body in water while still, and then get out. For the second case: I pour hot water into a cup in the sink, and then soak my body.

In recent years, I have mainly used the second strategy.

i

ジャングル・ブック | jungle book

— And can you fill your belly with something like love? — said the spider monkey.

m

ショート・ストップ | short stop

— Can a shortstop score? — asked an older friend of mine.

— In a way, yes, but it's more of a position where you prevent others from scoring.

— Oh, so it's out?

— No, sometimes it's considered safe.

— Are shortstop and shortground the same thing?

— More or less. Well, they both have something to do with “short”, but...

This interrogator of mine has been saving many brilliant questions up until this point.

— Are the people in the warm-up area strong?

— Did Reinbach¹⁶ cross the line or not?

Those who are close to such human beings want them to stay that way forever — and so they give ambiguous answers, so that other people remain in an eternal state of ignorance of what is happening. And sometimes they even whisper in their ears something like:

— Look, they just gave the signal for a home run. Everything will be fine.

i

ジンクス | jinx

The fact that a black cat crosses my path is no big deal to me. After all, I own a black cat.

However, on the days when I lose the Nobel Prize, something bad usually happens. Last year, the ten yen coin I used to pay for the public phone didn't go through, even though the call disconnected right in the middle of my conversation.

¹⁶ Mike Reinbach, professional baseball player.

Even the day I had a traffic accident and lost one of my legs... well, that kind of thing doesn't happen alone: I ended up dropping the sausage from my hot dog, all at once.

Rainy days are also no good. I end up having to wet the umbrella I just bought. The day a burglar broke into my house in the middle of the night was a very unlucky day: I forgot to take the trash out right before.

When I walked into the classroom and there were only beautiful students sitting in the front, it had to be bad luck. I was so happy that I ended up peeing my pants.

But the worst day was the one I died. The last time it happened to me was right on the day they started selling lottery tickets.

i

ス

スクイズ | squeeze¹⁷

— Between third base and home base...

said Osugi¹⁸ after the game.

— ...there was something like the Tropic of Cancer,

¹⁷ Squeeze is a baseball term.

¹⁸ Likely reference to player Katsuo Osugi, who played for the Tokyo Yakult Swallows.

And that,
stopped my foot.

2/9/1981

* Part of the Yakult Swallows Special Anthology.

m

スーパーマン | superman | superman

In order to chase a villain who had escaped into the middle of the ocean, Super Giant performed an incredible breaststroke demonstration.

I — who was a child at the time — didn't care much for breaststroke.

There was one more flaw in Super Giant. His groin area seemed very bulging, very swollen. Even as a child, I wondered if he wasn't embarrassed, showing off all that bulge.

Shōnen Jetto, in order to settle some case in Aoyama prefecture, would hang up the phone and immediately get on his scooter — which had supersonic speed — and speed off. His dog, Shen, followed behind him — running on its own two feet.

I — as a child — thought, “How can you say, ‘*Let's go, Shen!*’?”

I can't think of anything in particular that Nanairo Kamen did wrong; but his head was too similar in shape to a turnip. I — as a child — thought that anything would be better if it didn't have turnips added to it.

National Kid used National Electronics¹⁹ appliances too much. As a child, I found this disappointing.

They say that Superman was one of His Majesty the Emperor's favorite TV shows. When I heard this, I — as a child — thought Superman was a slob: always in a continuous mess, doing the same old things, without caring that even the Emperor himself was watching him.

I don't think about these things anymore — after all, I'm an adult now.

i

スター・ウォーズ | star wars

A long time ago,

In a galaxy far, far away...

The Yakult Swallows won...?

¹⁹ Super Giant, National Kid and Nanairo Kamen are tokusatsu heroes (a Japanese term for series or films with strong use of special effects, in the style of Kamen Rider and Ultraman). Shōnen Jetto is the protagonist of a manga of the same name, eventually adapted into a television series.

03/24/1986

* Part of the Yakult Swallows Special Anthology.

ステレオタイプ | stereotype

— So, as I was saying... — This young woman said. — Anyway, he was an incredibly brilliant person, but also incredibly strange.

— I see.

— He attended the oil painting course at Tokyo University of the Arts for about a semester, but he didn't want to know about the kind of painting they taught there, so he dropped out of college and went to work as a sailor on a cargo ship. He didn't have a penny.

— Oh...

— But when the ship arrived in Egypt, he suddenly got a fever, and they made him disembark. Then he spent three months in a hospital in Alexandria, but in the meantime the ship had already set sail back to Japan.

— What a problem!

— There was no way... so he settled there in Alexandria, and started reciting songs in a nightclub, to earn a living. He sings incredibly well, after all. It's worth listening to one of his songs, even if it's just once in your life.

— He really has talent, then.

— While he was there, a very rich Italian heard his music and, very moved, said that he had a yacht on which he sailed in the Mediterranean Sea, and asked if he wouldn't be interested in working there, as a crew member and singer.

— It sounds like a nice offer.

— But in reality it wasn't that; he discovered that the Italian was a smuggler, and a homosexual. He knew he had to escape as quickly as possible, but when he finally found out the truth, he was already about ten kilometers from the coast of Beirut...

— It was certainly the end for him.

— But he was a good swimmer and, with only his passport and wallet tied to his waist, he swam ten kilometers, in the sea at night, to the coast.

— What a problem.

— In Beirut, he saved money working in the ports and, by train, went from Iran to India. Along the way, he almost died from terrible diarrhea, and was also attacked by bandits in the mountains.

— He must have been tough.

— In the end, it took him two months to reach India. But he changed when he went to India. He himself says that without India, he wouldn't exist. It was an important experience in that sense.

— Incredible.

— He lived in India for four years. Then he returned to Japan. But he couldn't adapt, and Japan didn't accept him either. The artistic circles in

Japan are very authoritarian, and they don't recognize anything that goes beyond what is acceptable to them. For one reason or another, he ended up losing his taste for the mainstream art scene, and went to live in the mountains. That was twelve years ago.

— A long time.

— Today, while he works with his wife in the fields, he paints whenever and however he wants. He only comes to Tokyo two or three times a year. So he's not very well known. Although he's incredibly brilliant. — Uh... if you go to this guy's house, you can get some really fresh tomatoes?

— Yes, incredibly delicious.

— Is this a guy who drinks local sake served cold, and sings obscene songs when he gets excited?

— But how do you know?

— I had that impression, somehow.

— Hmm.

m

ストレート | straight

Playing cards against sea turtles is not an experience that makes your heart dance with excitement. This is because trying to guess what cards

they are holding or what they are thinking is as simple as trying to guess how many crows are resting on the snow. Playing night after night with this type of opponent is not at all interesting.

For example, during a game of poker — when the sea turtle suddenly puts his cards down on the table, gets off his chair and turns his shell twice against the floor, and returns to the table after taking a deep breath, this means he has got two pair. Basically, the sea turtle does this every time he gets two pair.

Sometimes the sea turtle goes to the kitchen, turns on the tap, and after spitting on both hands and washing them, he also gargles before returning. When this happens, it is a sign that he has a set. Despite this, the turtle itself is completely unaware of what it is doing.

So, obviously, I win every game. And every time, it tilts its head slightly to the side:

— It's like you can read my thoughts — says the sea turtle.

— That's not exactly the case. But you have some subtle habits, here and there — I say — Some involuntary behaviors, so to speak.

— Oh, I hadn't noticed. Habits, really, who would have thought? You're kind of a psychologist, huh.

— Oh, well... — I reply, with an awkward smile.

The sea turtle has torn a sheet of paper from the pad on the table and is currently, with his nostrils flaring, cutting it into a crescent shape with a pair of scissors. Apparently, he has managed to form a sequence of cards.

スペシャル・イシュー | special issue

The special edition of the magazine — with 24 and 32 pages of photogravures and typography, respectively — was titled: *The Last of the Snowmen*.

Right on the cover was the smiling face of an old snowman, who was over a hundred years old and had died at the end of the previous year. For human beings — beings with mild body temperatures, whose attention is focused solely on earning their daily bread — it is impossible to understand the willpower required to keep from melting for over a hundred years.

The coal eyes shine with a deep, transparent darkness, just one step closer to carbon's ultimate target — the diamond. In this photo, the words SEE YOU AGAIN are printed on a white background in English — but it seems to have been translated as a liberal translation of rest in peace, in Japanese. It is hard to call this an ideal translation.

The color photogravures that introduce the volume present the cultural heritage of snowmen, photos of their daily lives, the folk art they produce, and the clothes they usually wear. Of all the photos, the one in which the little snowmen, with their angelic expressions, stand in the middle of a field of tulips in full bloom while singing the snowmen's folk song, *Rick'n'Dunkle Chip*, would probably touch the hearts of even the humans who chased them.

The following pages, with black-and-white photographs, are not in very good taste. Crimes and bizarre incidents caused by snowmen are recounted in a strongly sarcastic text, accompanied by grainy photographs. In addition, there is a page of “medical data,” with detailed illustrations of anatomical drawings of the snowmen. There seems to have been quite a heated debate about editorial policies in this area. In particular, I only hope that expressing some things—such as certain positions—in a very suggestive way, as the hypocritical title “All the Love” implies, will not jeopardize the friendly relationship between snowmen and humans.

In the discussions on the text pages, there are many things worth noting.

I believe that a glimpse into the future of snowmen and humans lies at the intersection of the perspectives of the articles *Snow Gamelan Music in the Middle Dynastic Era* (by Inazō Hayakawa) and *Both West and East* (Zekō Matsumoto). I will avoid hasty conclusions, but the shocking report from a scientist’s point of view described in *The Fifth Ice Age Festival and the Human Gene* (Isamu Kanda) will certainly cause controversy for a while. However, the use of the dodoitsu rhythm, a regular poetic style that the author describes as having a “backward-looking tendency,” may end up having the opposite effect.

In his editorial afterword, Mr. Sono (a pseudonym) writes: “Cold love is a profoundly advanced form of warm love. It is possible that human beings—who heat up their feelings until they evaporate toward the heavens—are in fact eternally incapable of understanding snowmen, who seek to attain eternity by returning this love to zero point.”

セ

セーター | sweater

It's rare to be able to witness the migration of sweaters.

I once had this opportunity by chance. It was a winter night; the scenery was beautiful and warm.

My lover and I were having sex and eating potato chips in a small apartment in Higashi-Kōenji.

I was 19 at the time—and to a 19-year-old boy, even if it's a girl you met that very day, after spending half a night together, she becomes "*my love*".

My lover and I—with the intention of becoming each other's "my love"—boarded the subway together. It must have been around nine o'clock at night.

The lemon juice, ice, and gin were taken out of a paper bag. Two cloudy glasses were prepared.

We turned on the tap, and a shrill sound like a scream echoed through the silent apartment. We drank our gin and tonics as if we were part of a ritual.

Turning on the TV, which was painted red except for the cathode ray tubes, and using the fluorescent screen as a light source, we leaned against the window.

The student who lived in the apartment next door was using the water supply. A creaking sound filled the room.

We put off becoming lovers for a while longer and remained friends.

Soon, the TV screen went gray and only a buzzing sound began to play

My love and I, who had been talking until then as our words were reflected through the screen, now spoke to each other, looking directly at each other.

I turned down the volume—using my feet—only and left the screen on, although it showed nothing but light.

My love and I eventually ended up having sex.

As morning approached, we opened the windows to let in the winter breeze.

I was the first to see it: coming from the direction of Shinjuku, a flock of colorful sweaters, approaching in a dance-like flight.

Due to air currents and the weather, sweater migrations are mostly seen in winter, late at night.

— Amazing. We're really lucky.

In about thirty minutes, the group of sweaters disappeared in the direction of Ogikubo.

My love and I thought about telling our friends who lived in the neighborhood about this; but since the phone booth was quite far away, we decided to enjoy the event alone.

I still vividly remember that scene—of countless sweaters flying in a flock across the night sky—although I've completely forgotten my love's face.

i

ゼロックス | zerox

When the guy showed me a sheet of paper, laughing while telling me how strange it was that the man had the button on ON while talking about how he hated women who sat with their bare butts on the glass panel of the xerox machine, I felt ashamed, because I had said “let’s photocopy this” even though I thought they were both cut from the same cloth, since the sin there was not committed by any human being, but by the xerox machine, and besides, if we think from the logic that one should hate the sin and not the sinner, in fact, complaining about a machine is like hating a person, so why not put these annoyances aside and start a big fuss, people?, but as soon as I announced this, the boos started, the weekly publications ran, the babies cried, and when it became a really big problem, it would have been perfect if my eyes had been opened, but since a villain photocopied my dream, I ended up being arrested and sentenced to death.

i

ソ

ソフトクリーム | soft cream

Are there still criminals who try to kidnap children using the promise of an ice cream cone as bait?

Back when I was an age where being kidnapped wouldn't have been strange, perhaps this type of person was more common.

That impatient ice cream was our sweet admiration.

I knew that soft ice cream had been born by accident, the result of an ice cream manufacturer's mistake, and I also knew that the cones used as containers served as a way to give the tongue a break from the cold sensation. I also knew that there were three types — vanilla flavored in white, chocolate in brown and strawberry in red, and I knew that they would sell a mix of up to two flavors. I was also loyally aware that if I started licking the edges, the ice cream would soon start to melt and dirty my hands or fall onto the sidewalk; therefore, I had to hurry to the highest, tower-like part. The taste, on the other hand, was always a mystery.

The tongue forever registers a taste it judges bad, but surprisingly quickly forgets good tastes.

I always forgot the delicious taste of soft serve ice cream as I longingly ate the bottom of the crispy, deep cone with that mesh pattern.

If I could have eaten it for three days in a row, or even every two days, the delight of soft serve ice cream would have been mine, forever.

But a story like that, too good to be true, seemed too much like a dream. So my friends and I discussed among ourselves our knowledge about the incomprehensibly delicious soft serve ice cream.

i

ソフトボール | softball

According to research, the progress of a civilization is directly proportional to the number of softball enthusiasts in relation to the total population.

However, in the current scenario in which the very concepts of civilization and progress are being questioned, it is inevitable that some countries will be attacked by international public opinion when this study is published.

It can also be conjectured that this publication will cause the basic operations of softball, pure and innocent — such as throwing, hitting, running and catching — to attract general suspicion, as being impure and unseemly acts.

A maiden swings her arms, throws the ball. A young girl holds the bat, hits the ball. Employees of a company chase the fly ball during their lunch break. Elementary school students kick and run from home plate... It is possible that the time when these acts will be denied and prohibited is very near.

In developing countries, where a very small proportion of the population plays softball, it seems that anyone can still enjoy the game without any problem.

It is almost nostalgic to recall the days when we used to boast about our civilization in terms of the amount of paper consumed, the rate of functioning sewage systems, the consumption of beef, the prevalence of air conditioning.

To our softball-loving readers: this is not your fault at all.

It is simply fate. The phenomenon itself was a tragic configuration.

But this does not mean that there is no salvation. Apparently, a complementary study, conducted by academics from the same laboratory, raised the following question: “In addition to the proportion of softball enthusiasts in the general population, shouldn’t we also consider technical quality as a factor?” If this is true, this is great news. Gentlemen, you are capable of setting back the progress of civilization—by throwing as poorly as you can, hitting as poorly as you can, catching the ball as poorly as you can, running clumsily.

There are two choices: either reduce the number of people who play softball by filtering them out through intense training; or ensure the decline of skill by playing the sport terribly.

But until the research is published, and until the doubts about civilization and progress are cleared up, you are free to play softball without worry — so do your best today, as always.

So with this simple speech, I would like to conclude my opening remarks for the national softball tournament.

タ

ダイレクトメール | direct mail

We have received numerous questions about Dr. Yoneda's great invention, and so we would like to describe some of its innovative features, as far as possible.

The remarkable thing about Dr. Kumetarō Yoneda's great invention lies in the fact that it was not born out of a desire for academic merit; nor was it conceived as an instrument to be used in the pursuit of profit, manipulated by the so-called mercantile capital; it is also not the fruit of self-contained knowledge, originating from closed research systems, nor is it a convenience geared towards everyday use, of the kind that pleases the vulgar masses. It is something that can only be described as a gift brought to the world through divine revelation — the work of a god possessing great wisdom and magnificence. As you all know, the doctor is a remarkable man who boasts of his large frame, almost two meters tall, a robust and vigorous anthropologist of sponges, oblivious to academic cliques, business clans and family intrigues; on the other hand, when he returns home, he leads a happy and harmonious life, assuming the role of a good father and husband.

If we were to respond to you about the doctor's great invention without first informing you of this context, it is possible that misunderstandings would arise, and so we take the liberty of bringing these circumstances to light.

Frankly speaking, the purpose of his great invention is not defined at the present time.

The Urgent Regeneration of Bowel Movements Device, as named by the doctor himself, is not accompanied by mathematical formulas or technical graphs. This fact alone can be considered evidence that he is a genius chosen by heaven.

According to the doctor's oral explanation, his research is based on the hypothesis that if a human being A were suddenly struck by a strong urge to defecate while at an arbitrary point X, and a dog B were to defecate at an imaginary point Y, then the bowel movements of human being A would be attenuated — albeit to an immeasurably small degree.

It follows that the device itself would identify the imaginary point Y and fix dog B there.

Consequently, when this device is ready, and you on board the train feel a sudden urge to defecate — as soon as you think “Oh, how I wish I could poop now!” — you will then be able to imagine dog B defecating at a point Y (designated as your own residence). This will reduce the urge to defecate. You can be sure that dog B's defecation will coincide with your urge to defecate, within a margin of error of 24 hours.

That dog house pamphlet they sent me is quite complicated.

タクシー | taxi

— Sir, I'm not a tanuki, no. No cigarette smoke, please.

— Oh, sorry. I'm going to put it out now. — Biiii...

— The window! Open the window. Can't you see that the car is full of smoke? Damn, the car in front overtook without turning on its headlight.

— Kiiii...

— Oh, how dangerous, huh.

— What a joke. Here I am, earning my daily bread to support my wife and children... — Bi-bi!

— Excuse me, the air conditioning is a little cold...

— You're going to get out now, can you handle a little cold, right? I drive all day, and it gets so hot here that my body can't handle it. How about thinking a little about the situation of others too, huh? — Bii-bii.

— Oh, that's right, sorry.

— Well, if excuses alone could solve the problem, no one would need the police. Ah, we're here. — Screeeech...

— Er, I said “Omotesandō and Meiji-dōri intersection.” This is the Aoyama-dōri intersection...

— This is Omotesandō.

— This happens to be Omotesandō Station, and I'd like to get off at the intersection of Omotesandō and Meiji-dōri. — Biiii.

— I'm saying this is Omotesandō. Is there another Omotesandō? Huh?!
— Biiii, biiii.

— So, the street is Omotesandō, but my destination is where it intersects with Meiji-dōri.

— Isn't that in front of Meiji Shrine? Omotesandō is just this one — Biiiiin.

— I see. Please take me to the front of Meiji Shrine — Biiiiiiiin, bi-bi.

— — If you're going to open the window, close it properly afterwards. Otherwise, even with the air conditioning on, it won't do any good. — Beep.

— Arr. — Beep.

— It was 910 yen. — Screeech.

— Arr.

— 5000 yen?! I don't have any change. The customers have only given high marks so far, so there's no way to give them change.

— Well, then I'm not going to pay either, you idiot!

— What? Stop being so stupid!

— Just because I kept to myself, you think you're all that important, huh? It's only you guys who act all big over the customers.

— Oooh, then I'll call the police, how about that? The police!

— Before that, you better get your change from somewhere!

— Son of a bitch...

— What's up! — Pow, pow, crash, crash!

— Ouch, ouch! I get it, I get it! No need to pay, no. Stop it.

— I'll pay as much as necessary. Just let me hit you some more. You can call the police if you want. — POW!

— Oh, sorry, I'm serious, please stop!

— If you're going to give up for so little, then don't act so strong in the first place, you idiot...!

I'm proud of having done something like that — even if it was just here, on paper.

i

タルカム・パウダー | talcum powder

Sometimes, without warning, I get the feeling that in this world there are only me and talcum powder left.

This doesn't mean that talcum powder and I are that close. There are days when we don't understand each other at all. Whatever the case, there is something between us that could be called a second nature, cultivated through a whole sharing of experiences.

In other words, experiences like having slept with the same woman; contracted the same venereal disease; had the same size penis; received a bad word from the same critic; received the same refund for the prescription, things like that.

It would be highly unlikely to feel something like that about others: the hairbrush, the *eau de cologne*, the post-workout shampoo, the toothpaste, the bath towel. It's something that only happens with talcum powder. Why, I don't know.

m

チ

チャーリー・マヌエル | charlie manuel

*dedicated to Charlie Manuel*²⁰

Charlie Manuel,

as if picking up

a grenade dropped right in the middle of a minefield

caught a ball in flight

²⁰ Charlie Manuel is a professional baseball player who has played successfully for Japanese clubs including the Tokyo Yakult Swallows.

in right field

06/28/1981

* Part of the Yakult Swallows Special Anthology.

m

チューインガム その1 | chewing gum part 1

There are boys and girls who, lacking common sense, think of chewing gum as a substitute for brushing their teeth.

There are certainly places that are conducive to such foolish ideas taking shape. A typical example: the decadent metropolis where most of the people gathered there believe that prenuptial kissing should be allowed — if there is love.

Most people living in the modern world do not respect the role that chewing gum has played in history.

There are records that a certain historical figure, who wore shoes with rubber soles, had to stop for a few seconds when he realized that he had stepped on some gum residue. It is impossible for anyone with even a modicum of interest in getting ahead in life not to know that the carpenter who tried to build a house using solid sheets of gum is now the president of the Carpenter's brand of chewing gum.

That Dutch boy who appears in textbooks²¹ today — for sticking his finger in a dam burst — commented in a later interview about the importance of chewing gum daily.

The manufacturers of the tiles used in the special bus turned to each tile in order to persuade them: “You guys chew your gum well, huh!” — but were later vilified because the wicked tiles did not do what they were told.

The total sales of chewing gum worldwide is equivalent to the cost of transporting all the moles on the planet.

Chatting up a snobbish woman by calling out, “Hey, babe...” while chewing gum is an extremely educational act to learn about the greatness of the world. Likewise, knocking on doors — audibly chewing gum — to ask, “Which newspaper do you subscribe to?” also teaches us that newspapers are not always subscribed to based on their content.

However, the fact that chewing gum is no substitute for brushing your teeth is something that parents don’t usually teach.

i

チューインガム その2 | chewing gum part 2

Youth makes many things grow.

²¹ Reference to a Dutch story popularized by the book *Hans Brinker and the Silver Skates*, in which a boy spends the night with his finger in a hole to prevent the city from flooding.

If there were a man whose only thing that grew was the gum he chewed
— then he wouldn't be a normal man.

— You know that didn't come out this month...?

— I know. You told Momoko over the phone.

— What should I do?

— Whatever you think is best. If you want to have it, you can have it.

— Oh, not that...

— It's not something I can decide on my own. I'll respect your decision.

— What do you mean, respect?

— I'm telling you to do whatever you think is best.

— But I'm asking you exactly because I don't know...

— Have you stopped to think about it for a bit?

— Yes. I thought about it a lot, but after asking for advice, I don't know anymore. I can't trust you much.

— Why?

— When you were dating Ikuyo, you left her too, didn't you?

— I didn't run away, no. Ikuyo left me because she wanted to. She sent me away.

— So, is she lying?

— That's right.

— I'll ask her.

- Ask her. I'm telling the truth, so I don't have to be afraid of anything.
- So would it really be better for me to have it...?
- I already told you; do what you think is best.
- — How many children do you have?
- Two.
- And how are they now?
- One is the president of a steel company, and has two children in elementary school and one in middle school. The other married a professional cyclist.

I wonder what fate awaits the boys who spent their youth growing only gumballs.

i

テ

ディズニー・ランド | disney land

It is a mistake to think of Disneyland as an amusement park.

It is not precisely that it is not an amusement park; a more accurate way of saying it would be that it is like an exhibition that also meets the requirements of being considered an amusement park.

Fantasyland, Adventureland, Frontierland, Futureland — all built to fit the “Come and see!” model.

While there is a difference between whether we are looking while walking on our own two feet, or looking while sitting on moving objects, almost all of the facilities are intended to be eye-catching.

For example, imagine that you have purchased a ticket for the *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea* attraction. An amateur might think that the goal is to board a submarine. However, even after the submarine’s hatch is closed, it is not as if you are submerged in the middle of the ocean. It is really only a few meters deep. The speed is almost the same as a human walking. This is because, if the submarine were faster, it would not be possible to enjoy the view underwater. Of course, it is a “seabed” that exists a few meters below the surface.

The passengers simply continue to gaze devotedly, through the round window, at the “seabed” outside. A pre-recorded tape is played, with a dramatic narration saying things like: “*Wow! A giant octopus holding a treasure chest!*” or “*It looks like there is a mermaid over there behind the seaweed!*”

After making a complete turn and finishing watching the many tricks, it is over.

The system is identical to a “house of terror” in an amusement park.

No matter the name of the attraction, the principle is the same. It consists only of displaying the scenery.

It is a concept very similar to that of Disney cartoons.

That Disney guy — so obsessed with the act of “seeing” that he filled a ridiculously large area just for the purpose of putting that “seeing” up for sale —, if he were alive today, would probably be a terrible ignoramus, constantly bothering young people.

Some people must doubt it, so I’ll put it on record, but here’s the thing: there’s a left side and a right side to these submarines. There’s no way around it: it’s just too strange that, regardless of which side the passenger is sitting on, both sides look out their windows when they hear that “*Wow, a giant octopus...!*” broadcast.

I had the same doubt as a passenger. So I asked (“Excuse me, sorry...”) to take a peek at the window on the other side. And what did I see there, if not exactly what was being described in the broadcast?

There were two of the mechanisms that showed the octopus — one on each side — with the submarine’s own tracks acting as an axis of symmetry.

i

デート | date

Until then, I was totally okay with the kind of date my girlfriend likes.

That idea of going to the zoo to feed the orangutans bread and jam — thanks to my quick thinking — ended up being a great success. Without

the animal keeper seeing, I bribed the nearest chimpanzee to pass the orangutan a loaf of bread and jam in my place.

That was our first date.

When she asked me to go play monkey (the card game) in the middle of a cafe for couples, I felt a little uncomfortable; but I managed to regain my composure and did everything I could to make it a beautiful memory. The difficulty of playing monkey with just two people is that it is comparatively very easy to know who is holding the monkey — but I left the monkey card hidden in my shoe, so it ended up being a very exciting game.

We had another date on a day when it was raining heavily — and only one of us had an umbrella. Except when we were inside a building, she was the only one who could hold the umbrella.

A meeting in which each of us had to mention as many merits as possible about people we loved. I told her about how my mother was a great cook, and that she weighed more than anyone in our town by far, and would probably hold that title for a while. My girlfriend chatted excitedly about a guy she knew—who was vice captain of the baseball team and also head of the historical research department. By the way: I was the one who suggested that we not include each other among the people mentioned.

Another meeting, in which we had fun peeling grapes. I was the only one who really enjoyed this one; she said it was a shame that she could only do the eating.

We've had all kinds of meetings so far, but this time's plan is one that I can't agree with.

—How about something more planned, like agreeing never to meet again?

Personally, I believe that a large-scale project like this requires a certain frequency of meetings.

i

デス・マッチ| death match

— It was my fault. Even if I ask for your forgiveness, it's useless. I'd rather make up for it with my death.

— Maybe with that you'll be able to maintain your own dignity... But who knows what they'll say about me if you end your life right after staining my face like that?

— I see. Actually, my feet and hands can't move, and that's why I was racking my brains thinking about how I could even commit suicide.

— I could also solve all this with a punch in your face, but since I can't move, I'm in a bit of a pickle here.

— Oh, you too? Same conditions, then.

— Let's swear here and now a duel to the death. Then, we can wait until our hands and feet work again. What do you think?

— Understood.

The two cockroaches, caught in a trap, with their limbs immobilized — decided for now to curse each other.

Both were thus summoned to the heavens, like warriors who would fight to the death, without ever suffering any external wounds.

i

テント| tent

Traveling with a tent slung over your shoulder is a lot of fun. It's like you've become a snail.

It's raining. That's a good thing, too. The raindrops hit the roof of the tent — making a plop, plop sound.

I came with my girlfriend. That's not bad either. Even though she's a virgin as rigid as iron — and she came with a pair of scissors hidden in her pocket — it's still not a problem. Sex is truly a triviality. At least that's what I think, here in this tent.

Outside, insects are making noise; the portable radio is broadcasting a local program with practically incomprehensible music. In the stream in front of the tent, a dozen cans of beer are freezing. And the Earth is spinning nonstop. I have a feeling that this is all incredible.

At that moment, someone clears their throat outside.

Ahem.

I pull down the zipper on the door, stick my neck out, and my gaze lifts to the outside. A young man, dressed in a watermelon-print T-shirt and Bermuda shorts. Everything about him looks smooth, soft—like a fairy with a boiled egg.

— Sorry to disturb your rest — he says.

— If you came to ask for a can opener, I'm sorry, but I don't have one — I say. I don't eat anything from a can.

— No, it's not about a can opener.

— If you want beer, I can give you a can.

— I didn't come for beer either.

— Oh — I say.

— It's a survey.

— Oh.

— A survey about tents. I was sent by the Tent Committee.

He pulls out an ID, which I examine. There's no mistake. It's from the National Tent Committee.

— So? — I ask.

— Can I ask you a few questions?

— Sure.

He looks relieved.

— Then I'll get started. One: Are you happy inside your tent? Please answer yes or no.

— Yes.

The young man wrote down the answer, writing with a pencil on a paper made for research. After that, he smiled for no apparent reason:

— Two: Is your girlfriend a virgin?

— Yes.

He writes.

— Three: Do you intend to respect your girlfriend's virginity?

— If she prefers.

— Please answer yes or no.

— Yes.

Write, write.

— Finally, four: Do you believe that planet Earth is spinning?

— Yes.

Write, write.

— Thank you very much.

— You're welcome.

He starts to leave; but after hesitating, he clears his throat again.

— Hmm... Would you really give me that beer?

— Sure.

I closed the zipper on the door and crawled inside. The inside of the tent was warm and humid with the breathing of my sleeping girlfriend.

m

ト

ドーナツ その1 | doughnuts part 1

Two doughnuts fell in love with each other.

A relationship between two doughnuts would have no future, so one of them decided to split itself in half and take the form of a boomerang. It wasn't the intention, but the cut caused two boomerangs to form, so one of the boomerangs became a hindrance.

— Very well, I'll be the judge, then.

— Ah, since you're going to be the judge, then you can stay.

— To your posts... *begin!*

The doughnut-shaped boomerang and the boomerang-shaped doughnut began the match.

Since they were in love to begin with, it was better if they had done something else.

— *Fight!*

The judge boomerang was the most excited.

m

ドーナツ その2 | doughnuts part 2

It's been almost two years since my girlfriend turned into a donut.

Like most people who have gone through this transformation, she believes that her center — or her core — is a void. So whenever I call, she says:

— You only see my exterior. My essence is nothingness. I don't want to meet you.

For religious reasons, those turned into donuts can only associate with others who have gone through the same process. That's why I haven't seen her in almost two years.

Donut-turned-people don't eat eel, and they don't wear clothes with zippers. They don't smoke filter cigarettes, and oral sex is forbidden. They're also not allowed to read books whose authors are still alive.

The reason for these restrictions is completely incomprehensible to me. After all, what is the causal relationship between having nothing in your "center" and not being able to eat eel?

The other day, I met a young girl in a bar who had been transformed into a twisted donut.

— Human nature is non-directional — she said, lying in bed — That’s why we don’t fly under any circumstances.

— I see — I said. I feel like society is getting more complex every day.

m

ドッグ・フード| dog food

Our dog takes 40 to 50 seconds to finish a meal. He eats two servings of dog food a day, which means that in a 24-hour period, his meals last about two minutes in total.

If his — Toro’s — desires were organized in order of preference, I have no doubt that “food” would come out on top.

But for a human being, 40 seconds in a 24-hour day is a remarkably short period of time.

A handful of semi-moist kibble is placed in a stable, yellow plastic container. As my hand moves away from the container, his head moves in that direction; his long fur sways, reminiscent of a traditional Chinese lion dance, while the kibble grains roll around, making a soft noise. After about 30 seconds, Toro will choke and cough. At this point, only a few grains will be left in the container. And by the time ten seconds are up, they will be completely gone, too.

He then quickly sticks out his tongue and licks his nose, looking satisfied; with that, he is finished. His catchphrase is: “My snout alone is worth 80,000 yen!” And anyone who saw him with that in mind would be convinced of it. His snout looks like a black jewel, made of rubber.

Without thanking me for the meal, he walks away—to no particular place—with his nose sparkling. Most of the time, he’s lying down heavily on the arm of the couch, yawning profusely.

I’m definitely not the kind of person who hates humans and prefers animals; but I always envy the way my dog handles his meals.

I admire the audacity he has in finishing, in mere seconds, what is his most anticipated moment; that ceremony called “food,” which he eagerly awaits all day long.

Humans want to savor the moments they long for. But before you know it, that time itself starts to become the goal, doesn’t it? Not that I dislike people for acting like that — but I wish I could reclaim that distortion caused by desire, the kind that makes us forget to measure time.

i

二

ニックネーム | nickname

Idiot said to Hippo:

— Your mother is Cupcake²².

When he heard this, Cupcake said to Hippo:

— Am I your mother?

— That's not it — Hippo replied, but soon added: — Or maybe you are.

Hippo's mother, for some reason, gave Idiot a pair of mittens that she had knitted during the night, as a gift. Idiot thanked Cupcake.

— Your mother is not Cupcake.

When he heard this, Cupcake said to Hippo:

— It seems that I am not your mother, huh?

Idiot said:

— That's right, it's not Cupcake.

But Hippo said, in a low voice:

— That's true, but it's *just you...*

i

²² In the portuguese translation, the used term was “Bolotinha”, a type of small dessert. To try to replicate the same sense of *roundness* and *cuteness* in a dessert, the best term I could think of was “cupcake”.

ノ

ノック | knock | knock-knock

Tsai Chi Choi and I went to visit my girlfriend.

Tsai Chi Choi closed his hand and knocked on the door, opening a hole in it — shaped like a fist.

My girlfriend peeked through the newly created little window, stretched her lips about four inches and kissed me through it.

Seeing this, Tsai Chi Choi knocked on the door once more, in the same manner as before. My girlfriend once again passed her lips over the new hole, in order to kiss it. However, Tsai Chi Choi — whose heart was as shy as it was full of desire — took a step back, avoiding the neck that was reaching out toward him — and delivered a right hook. The severed neck flew far away, toward the emergency door at the end of the hallway.

Once in the room, Tsai Chi Choi sat down hard, destroying the carved-legged chair in one fell swoop.

— Let's be a little more gentle — I said to Tsai Chi Choi, my voice soft; but he only laughed, his narrow eyes curling like two thin crescent moons. Two seconds later, he had crushed the phone; ten seconds after that, he was chewing on a cup of coffee — his mouth open — while his feet sank into the ground.

My girlfriend reached out, catching a bird that had landed on the balcony railing.

— She stretches quite a bit, doesn't she, Tsai?

I tried to invite Tsai Chi Choi to stop the senseless destruction and join in a peaceful discussion.

Tsai Chi Choi stretched out vigorously and lay down on the ground, as if he were putting down cotton.

— I broke his girlfriend yesterday.

— Did *he* break her?

— No, *I* broke her.

— She must have been a very fragile girl, then.

Tsai Chi Choi's girlfriend's face was human, but the rest of her body was just like a *gagambo*²³.

— It was kind of like a giant mosquito, you know.

She had gotten into the wrong room and flown into mine without even knocking — I ended up swatting her, out of reflex. Around her neck was a small lost tag that read, "*If contacted, contact Tsai Chih Choi.*"

— It's too late, then.

— Tsai threw her in the trash can. He intended to marry her, apparently.

— So I'm the one who has to comfort him, then?

— Not quite. I thought the three of us could spend a moment together, take his mind off things for a while.

— He refused the kiss.

²³ Gagambo is an insect, similar to a mosquito.

— I think maybe he's just not used to these things. He lives only for martial arts, after all.

Before I knew it, goldfish were flying through the air around me.

— I'm not sure. — New pets?

— Yes. The birds outside keep trying to catch them. They've already eaten about a hundred.

— What now?

— Here in this room there are about a thousand. Only half can fly; the others are sleeping in the shade of the sofa.

Tsai Chi Choi is staring at the goldfish, his mouth open.

Tsai Chi Choi whispers in my ear; he says he fell in love with one of the little fish at first sight.

— He says he intends to marry one of the little fish. What do you think?

— Well, I'd rather he leave than lose one of the little goldfish. These repairs are going to be a lot of work.

Hearing this, Tsai Chi Choi was overjoyed — he put the goldfish he had fallen in love with in his mouth, and hopped with both feet together. He crossed the floor, descending from the fourth floor to the building manager's office on the ground floor — in one step.

— He really is quite a warrior! This building is made of concrete.

— His training regimen is quite intense, apparently. Several countries have been destroyed thanks to his training.

— Hey, give me a kiss — She interrupted me, extending her lips, which had sprouted again.

I put my jacket over her long, tubular mouth, and wiped the sweat with a handkerchief.

— Let's get some rest. The people on the third floor are looking up here.

No doubt the people on the second floor, as well as the building manager on the first, were also paying close attention to our room. I can understand how normal people must feel.

i

ハ

ハイウェイ| highway

The bicycle was going down the pitch-black hill with its brakes squealing.

The one pedaling it was a police officer.

A car was slowly speeding along in second gear, in order to pass that bicycle.

A red light was attached to the roof of the car, although it was not lit.

Suddenly, the car window opened — and another police officer craned his neck out.

— Wait, wait a minute.

That's what he seemed to be saying to the police officer on the bicycle.

The police officer on the bicycle turned momentarily to the patrol car — and then pedaled as hard as he could, racing away.

— You think you can compete with an engine and four wheels?! — A loudspeaker shouted from the patrol car.

The fugitive on the bicycle put his hand over his mouth — as if to imitate a megaphone — and shouted with all he had:

— Idiot! *I'm a true Tokyo child!*

— Well, my house is also within the Yamanote²⁴ line, you see!

The pursuing patrol car finally spread its wings. A few seconds after the chase began, it was ready to take to the skies.

The bicycle, in turn, had reached the highway toll booth in a matter of moments.

— If we're on the highway, there's no way to compete with me. You idiot. You can try to come after me, whether on the ground or in the sky.

The car finally began to glide.

A red light was spinning above my head, moving away smoothly.

The policeman on the bicycle then swallowed some anabolic pills.

Shortly after, the patrol car caught up with the cyclist from above and turned off the engine.

²⁴ The Yamanote Line is a circular railway line, one of the busiest lines in Tokyo.

Thirty meters away, the car fell, crushing the bicycle — and the policeman who was pedaling it.

The car's loudspeaker transmitted the driver's voice, as he struggled to shout one last time:

— I am the highway demon!

But look, the policeman on the bicycle stood up, holding the patrol car high in the air with his bare hands, throwing it toward the road.

— And I am... the angel of the highway.

This story did not happen in Japan.

i

ハイヒール| high heeled

The elephant boarded the subway wearing beautiful high heeled shoes. Her left hand was tightly holding the boarding pass, and her right hand was carrying two volumes of a best-selling novel. This surprised me quite a bit, since I hadn't known that elephants read best-selling novels until then.

Anyway, it was rush hour, so the presence of an elephant was a nuisance to all the passengers. In particular, if an elephant in high heels ended up stepping on someone's foot, it would be no joke. Not even rolling around on the floor shouting "Ouch, ouch, ouch!" would solve the problem. For

this reason, the space around the elephant was completely empty; it resembled the shape of a donut. The elephant herself must have realized this, because she looked so unattractive.

Indeed, an elephant in high heels entering the subway during rush hour is something that goes against common sense, there's no arguing that. But there was something about that elephant that made it hard not to like her. So I gave her a little smile. Not that I wanted to sleep with the elephant or anything.

The elephant seemed very relieved by my smile.

— Can you tell me how long it is to Ochanomizu? — the elephant asked me.

— Let's see... it seems like there are four stops left — I replied.

— Oh, yes — The elephant blushed — Thank you.

— Sorry to ask, but... — I decided to ask the elephant a question — Where did you buy those high heels of yours?

For a moment, the elephant looked at me in astonishment.

— Why are you asking that?

— Oh, they're so pretty, I thought I'd buy them as a gift for my sister. — I don't have a sister, of course.

The elephant smiled, looking calmer. She probably thought I'd criticize her for wearing high heels:

— They sell these at Yoshinoya in Ginza.

The elephant got off at Ochanomizu Station. Before leaving, she stopped in front of the door and waved at me.

When I couldn't see her anymore, I yawned and continued reading the book. I'm quite popular in the elephant world.

m

ハルキ・ムラカミ| haruki murakami

Particularly well-made model trains usually include little figures—for example, an elderly couple sitting on a bench waiting for a steam train, or a porter with a heavy-looking suitcase. They capture my interest more than the locomotives or the tracks.

Haruki Murakami has the look of someone who would be inside one of these models, playing the role of a traveler.

Perhaps his model — beautifully painted, right down to his zinc pinky fingers — is waiting for the train.

His suitcase is so tiny, it's impossible to peek inside. It's also unclear, in this scenario, whether he's going on this little trip to run an errand.

In the scenario I imagine, his intention is to make a complete circuit of the entire model. But the figure simply says, "Yes, maybe that's it."

— Did you make this model?

— I can see how you would think that, since it's exactly the kind of thing I like.

— When you get on the train, it's hard to know when to go home.

— Yes. Once you get on, the boredom seems to disappear.

When he gets tired of the view of the enormous model, in an instant, he appears on the platform of another model, waiting for the train.

— Did you make another one?

— No. It was an adjacent lot; I just moved. — The zinc mouth moves silently.

i

パン | pan

The fact is that we were very hungry. No, it wasn't even that we were hungry. It was as if we had swallowed the vacuum of outer space itself. It was small at first—a small space, like the hole in the middle of a donut—but as the day went on, it grew inside us until it became an endless void. A pyramid of hunger, accompanied by solemn background music.

Why does hunger arise? Because of the lack of food, of course. And why is there a lack of food? Because there is no equivalent exchange necessary. And why is this equivalent exchange not happening? Maybe because we lack imagination. No; the feeling of hunger may be caused directly by a lack of imagination.

Whatever.

God, Karl Marx, and John Lennon are all dead. Either way, we were hungry, and so we would move towards criminality. It wasn't the case that hunger made us run into the darkness—the darkness had used hunger to make us run. It was like some kind of incomprehensible existentialism.

“Oh, I’m ready to lose myself for good,” my partner in crime said. In a nutshell, that was it.

It wasn’t surprising, because we hadn’t drunk anything but water for almost two whole days. We tried eating some sunflower leaves, just once—and we didn’t feel like eating them again.

So we headed off to the bakery, taking some kitchen knives with us. The bakery was right in the middle of the shopping mall, between a mattress store and a stationery store. The owner was a bald man in his fifties, a member of the Communist Party.

We walked slowly down the mall to the bakery, knives in hand. Like in that movie, *High Noon*. As we walked, the smell of baking bread grew stronger; and the stronger the smell grew, the deeper our inclination to do evil became. We were both excited about robbing a bakery and attacking a communist—and the fact that both things were happening at the same time was moving, in a Hitler Youth kind of way.

It was late afternoon, so there was only one customer inside the bakery: a slovenly-looking middle-aged woman holding a shopping bag, looking very careless. There was a smell of danger around her. Premeditated crimes are always foiled by some clumsy aunt. At least, that's how it always goes on TV. I gave my partner a look, signaling him to do nothing until the woman left. Then I hid the knife behind my body and pretended to be sorting through some bread.

After what seemed like an interminable amount of time, the aunt placed a fried bread and a melon bread on the tray, with the caution of someone choosing a wardrobe or a dressing table. But that didn't mean she was going to buy them right away. The fried bread and the melon bread were nothing more than a concept or a thesis to her. Or maybe they were like the remote Arctic. She still needed some time to adjust.

As time went on, the melon bread was the first to slip from its "thesis" status. The woman tilted her head, as if wondering why she had chosen melon bread—the sweetest and most sickening of all—after all. She returned it to the shelf, and after thinking for a moment, placed two *croissants* on the tray. This was the birth of a new thesis. The icebergs melted a little; a few rays of spring sunlight shone through the clouds.

— Not yet? — my partner asked quietly — Let's kill the old lady too.

— I'm telling you, wait. — I held him back.

The bakery owner wasn't paying attention; his full attention was focused on his radio cassette player, on which he was listening intently to Wagner. Whether or not it's right for a communist to listen to Wagner, I can't say.

The aunt continued to stare at the *croissants* and the fried bread. Something's not right. It's not natural. It seems that *croissants* and fried bread don't belong together, in the same category. She apparently sensed that there were conflicting ideas here. The tray of bread was shaking in her hand, *ta-ta-ta-ta* — like a refrigerator whose thermostat was faulty. Of course, she wasn't actually shaking. It was a completely figurative shaking. *Ta-ta-ta-ta*.

— Let's kill them soon — my partner said. He was as sensitive as peach fuzz, thanks to the nervousness sprinkled by hunger, Wagner, and the aunt. I nodded silently.

And yet, with the tray in her hands, the aunt seemed to be wandering through Dostoevsky's hell. The fried bread went up to the podium first and gave a moving speech to the citizens of Rome. Elegant words, admirable tricks, the baritone very well tuned... everyone applauded, *clap, clap, clap*. Then it was the *croissant's* turn to go up: he gave a somewhat incoherent speech about traffic lights; cars turning left must go straight ahead on a green light, and only turn left after carefully checking to see if any cars are coming from the opposite direction — or something like that. The Roman citizens didn't quite understand what he meant, but it seemed complicated, so they applauded, *clap, clap, clap*. The applause for the *croissant* was a little more numerous. And so the fried bread was returned to the shelf.

A perfection of extreme simplicity manifested itself on the woman's tray. Two *croissants*.

After that, she left the bakery.

It was our turn.

— We're really hungry — I admitted to the bakery owner. The knife was still hidden behind my back.

— And to make matters worse, we don't have a dime.

— I see — the owner nodded.

There was a pair of nail clippers on the counter—and we were both staring at them. They were huge nail clippers, so big you could use them to clip a vulture's nails. They had probably been made for some kind of joke.

— If you're that hungry, just eat some bread.

The owner said.

— But we're out of money.

— I heard you the first time you said it — he said, looking bored — I don't need any money; eat as much as you want.

I looked at the nail clippers once more.

— Look, we're on the path to crime.

— Uh-huh.

— So we can't receive favors from others.

— Hmm.

— That's it.

— I see.

The owner nodded once more.

— Then here's what we'll do. You can eat all the bread you want. In exchange, I'll put a curse on you. How about that?

— What kind of curse?

— Curses are always uncertain. It's not like the bus schedule.

— Hey, wait a minute — my partner chimed in — I didn't like that. I don't want any curse. Let's just kill him.

— Wait, wait — said the owner. — I don't want to be killed.

— And I don't want to be cursed — said my partner.

— But there has to be some kind of trade — I said.

We sat in silence for a while, staring at the nail clippers.

— How about this," the host opened his mouth — Do you like Wagner?

— No — I said.

— No — said my partner.

— If you start to like him, I'll let you eat all the bread you want.

It sounded like the talk of a missionary sent to the Dark Continent; but we accepted this deal pretty quickly. It seemed better than the curse, at least.

— I like it — I said.

— I like it — said my partner.

So we ate lots of bread while listening to Wagner.

— Tristan und Isolde, which shines brilliantly in the history of music, was performed in 1859. It has become an indispensable work for those who want to understand Wagner in his later period — the owner read aloud from the explanatory booklet.

— Yum, yum.

— Yum, yum.

— The King of Cornwall's nephew, Tristan, goes to fetch his uncle's bride, Princess Isolde, but falls in love with her on the way back. The beautiful cello and oboe theme at the beginning of the piece is the leitmotif of their love.

Two hours later, satisfied, we said goodbye.

— We'll hear *Tannhäuser* tomorrow — said the bakery owner.

When we got to the room, the emptiness inside us had completely disappeared. And, making a *ta-ta-ta-ta* — like an object sliding down a gentle slope — our imagination began to move.

m

ハンサム | handsome

I'm glad I wasn't born a handsome man.

I really feel sorry for those who were born to be TV heartthrobs. Of course, there's an opinion that handsome people used to have a lot of fun back in the day, so if things aren't going well for them now, there's not much they can do. But those who used to enjoy the festivities back then were born back then, and those who are heartthrobs today aren't enjoying those laurels, so it's really a shame.

It's necessary to explain to those who aren't very sharp why these Adonises also deserve our compassion.

It turns out that a heartthrob suffers prejudice because of who he is.

Just look at that pop singer whose maiden name was Yamaguchi — when she got married, she changed her name to Someone Miura²⁵. When she revealed her husband's identity, what was the public's opinion? They discriminated against Tomozaku So-and-So, saying: “With that guy over there?!” There is no basis whatsoever for calling him “that guy.” The reason for this contempt is only one: So-and-So is a heartthrob.

“Heartthrob” → nothing but his face → empty inside → stupid → “he can go fuck himself!” ... It's a shame that they are judged this way. It's not inevitable that a handsome guy will be an airhead, but it's also not certain that an ugly guy is a good person.

Even when a handsome guy says something normal — the impression it gives is that he's lying. If he steps on a banana peel and falls straight to the ground, people think he deserves it. They are totally discriminated against.

It seems that people refuse to accept anything that they feel is too far from themselves.

²⁵ Momoe Miura (maiden name: Momoe Yamaguchi) is a former Japanese idol, actress and pop singer. At the height of her popularity, she married actor Tomozaku Miura.

When those close to them or those they can judge as inferior are the ones who fall after tripping on the banana peel, they feel that pain as if they themselves had fallen.

It is believed that heartthrobs use their appearance as a way to influence others — but the truth is that everyone judges other human beings by their appearance.

Those who are unfortunate enough to be born handsome these days must work harder than average and become important people despite their beauty.

By the way: this story is about those who are heartthrobs — not about those who are *heirs*, you see?

i

ヒ

ビール | beer

dedicated to the Meiji Jingū baseball stadium

“Matsuoka suffering that home run
wasn’t my fault”

said the unfortunate

young man selling the beers.

5/16/1981

* Part of the *Yakult Swallows Special Anthology*.

m

フ

フィリップ・マーロウ | philip marlowe

At dawn, there is a knock on the door; when you open it, a friend of yours is standing in the doorway, trembling and holding a . 45 caliber automatic pistol in his right hand. He says:

— Excuse me, but I need your help to escape to Mexico.

This is not the kind of situation that happens very often in life. In fact - for the vast majority of people - it is unlikely to happen even once. Even if it did, with any luck you would be sleeping so soundly that you might not even hear the initial knock on the door; and, even more important, Mexico is very far away.

But if this really did happen, I think we would really have to start with a coffee, as Mr. Philip Marlowe would do:

— Well, wait a minute. I'll make some coffee. The conversation will come later.

I've had an experience like that.

At five in the morning, a girl knocked on my door. It sounded like a light rain was falling outside; the girl was soaked, like a broken steam iron.

What is she doing now?

I wonder if she is still knocking on someone's door at five in the morning?

m

ブルー・スエード・シューズ | blue suede shoes

*“You can burn my house, steal my car,
Drink my liquor from an old fruit jar
Do anything that you want to do, but uh-uh,
Honey, lay off of my shoes
Don't you step on my blue suede shoes”*

Carl Perkins, “Blue Suede Shoes”

Thanks to this song, I developed a lifelong fascination with blue suede shoes. I used to feel like if I put them on, life would flow extremely smoothly—I was about fourteen at the time.

Anyway,

“but baby

Don't you step on my blue suede shoes”

...was the part I liked the most.

When I'm sixteen..., I thought. When I turned sixteen, I was going to buy blue suede shoes. I thought sixteen seemed like the age for blue suede shoes for some reason. I thought that by sixteen, I would have fifteen girlfriends and go out on dates with them every day and say something like, “Hey, hey, don't touch my blue suede shoes.” By fourteen, that kind of nonsense was all I could think about.

So, like the interlude between a double feature, two years passed, and I turned sixteen. As a birthday celebration, I bought the blue suede shoes.

So what happened?

The girl I went out with in March was already in a relationship. Her boyfriend was pressuring her to make out, and she was pretty upset about it. I tried to help her out by giving her some advice.

That was it.

I didn't get along with the girl I went out with in June. When I talked about the South Pole, she was thinking about the North Pole. So penguins and polar bears lost their safe haven; they had to embark on a wandering journey with an uncertain destination.

We ended up there.

The girl I went out with in July was almost three kilos over my acceptable weight limit.

The girl I went out with in September was always blowing her nose in the movies. But she was really amazing. On our second date, she said to me:

— You know, those blue shoes don't really suit you.

With that, I put my blue suede shoes in the shoe drawer.

After all, she didn't have a boyfriend, she thought about the South Pole when I talked about the South Pole, and she wasn't very chubby; after her cold went away, she didn't blow her nose anymore, and she didn't suffer from making out.

Anyway, that's how I gradually found happiness.

m

ブルーベリー・アイスクリーム | blueberry icecream

— I want to eat blueberry ice cream — my girlfriend announced at two in the morning.

I wonder why women have such completely nonsensical ideas at completely nonsensical times. For no particular reason, I put on a T-shirt, thinking about the fate of Chiang Kai-shek and the Chinese

Nationalist government, and went out into the street to hail a taxi. I put on a T-shirt while thinking, for no particular reason, about the fate of Chiang Kai-shek and the Chinese Nationalist government — and then went out into the street to hail a taxi.

— Anywhere will do; just drop me off at a store that sells blueberry ice cream — I told the driver, and then closed my eyes, yawning.

About fifteen minutes later, the taxi had stopped in front of an unfamiliar building in an unfamiliar city. It was a three-story building, very old, with an oversized entrance and seven flags hanging from the roof, for some reason.

— Do they really sell blueberry ice cream around here? — I asked the driver.

— Isn't that why you came? — the driver said.

A truly perfect answer, in keeping with the dramatic tradition. I paid, got out of the taxi, and entered the building.

A young woman, about twenty years old, was sitting in the lobby of the building. Although she wasn't moving a muscle, she looked as if she was extremely busy. When I asked,

—A blueberry ice cream, please — she gave me an unpleasant expression, as if to say.

— What else do you want? — She then handed me a piece of paper in beautiful pastel colors.

— Write your name and address on this, and then go through door number 3.

With a borrowed pencil, I wrote my name and address on the piece of paper. Then I climbed the coffin-shaped stairs and pushed open door number 3. In the middle of the room was a table, about the size of a ping-pong table, at which sat a young man, comparing with his eyes the documents he held in his left and right hands.

—A blueberry ice cream. — When I handed him the piece of paper, he stamped it with a dull thud, without looking at me.

—Number 6.

I had to cross a deep river before I reached door number 6. The white light of searchlights circled the surface of the river; sometimes I could hear the bang of gunfire in the distance.

Between doors numbers 6 and 8 was an old church being used as a field hospital; on the grass in the atrium lay many soldiers, whose legs or arms had been torn off. In the dining area of the mini-hospital, there were three barrels of rum-raisin ice cream, but there was no blueberry ice cream.

— Blueberry is at 14 — the cook informed me.

Door 14 had been completely destroyed by a nighttime bombing, leaving only its frame. A piece of paper had been pinned to it, on which was written: “Customers, proceed to door 17.”

In front of door 17, a large army of camels was rioting. The darkness of the night was filled with the shrill cries of the camels and the smell of urine. With great difficulty, I finally found a friendly camel and got him to open door 17 for me.

Door number 17 was the last door.

When I opened the door, inside were two impeccably dressed middle-aged men in the middle of a fight with a large anteater. They were bleeding profusely, and all over their bodies. They had all come this far—and their ultimate goal was blueberry ice cream.

The cursed blueberry ice cream.

But I am not a sentimental person at all. In the style of The Tragedy of Y, I beat the two men and the anteater to death with the back of a mandolin, one by one; I opened the refrigerator and took out a blueberry ice cream.

— How long would you like to leave it on the dry ice? — the girl at the counter asked.

— Thirty minutes — I replied coldly.

When I returned home with the ice cream, it was five in the morning, and the sun was rising. My girlfriend was already fast asleep.

m

プレイボーイ・パーティー・ジョーク | playboy party joke²⁶

1

²⁶ The title, Playboy's Party Joke, is probably a reference to a humorous column, with suggestive jokes, published in Playboy magazine since the 1950s.

When Alice came back from her trip, she found her husband George in bed with a young female anteater.

— Oh, George, look at you! Taking an anteater to bed while I'm not home!

— Anteater?!" said George — Oh, no, I swore it was a zebra!

2

When Lewis came back from his trip, he found a zebra and an anteater in his bed.

— Fred! Fred! Where are you? An anteater and a zebra are having sex in bed!

— Hey, hey, don't talk nonsense — said the zebra — Look closely. I'm just biting into a baguette in bed.

3

When the zebra and the anteater returned from their honeymoon, they found their neighbor Richard masturbating in bed.

— Hey, what are you doing there?!

— Don't be an idiot — Richard said — Your house is next door.

4

While taking a walk on the afternoon of January 23, Michael saw a neighborhood girl swimming completely naked in the park's lake.

— Hey, Annie, be careful not to catch a cold in the cold weather now.

— What are you talking about, idiot?" the girl said — Today is August 4.

Michael took a diary out of his coat pocket and looked at the calendar. Indeed, it was August 4.

5

One day, an anteater went to Scotland Yard to make a confession.

— It's that I killed my wife while wearing a woolen sock.

— Give us more details— the inspector asked.

— When I got home and opened the refrigerator, my precious wool sock was frozen solid. It made me so angry that I beat my wife to death with the sock.

— And the body?

— I stuffed it in a large mandolin and threw it to sink in the Thames River.

— Why put it in a mandolin?

— I must have some kind of complex, surely...

— That story doesn't exist — the inspector said with a sigh. — It's not for *Playboy*, it's more for *Mon Oncle*²⁷.

6

When Eddy came home from a business trip in Florida, he found Ronald Reagan and a ray of hope in his bed, the insect.

— Mr. President — Eddy said, surprised. — What are you doing?

— You idiot, don't you have eyes? — Reagan shouted angrily. — Because there weren't any zebras.

7

When Ronald Reagan came back from the Ottawa summit, an anteater was sitting in the president's chair.

— Hey, what the hell are you doing there? — Reagan exclaimed, irritated.

That's it.

m

²⁷Mon Ocle ("my uncle" in French) was a Japanese magazine, first published in 1981, which lasted six issues. Its content revolved around the concept of psychoanalysis, using accessible language. Shigesato Itoi contributed to the first issue.

へ

ベースボール | baseball

Even in baseball, there is both light and shadow.

One of the things that falls under the category of “light” is the score.

Back when I was in elementary school, I could tell you the batting average of my favorite player every day. My favorite player would usually be a historic hitter, the kind who goes by the honorific title of Mister—so my concept of “batting average” always started with a 3. A batter should hit more than 3 times in every 10 plate appearances. Also, sometimes the balls are hit so fast and accurately that the camera lenses can’t follow them as they pass over the left-field bleachers. I believed that was the norm.

When you have a particular favorite player, you end up looking exclusively at him. This inevitably means that there is less attention being paid to what is around you—and before you become unable to see the game of baseball as a whole, even the other players on the same team have already been lost in the shadows of your perception.

If the players I watched so intently in the spotlight had not been those commonly referred to as Mister—for example, if they were called “Almost Mister,” “Warm-Up Ace,” or “the Net Wizard” or “the Underhit Demon”—my life would probably have been completely different.

A hit is like a banquet, a delight that can only be seen about once every four appearances at bat. Perhaps because this thinking has taken hold, human beings have come to believe that if they simply work diligently and put in all their effort, at some point they will be rewarded—or not, in

which case, oh, so be it; let's go out and have a drink tonight. People have come to think that way. I can't say that the way I watched baseball games shaped my personality, but when I think about the things I fell in love with later—and the process by which I fell in love with them—yes, there's something familiar about it.

To be honest, it all revolves around the same, blatant theme: the desire to always be seated at a banquet, at a table full of delicacies.

The reason for this is that it's what I considered normal. The number I recognized as normal for a batting average was 30 percent or higher. Likewise, when I did a certain thing, I wanted it to be done a certain way, exactly; if I did it, and it turned out not to be what I imagined—then I was no longer enthusiastic. I ended up incorporating a kind of distorted idealism.

Some more dissolute people say—and there's a grain of truth in this—that a woman's destiny is determined by her first man; However, in the same way, it seems that the path of a young man's life will be decided by the first idol he falls madly in love with.

Scary. It's scary, but it's a really convincing logic, and it doesn't seem like a lie at all.

That's how my life as a baseball fan has been, walking up to the present along a path illuminated by light. But lately, without a source as bright as that of that time, I spend my time turning my gaze to the shadows that also exist in baseball.

For example, I've started to notice the existence of umpires, whose names are not even announced on the scoreboard; but who suddenly move along the line of the field, only when the ball flies into the outfield.

I wonder what those two silhouettes are thinking as they watch the game, breathing silently so as not to attract attention; both with one foot on each side, on the border between the field of the impossible (the so-called foul ball) and the field where everything happens (fair ball). Their children probably got tickets from their parents and, accompanied by a friend A and a friend B, are sitting somewhere in the audience. No doubt one of them must look at their father from time to time and whisper, deep in his heart: “Hey, Dad...”. I play around imagining things like that.

Although this is definitely not light, we cannot call it shadows either.

As for the shadows, I believe that many people know how to use the power of imagination and carry this meaning, which is too heavy, on their shoulders — that is not, in any case, my area of expertise.

i

ペンギン | penguin

The number of penguin products — toys, dolls, wrapping paper, lamps — has been increasing indiscriminately.

A friend gave me an electric penguin doll made of synthetic rubber, saying: “Look at what you can find these days!” It was one of those adult toys, a reddish-brown penguin identical to a penis; since it was not something that could be used as decoration, I left it in the box. The

packaging has a drawing of an innocent penguin playing among the glaciers, and reveals nothing about the apparent maturity contained inside.

The penguin has been sealed in the box for a long time and the other day, by chance, it occurred to me that it is still a virgin.

It was born with only one goal in life, and it will die without ever having had that experience. Come to think of it, if no one uses it, it will live like that, semi-permanently.

My friends just laugh, calling him “poor thing!” — but no one wants to adopt him.

If I were a woman, I would be able to perform this act of compassion.

People really do make things that only cause trouble.

By the way, if anyone is interested in taking care of him, I will give him to them for free. Just send your request to Tōjusha Publishing. The people in charge are also sworn to complete confidentiality, so just get in touch as soon as possible.

(I wonder if they will think this last paragraph is a lie...)

ホ

ホエール | whale

The singer being interviewed raised the microphone to her mouth.

Lipstick stained the protective grille of the equipment; however, the microphone is just an inanimate instrument, so she had nothing to say about her contentment or displeasure. Instead, the voice of the singer who had left the lipstick mark resounded through the speakers.

— I would like to ask just one question, to the reporter from earlier. Do you eat whale?

There you have it. It's my turn to answer. My colleagues turned their gazes to me.

A slight smile crossed the singer's expression before even hearing my answer, as if she already knew.

This time, I was the one who held the microphone.

— But of course I do.

To tell the truth, it's been many years since I've eaten whale meat. However, my friends do occasionally. My wife's father, who has fished in four countries, says that there is nothing more delicious than the meat from a whale's tail.

So my answer was ready from the beginning.

The interpreter, whose makeup was stronger than the celebrity herself, spoke loudly in English, emphasizing my words:

— *Of course! Always.* — A correct translation, depending on the point of view.

I continued to fire off the words in Japanese:

— Whales are delicious. My favorite food. Every day, I eat whale, dolphin and fish cake, but what about that?

The singer blushed a little; after controlling her breathing, she said something, slowly, in my direction. Her blue eyes, surrounded by many small wrinkles, remained open, as if she wanted to immobilize me there, under her control.

The interpreter, with the same look, said to me, slowly:

— From today on, please stop eating whale and dolphin. And fish cake too.

i

ホテル | hotel

6:50 on a certain day in a certain month.

I am writing this manuscript on the 21st floor of a certain hotel. Today is the third day of this canned life.

The work drags on, and the marks of my mumbling turn into rubber crumbs, piling up on the table.

On the first night, the guest in the room next door stayed out drunk until late, making a great racket. Insults like “*I’ll kill you!*” and “*Brat!*” flew like a fireworks display over the Sumida River. I consider myself a “brat” too—and even though I knew they were meant for someone else, these threats frightened me. If it had only lasted half an hour, I would have allowed myself to think that I had seen a real-life play and let it go, but it had already gone on for almost two hours and there was no sign of an epilogue, so I called the front desk and asked to be moved to another room.

When I managed to connect the disjointed words that were being thrown out in a particularly loud voice, the situation began to become clear; apparently, the guest in the room next door had lent the brat 3 million yen and was pressuring him to return the money. The strangest thing, in my opinion, was that the brat in question did not open his mouth or offer any response; however, the hotel clerk suggested that my neighbor was probably talking on the phone, which made me feel a little relieved.

The new room where I left my bags was inhabited by a poltergeist. The noise is endless: *DOM! BAM! DANGARAN!*

The ceiling of this room is the floor of a room on the 22nd floor, which apparently is occupied by a family who seem to believe that the floor exists for their exclusive use. They seem to have several children and are very active—running and rolling around the entire time they are in the room.

The artificial *poltergeist* phenomenon lasted until one in the morning, when it suddenly stopped with a pop.

That was my second night in the canned life.

I went to bed in the morning without even changing my clothes, and slept for a few hours. I had many unpleasant dreams.

I woke up in a bad mood and a little dazed, and went to eat some mediocre sushi in a restaurant on the basement floor. The inferior sushi I was rolling around in my mouth and the face of the chef who prepared it were similar, like father and son.

It is currently 8:35.

A few minutes after I started writing this manuscript, there was a vignette.

In the hallway, I heard a strange chirping voice of a woman; and the eloquent voice of a man, clear and salesmanlike.

To be brief, one could hear through the door the kind of conversation in which the man's words — "Oh, I wouldn't do something like that. I am a gentleman, after all" — already made the situation there quite clear.

The door to the front room had been closed silently, but—although the sound itself was quieter—the conversation could be heard just as clearly as when I was in the hallway.

— Oh, uh...

For me, this is the place where I spend my canned life, but for Tweety's voice and Salesman's voice, this is a place of "oh, uh..."

They are not to blame for anything. On the other hand, it is not my fault either. It turns out that whoever ends up in the position of having to hear "*oh, uh*" ends up feeling somewhat guilty.

This feeling of guilt has no reason to exist. But what do human beings do when this feeling arises? Someone like me—representative number one of the human race—has a tendency to turn it completely inside out: I try to throw this irrational guilt back onto the other person.

May Tweety and Salesman's Way be unhappy, then. With this in mind, I kept an eye on the progress of their little play. If that *"ah... uh"* turns into *"ah, that's right..."* in a few minutes, that means that planet Earth is at the mercy of these people. Oh God, please test those who know no fear. And as for my own trials, please alleviate them a little—through *Tōjusha Publishing*. That's the kind of thing I keep thinking about.

The truth is, it's no one's fault. Nevertheless, if the "ah... that's right" really started—my auditory satellite dish would automatically turn in that direction, even if I didn't mean to. My feeling of guilt would then grow bigger and bigger, growing and growing. A long time ago, while reading a book by Edogawa Rampo, I thought, "That Rampo really is a scary man." But perhaps I am becoming like him. Perhaps I have no choice but to dwell on the fact that I have a fundamentally dark personality deep down.

But I just had to wait—what is yours, fate brings, after all.

The Salesman made a mistake. Perhaps his fatal mistake was to believe too much in his own powers of persuasion. For a while, Tweety began to cry—I began to fear that if the girl's crying continued, I would end up having to put my feet in some really muddy situation. But then almost immediately I began to hear V's crying voice as well.

The attendant, and then Tweety would suggest, in a motherly tone, "Let's go out and get something to eat, shall we?"—and the stage for the play was clear again. The door was opened.

Good. Thank you, Tweety. Thanks to your good deed, the mental health of this canned guest was saved from imminent danger. I told my assistant the synopsis, as well as my thoughts, about the theatrical scene whose curtains had just closed.

“There really is a lot of nastiness in hotels, isn’t there?” was what he had to say.

I was glad to be back to my original state of simple joy and tiredness, without having to face the Edogawa Rampo in me.

Tweety had behaved excellently, but then again, I also felt compassion for the Salesman. And I myself had been commendable, too.

In truth, this chapter should have ended with a full stop, in the previous line. However, it has been six hours since then; and one incident has somehow ruined the happy ending. Not that it was their fault—but I still held a grudge against them.

Without any energy to transform into Edogawa Rampo, I left my room, carrying the key and some coins.

What must the lobby staff have thought of me when they saw me playing video games late into the night, never taking my eyes off the clock?

ポニー・テール| ponytail

The class all laughed when Akiko asked:

— Why didn't Kurama Tengu²⁸ wear a ponytail?

— But that shows excellent critical perception — said Professor Takami, looking at Akiko fixedly, and wrote in English on the blackboard in white chalk: PONY TAIL. After rubbing the chalk dust that had gotten on his fingers on the corner of the desk, he read in Japanese: “ponytail.”

In a gesture that almost pierced the air, the class representative Shin'ichi's hand raised:

— Kurama Tengu used disguises, so it's possible he had a ponytail.

Shin'ichi was going to say something else, but Akiko herself interrupted him:

— No. Sometimes, he appears without disguise, and his hair is tied up in a bun.

Existence and essence — Professor Takami wrote again on the blackboard. Then, he haphazardly drew a circle around the ideograms that form the word existence, and also an arrow coming out of it.

— The number of sperm released in a single sexual intercourse is estimated at around 200 to 300 million.

— But professor, what about the Kurama Tengu? — Shin'ichi said in a firm tone, standing up.

²⁸ The tengu is a creature from Japanese mythology, with a red face and a long nose. Kurama Tengu (also called Sōjōbō) is a specific tengu that is said to inhabit Mount Kurama.

— The Kurama Tengu too; that's why I'm saying, between 200 and 300 million.

— That's right, this is a topic that needs to be discussed within a circular framework. What the professor is saying is that the concept of science itself is already an ideology, and that it's foolish to fix this category called science without being aware of these illusions! — Akiko also shouted.

— Akiko, did you sleep with the professor?! — Shinichi's voice echoed through the classroom like the cry of a bird in immense pain.

— With a lesson as stupid as this one in a first grade class, it wouldn't even be strange if 200 or 300 million Kurama Tengu broke through the window and invaded the classroom.

After all, Kurama Tengu uses disguises, so there's no way to know for sure if it has a ponytail or not.

Background music suggestion: *"Hey Paula"*

マ

マーガリン | margarine

If the red panda made fun of the panda, it would certainly attract the ire of the army of ardent fans that pandas have.

But margarine, on the other hand, can practically laugh in the face of butter, can't it?

Until now, historically, margarine has been forced to behave like a common cousin, sacrificing itself to maintain the prestige of the main star of the family: butter.

It is true that margarine has a different aroma than butter. It has a different taste. And the price is also different.

People have cast an air of contempt on margarine, as if they saw something in it of a miserable Mitsuhide Akechi²⁹ — who tried to take the place of butter and failed.

But, just as the monkey in a zoo will never become a human being, margarine — no matter how close it gets to butter — will never be anything more than margarine. No, it is not right to say anything other than: it is just margarine.

Just as monkeys do not apologize to humanity, margarine should not humble itself before butter.

To be honest, you know, butter is already a relic of the past. It is high in fat, high in calories, and also causes difficulties for cattle.

²⁹ Akechi Mitsuhide is a Japanese historical figure, known for having betrayed and killed the feudal lord he served, the famous shogun Oda Nobunaga.

First of all, margarine is capable of imitating butter to the point of receiving applause and praise of “It is exactly the same!” — on the other hand, butter is not even capable of passing as an imitation of margarine. It justifies itself as a model student would: “Oh, no... I am not very good in that area.”

Just think what would happen if all the cows in the world were exterminated by a Mas Oyama³⁰ butcher. It would be the extinction of butter, wouldn't it?

But margarine would be fine. Even if the sardines die, let the bastard saffrons dry up; Even if the corn cobs perish, the oil runs out, and the whales disappear; for some reason, it seems to me that we would still have the ingredients to make margarine.

I ask everyone to please treat margarine with care. Because she's good.

From now on, keep a gallon of industrial margarine in your kitchen. With a large wooden spatula, scoop out a large amount — and use it in your recipes and on toast.

For those who really don't want to use margarine: you can just buy it and stare at it. After all, the color is so beautiful, that perhaps the roots of love will begin to sprout from it.

Without realizing it, this has become something like a bad commercial, sponsored by the Margarine Association.

³⁰ Masutatsu (Mas) Oyama é um artista marcial japonês, conhecido por criar o estilo de Karate Kyokushinkai.

It will end up having the opposite effect: when something is recommended so persistently, we end up thinking that it is because they want to sell everything and get rid of the junk.

i

マスカレード| masquerade

I would like to eliminate the word mask from the world.

Since, if I do it too suddenly, an obvious gap will be left in its place, I suggest leaving the word costume as a substitute.

The thing is, a mask gives a certain sensation to the tongue — or rather, it leaves a certain taste there — something kind of intellectual. I think it would be better to get rid of all that kind of stuff.

Speaking like: “I am wearing the mask, the mask called me.” or “It is a mask over a mask, and there is another mask covering that one; the boundary between the skin of my face and this mask no longer exists!” Doesn’t that sound pretentious? Although in this case, even replacing it with costume would be the same.

For example: “I am wearing a costume, the costume called me.” “If you take off this ‘mother’ costume, you are just a bitch!” You can joke like that.

It almost makes you want to read that story by Mishima, *Confessions of a Costume*.

The old *Masked Ball* is now a *Costume Ball*.

A word like “court jester” can also be used — let’s start using *funny guy* instead. Something like this: “In the end, for you I’m just a *funny guy*”.

Instead of “heresy,” it’s enough to call it *weirdness*.

“Hypocrisy” becomes *out of step*.

For “emotion,” you’ll have to make do with “little push”” Like: “I need to feel more of that human little push behind all the aesthetics, you know?”

“Ego” probably becomes “little old me”.

They’re a bit like those foods that appear a lot in stories told by the elderly: the foods that replace rice in times of war. They may not offer the satisfaction of a full stomach, and they’re low in calories, but look, folks — what we have these days is an *excess* of calories.

I believe that the less clutter we put on top of words, the easier it will be to clean up later.

But, well, maybe that's my own "costume."

マッチ| match

Even though it was Christmas Eve, there was no one else in that little bar except the three of us: me, my friend, and a girl we didn't know.

My friend and I were talking about Superman while we drank whiskey. Doesn't he get tired of flying through the sky doing that pose? Does he destroy the toilet when he goes to the bathroom? — that kind of silly talk.

All the while, the girl was breaking matchsticks.

Crack.

Crack.

When the matchsticks were gone, she grabbed more matches from the aquarium on the bar and started breaking them again.

Crack.

Crack.

It wasn't a very loud noise, of course, but it was hard to ignore.

Crack.

Crack.

The bald bartender was also clearly perplexed by the sound. Maybe he wanted to say something to the girl — but he had no idea what. If a box of matches cost 10 yen per match, even if she broke fifty, it would still only be 500 yen for him to add to her bill. That would be enough, he thought. No need to bother anyone just for that.

Crack.

Crack.

My friend and I stopped talking and listened intently to the sound of the matches being broken.

The girl was wearing a beautiful suit—and her face was no less beautiful than the suit. From the top of her head to the tips of her toes, she looked expensive. At the very least, she wasn't the type to be alone in a Shinjuku bar at ten-thirty on Christmas Eve, breaking matches.

“Hey, what's that thing you've been doing for a while now?” my friend asked, calling her over. He had built up a bit of a reputation in Shinjuku for being a very determined womanizer.

The girl looked at us as if we were making fun of her. The look you get when you find a discount coupon for a disco on the sidewalk after it rains.

— What am I doing...? — *crack* — Breaking... — *crack* — matches.

— Is that fun?

— That's — *crack* — my problem.

— But there are other more fun things in the world.

— For example? — *crack*.

— For example... wringing a sea lion's neck.

— Hmm — said the girl. — And where are there sea lions?

— Well... — said my friend. — Near here there's a really good and little-known place where there are sea lions. Do you want to go there?

— I don't feel like going anywhere else.

— What a shame. Because there are a lot of sea lions in that place.

— Really?

— Just go around picking them up and twisting, snap, snap, snap.

— But don't you feel sorry for the sea lions? — No, no; sea lions have to have their necks wrung at least once a year. Otherwise, their bones don't develop properly. So you can have fun, and the sea lions will be grateful at the same time.

Finally, the girl and my friend disappeared into the Shinjuku night, in search of the sea lions. It was just me and the bald bartender left.

—There really are many ways to persuade someone, aren't there? — the bartender said, looking excited. — Sea lions, just look at that...

— Yeah — I said.

In the ashtray on her table, the half-broken matches had been piled up like kindling for a Spanish Inquisition trial. When I set the pile alight, the bar was bathed in a peculiar glow, very typical of Christmas Eve.

— Sea lions, yeah... The bartender sighed once more.

m

マット| mat

31st National Entrance Rug Competition

Award winner: no entries

(selected comments)

Mr. M. I.

“Despite my advanced age, I believe I have demonstrated a higher than average understanding of the works created with such fervor by the young, active entrance rug designers. However, to be completely honest, looking through the entries lately has been a great pain. And perhaps this is not only due to my chronic pain in my waist. The dozen or so rugs that come to my house, strangely enough, do not move my heart.

It used to not be like this, in the old days. Until about five years ago, I used to line up all the entrance rugs that had been sent to me and entertain myself for a good week, jumping and sprawling on them, with my wife. I must say that the quality has diminished. None of the works can be considered suitable—that is my conclusion.

I do not understand the attempts of young people to reimagine the traditional entrance rug—but I would like them to keep in mind that a rug still has an appropriate way to be an entryway rug.”

Mr. N. S.

“Among the participating works, *A Day in the Life of an Anteater* was the one that caught my attention the most. The idea of weaving the beak of a real anteater into the front door mat was truly unusual. However, when it comes to the choice of anteaters as a subject, I still have my doubts. I suspect that the author himself does not quite know the reason. That is

where the weak point of this work lies. Inevitability does not happen overnight.

In the Style of Magritte also belongs to this category, in my opinion. Although strongly influenced by other foreign works, the sensitivity of the work undoubtedly belongs to its own artist. I also do not see any technical flaws. I pay tribute to the extraordinary efforts of the artist in creating a carpet like this, at once three-dimensional and paradoxical. However, I cannot understand why a visitor would have to walk around the floor three times to wipe his feet.

That said, there was something different about these two works, a portent of things to come. Unfortunately—due to the strong opposition from other members of the selection committee — they were not selected as honorable mentions, but I wish them both the best.”

Mr. M. T.

“Due to a three-month inspection trip to France, I came to the selection committee without having had much time to examine the shortlisted works. As soon as I looked at them, I realized that there was nothing there of note. Call me irresponsible, but I have been making my living in this field for about 30 years, so I know what I am talking about—I can tell the difference between an iceberg and a shaved ice, at least.

On my recent trip to France, I was deeply impressed by the high social status of entrance rugs in the country. One could argue that it is a result of the weight of tradition there, but what really sustains this tradition is the affection that people have for their rugs, as well as their own willpower. I do not want to make comparisons—but I simply cannot get

my feet used to these two-tiered entrance rugs; the rugs with cryptograms; the rugs shaped like sea lions.

I am not in any way advocating any kind of retrograde realism when it comes to These are doormats. But from what I've seen of this year's nominees, I can't help but feel a little pessimistic about the future of rugs in Japan."

Mr. K. H.

"I had the fortunate opportunity to see each of the shortlisted works this year. I don't know much about these more complex things, but I was impressed by their creativity.

Of all the works, Letter from Hanamaki Village is a work of a singularly feminine nature, a work of very refined feelings—which reinforces my belief that the naturalism of the entrance mats remains intact. The composition of the cherished and uninterrupted design—the scent of the countryside, the simple figures of people, the lovely cows and horses, and the abundant rice paddies—can only be called magnificent. It is almost a waste to rub one's feet in it.

Some members of the selection committee thought that this work was almost identical to last year's Hanamaki Village Festival by the same author. However, I find it admirable that the author sought new themes amidst the daily life of an ordinary village in the countryside.

In any case, I look forward to the next in the 'Hanamaki Village series.'"

(comments in order of arrival)

ミ

ミラーボール| mirroball

I gave a mole a disco ball as a gift.

As a thank you, she gave me a pair of sunglasses. The design is so tacky that I usually keep the glasses in the drawer. It seems that moles think that workman's clothes are something cool.

Sometimes, in the middle of the night, I see several streaks of light appearing in the middle of the grass in the garden.

During those nights, I bury my Walkman's headphones deep inside, to make their parties more lively.

My girlfriend complains about my exaggerated kindness towards the moles.

— Did it really bother you that much that I'm not a virgin anymore?

— No. All the moles around here lost their hymens a long time ago.

Is it so hard to believe that I simply enjoy their company? My girlfriend, meanwhile, is suspecting that there is something sexual going on between me and the mole.

モ

モーツァルト| mozart

I was at an outdoor music concert with a can of beer in my hand when I met the elephant again. It was the same one I had seen on the subway—the one who wore high heels and read best-selling novels.

The elephant was wearing a pretty dress that looked like she had bought it at Laura Ashley, and a pair of large sunglasses that had been pushed up on her head. And of course she was wearing white lacquered high-heeled shoes.

— Good afternoon — I said as I passed her. There was no real need to greet her, but she was looking from side to side, looking so uncomfortable— perhaps she was insecure because of her large size — that I ended up feeling sorry for her.

— Oh, good afternoon — she replied, with a smile; she seemed to remember me, too. She fanned her face with the concert program she was holding in her hand. For no particular reason, she inclined her head

— Do you like Mozart? — I asked.

— Yes, I do. When I listen to Mozart with great concentration, it's as if my body becomes invisible — She blushed a little as I said this. She was probably worried that the idea of an elephant becoming invisible would sound too absurd — And you, do you like Mozart?

— Well, I like anything, as long as I can get out of the house at night while drinking beer and listening to good music — I replied, holding up the six-pack I was holding for her to see.

— Oh, yes, I understand. It's a really nice evening, isn't it?

— Would you like a beer?

— No, I'm fine — She shook her head “no”, with an apologetic expression on her face. When she shook her neck, both ears wiggled adorable — If it gets too crowded in here, they might not make way for me to go to the bathroom later.

— Hmm — I said. It's pretty tough being an elephant. If she did end up stepping on someone's foot in the bathroom, it wouldn't be resolved with just "Oh, excuse me, sorry."

After that, I went back to my seat to listen to Mozart's symphony in G minor, while I drank a beer by myself. And I could imagine how her ears must have been flapping — *flap-flap* — in tune with the music.

m

モラル | moral

A yakuza member with a Doraemon tattoo and a bank employee with cicada-shaped earrings got into a heated argument in front of a police station.

The officer in charge, wearing makeup and dressed like a call girl, took his police baton from his waist and swayed; but he was so curious about what the two were discussing that he decided to butt in.

Who should be valued more: a father or a mother? Apparently that was the topic of the altercation.

— I value both mother and father — said the police officer who looked like a stripper, proudly.

— A man like that probably treats his own wife as inferior — said the bank employee, in a rude tone.

— He must be jumping the fence, for sure — said the yakuza member.

— Oh, but once is fine, right? — The police officer pouted childishly.

— I wouldn't do that — said the bank employee, trembling.

— Neither would I, I've never done that, not even once — the yakuza also exclaimed.

The police officer retreated to his station, dancing.

ラ

ラーク | lark

Of course, a sea lion festival is not an easy event to organize.

It is no exaggeration to say that the most important part of a sea lion festival is the entire process leading up to the festival. Of course, the festival itself is spectacular, but it is, so to speak, nothing more than the conclusion of a succession of acts, and it is precisely in this sequence that the sea lions themselves have the strong awareness and confirmation that they are sea lions.

It's complicated.

Speaking in concrete terms, in order for a sea lion festival to take place, it is necessary to have the approval of 2/3 of all sea lions, as well as the consent of the sea lion elders. That said, sea lions are festival-loving animals by nature, so this does not require much work. Basically, if someone were to say, "Let's organize a sea lion festival?" — usually, the answer will be: "Oh, come on, come on, we have to do it!" This part is resolved very quickly.

The hard part comes later. The first thing the sea lions do is argue about who should be the organizer of the event.

I would like to make one thing clear: sea lions are really diligent and honest animals. What's more, they are humble, considerate and not demanding at all. When they play mahjong, they immediately try to pretend that their score is lower than it really is. They keep saying "Let's see... these must be riichi, tanyao, pinfu, right, it's 3900, right...?³¹" and

³¹Riichi, tanyao, pinfu, dora and mangan are terms from the game mahjong.

trying to knock down all the tiles, to start another round. But then, when the other three players gather around to inspect the hand, they end up admitting victory: “Oh, look, here’s a perfect dora, it’s mangan, it’s mangan.” People with this type of personality cannot become writers.

That’s why it takes about two days to decide on a single organizer. It’s not that everyone hates the idea of being responsible, but it’s hard for them to say for themselves, “Well, how about I do it?” On the other hand, recommending someone else in the group is also like forcing someone to take the job, and that’s also uncomfortable. Maybe this would be a case of deciding to do it by chance, but unfortunately, the concept of a “lottery” doesn’t exist in the sea lion world. They’re animals with short memories, so you can’t make them take turns in order either.

There’s no way around it.

And what do they do about it? Nothing. They all stand in a circle, in total silence.

When the sun eventually sets and it’s already the middle of the night, the elder sea lion gets up and says, “Well, let’s continue this tomorrow.” Everyone nods “yes, yes!” and goes home, red-eyed. And again, at dawn...

...

That’s the sequel.

Sea lions are patient animals, and if left to their own devices, they can stay like this for weeks...

...

However, if they continued like this forever, they would starve to death; so the elder sea lion calculates the most appropriate time and stands up, opening his mouth to say, hesitantly:

— If we continue like this, nothing will get resolved, so even though it's impertinent of me; how about I choose someone, what do you think? — Everyone shouts in agreement. In fact, they were all waiting for this moment.

— Well... since that's how it is... — The elder sea lion looks around, clutching his aching stomach. "Toshibō of the Southern Rock, do you think you could do it?"

— I don't mind doing it — Toshibō stands up, blushing — If you'll accept someone like me. To begin with, I'm pretty weak at mahjong...

But in the end, Toshibō of the Southern Rock would be the organizer. This is because the sea lions had already correctly predicted from the beginning that Tonbō of the South Rock would probably be the organizer. They then returned home, each with a satisfied feeling similar to *déjà vu*.

With that, the sea lion festival is indeed ready to begin. The organizer has a lot of work to do. First, they have to secure the venue, arrange the drinks and snacks, arrange the order of the acts, greet the elders, prepare the booths, allocate the budget... it's an endless list. All of this is the work of one organizer. Since he doesn't have enough free time to go to sea and fish for mackerel, the other sea lions go out and fish. In addition, they end up taking enough for themselves to eat, so the organizer's house is about to overflow with fish, naturally.

If that were all, everything would still be fine.

When night falls, pretty young ladies come to the organizer's bedside, saying, "Mother asked me to come and comfort you, Mr. Organizer..."

This happens twenty times a night; no matter how robust a sea lion is, it is hard work. But of course it would not be good form to refuse them when they have come so dearly. During the day, to solve a mountain of various tasks; during the night, to stuff oneself with fish until one can't stand it and have sex twenty times - these are the organizer's duties. However, the sea lion must keep smiling; after all, this is his destiny.

In about a week, the venue is secured, a budget has been allocated, preparations for drinks and snacks are ready, and a program has been drawn up.

But this does not mean that the sea lion festival can be held right away. When the assembly is opened and the preparations for the festival are acknowledged, a ceremony is held, the Sea Lion Resolution. It is a ritual in which the sea lions confirm the fact that they are sea lions, and nothing more than sea lions.

It sounds simple when you read it in writing, but it is a very complex practical matter. First, they need to establish some definitions, such as "what is a sea lion?" and "what makes someone a sea lion?" Well, despite this, sea lions are naturally reticent animals by nature, so this part is done without much care. Everyone goes up on stage one by one and talks for a long time about how they live their lives as sea lions, how they became aware that they are sea lions, and about their aspirations to continue being sea lions from now on, which is met with great applause from the other sea lions.

This is all done in a harmonious way. There are times when a sea lion makes a mess on stage and the others laugh, but it is very rare that there

is no applause. It never happens that a dolphin crashes the event and claims to be a metaphorical sea lion. Sea lions are, through and through, sea lions.

That's what I've written so far. But, thinking about it, this story has nothing to do with the title. I really just wanted to write about sea lions, so that's what I ended up writing about. The title is lark only because I wrote the manuscript while smoking a pack of Lark cigarettes, which my brother-in-law gave me as a souvenir from his trip to Hong Kong.

By the way, he stopped in Taiwan on his way back from Hong Kong, and boarded another plane shortly before, which eventually crashed. If the flight order had been reversed, I would be smoking a pack of Hi-lite right now. Life is a strange thing.

m

ラブレター | love letter

After rereading the letter I had just written once more, I folded the paper with the corners aligned, and inserted it into the square envelope. I pressed the seal firmly with glue.

After sealing the letter, I was overcome by the familiar anxiety that I had forgotten to write something important; but I decided to send it as is. No matter how much I revise, how much I rewrite — as soon as the seal is

pasted, I get apprehensive. The result is the same, no matter how many times I do it.

I took a deep breath and rang the bell on the table, making it ring twice, jingling. As always, a spider monkey appeared from inside the fireplace.

— I would like to request your postal services again — I said to the spider monkey — The recipient is the same as always. It's an important letter, so be careful not to lose it or get it dirty, okay? If you deliver it properly and then bring me the answer, I will give you three cookies.

I put the letter inside the leather pouch that hung from the spider monkey's neck, and pulled the strings of the slit, closing it tightly. That was it, all that was left was to wait patiently for the answer.

— Go, spider monkey! — I shouted. The spider monkey turned its body nimbly, and disappeared into the fireplace. After that, all that remained was a deep and silent night.

I remained lost in thought for some time, with my chin resting on one hand, but finally I rang the bell again, making it ring three times. This time, a gibbon emerged from the fireplace, and I asked it to bring some wine to my room. The night is long, and the wait for an answer is cruel.

m

ラストシーン | last scene

I don't like the final scenes in today's movies, which are so intricate that they don't even give you that feeling of "Ah... it's over. It's really over."

When it comes to this, I can always trust period samurai films.

In the background, the benevolent Mount Fuji, a witness to both the screen and the story as a whole, encourages the world outside, as in the saying that declares: "every day is a good day."

The composition of the scene is very similar to the technique called perspective: a single path in the center, with the protagonist leading towards the vanishing point. Beside him, a vengeful street musician follows, and some younger (somewhat cheeky) boy walking quickly. Closer to the audience is a good-natured pickpocket who, during that hour and a half, has transformed from bad guy to good guy — he chases the group, brandishing his cape:

— Wait for me! Let me join you!

As if making fun of the owner of the voice, the protagonist pretends to run away, takes a quick run. Everyone looks at each other and bursts out laughing.

That's what I'm talking about! It's essential.

ランチ | lunch

There was an international exhibition of illustrious people, so I went to take a look.

The place was so crowded that they had stopped selling tickets at the entrance.

— What's the wait time, roughly? — I asked the receptionist tentatively.

— I don't know, tens of thousands of visitors started arriving as soon as we opened the doors, so the director ordered the sale of tickets to be stopped. We haven't heard anything since.

A black curtain hung outside the entrance door, sometimes shuddering when the door was pressed from the inside.

— It's pretty crowded in there, huh?

— We don't really know.

The receptionist went to join some students who were working part-time at the event—they were folding clothes, both men's and women's, and arranging them inside cardboard boxes.

— What are you doing?

— All the guests have taken their clothes off — As soon as the crowd entered, a mountain of clothes and shoes suddenly began to pour out. It was surprising.

— That happened as soon as the doors opened?

— Yes. It's a complicated situation.

A middle-aged man with a pompous face came running.

— Kill now, kill now. It was decided at the meeting just now.

The receptionist, with her mouth half open, confirmed the order:

— K-kill, sir? — She seemed like a kind young woman, but her expression was lacking. If she was more surprised than she let on, it would probably be better to show it with her face.

— Just send the gas and then set it on fire — the middle-aged man said with an air of boredom; then he went down the stairs, looking like someone who was very busy.

— There's going to be an explosion, so it would be better if you went home.

— What about you?

— I might die in the explosion.

How could she say that so calmly?

— I'll give you something to remember me by.

The receptionist took off her bra in a moment and put it on my head. She smelled like a woman.

—I didn't want to work here. I don't like this, killing people.

—What kind of place is this?

I couldn't quite comprehend what was happening.

— Even if you don't kill anyone, I think it's best to quit. Leave things as they are and let's get out of here together.

— Going out with someone I just met...?

— So killing tens of thousands of human beings in a gas explosion and dying along with them sounds good to you?

—It doesn't sound very... good. I have a family, after all, and someone I can date. And I bought tickets to see a movie at the cinema tomorrow.

The same man from before came running back.

— I'm not a patient person, you know. Do it now, or you're fired.

— Okay. I'll do it right away.

— Her face looked so sincere that I was terrified.

— Are you really going to do this?

— Yes, because if I don't do it soon, I'll be fired. It's dangerous. Please leave this building within ten minutes.

Gripping her bra tightly, I ran as fast as I could.

The big explosion did indeed happen a short time later, and the reverberation of the boom made my ears go crazy.

Passersby stared at the smoke—enough to darken the sky—and muttered things like “So much smoke!” and “What a strange way to do that.”

The middle-aged man from before walked past me, accompanied by another man of similar appearance:

— There's no place in these parts that serves a good, cheap lunch.

It looks like they were going to lunch.

ランナウェイ | run away

The necessary condition for successfully running away from home is, first of all, to have the self-awareness that you are going to run away from home.

Without this, even if you go to Africa or Antarctica, you will be considered just a simple traveler.

In addition, this self-awareness must, until the end, be based on the perception that it is you who will do this action. Running away from other people's homes does not constitute running away from home. Hypothetically speaking, even if someone who has already successfully run away from home says that they transfer these rights to you, it is not valid. Even if you run away from home — if there is no one who can be aware that you have run away, it is as if you did not do it.

Next item: to run away from home, you need to have a home. Whether it has a garden or not, whether it is newly built or old, how many minutes it takes to get from there to the station, these factors do not matter, and it does not matter whether it is a house or a rented room. However, you need to be careful: you must live with someone, otherwise the escape from home will turn into a night escape, the kind that people do to escape debts or other problems.

It is said that the appropriate distance to escape from home is any distance greater than two meters. If the distance is less than this, even if

the escape itself is successful, it is likely that you will be caught sooner than you think.

Some people get so attached to the reason for the escape that they are unable to put the plan into practice - however, in these cases, I recommend trying to think one step ahead and regret not finding a reason to escape from home.

There are no specific rules regarding personal belongings when escaping from home. However, it is a common problem to want to blow your nose, or feel the urge to defecate on the way, and find yourself running out of toilet paper; in which case it is best to bring a roll of toilet paper. I have no objection to leaving items such as raincoats, lunch boxes and water bottles to the discretion of each individual. Money will also be incredibly useful, so — if you don't mind — it is good to include it in the list of personal belongings.

As for transportation, things will work best if there are no restrictions on any particular means of transport. Everyone is free to enjoy the formal beauty that exists on the stationary train, but if this obsession goes too far, your mobility will be impaired.

Some people take the connection between running away from home and suicide very seriously. However, if your suicide is successful, even just once, the next time running away from home becomes an impossibility. Therefore, it is best to avoid it when possible. Furthermore, suicide can easily be carried out at home, so there is no need to make the effort to run away.

Running away from home and prostitution, just like running away from home and drug addiction, are closely related behaviors. However, neither is advantageous to the person who has run away from home.

Finally, if you run away from home and spend the night away, the people who live in your house will be worried—so never do it.

i

レ

レインコート| raincoat | raincoat

My blood boils with excitement during stormy nights.

Company workers don't work overtime and take the train home. There's no one in the bars. Taxis speed along, as if their drivers don't care about anything anymore.

The trees on the sidewalks rustle, as if they're shaking off the accumulated stress of every day.

A few scooters and bicycles have been abandoned by their owners, motionless and soaked.

When the blinds are raised completely, leaving the landscape outside fully visible, the scene is much more captivating than any cheap movie, completely changing the mood inside the room.

On nights like that, an umbrella doesn't help at all. The rain attacks from the sides, with the force of a downpour, and then you end up soaked like a mouse.

Sometimes a subtitle flashes across the screen of the television that was left on. A procession of white letters chatters about the direction the storm is taking.

On a night like this, a woman who stays still in her room is not the one I want to meet.

The woman standing in front of the pay phone in a closed tobacco shop, tossing a coin in with her wet hands — that one is much more fun.

The phone rang, with pomp.

— I'm close by. Do you have time to meet me?

— Yes. Let's go somewhere.

The woman, wearing a thin men's raincoat and holding a paper bag in one hand, entered without pressing the doorbell.

— This rain is nothing to worry about. It's just the typhoon wind that scares me.

— What's in that bag?

Oranges.

A bit old-fashioned, huh? And what else?

— A makeup box, with a dozen raincoats — You're talking like a schoolgirl.

In the end, after a hot bath, we had sex for hours on end.

— We didn't go anywhere. Like everyone else.

— Well, we wanted to go.

We went to sleep, and when we woke up, the sky outside the window was extremely blue, and the birds were singing.

— It's so sunny! It almost sounds funny.

— If we hadn't had so much sex, it wouldn't be so bright.

— It sounds like porn!

When the weather is good, the mood changes too.

— Hey, how about a date during the next storm, too?

— Can't we meet on a sunny afternoon?

— It's so embarrassing.

If typhoons formed every night, I would probably live with this woman forever.

But for some reason, they only appear very occasionally.

— What a boring man. He should drink his milk and go straight to work, right?

— How did you guess?

— Because maybe I'm like that too.

While I read the morning paper, heavy with humidity, she was fixing her hair.

How unpleasant, being an adult...!

ワ

ワム ! | wham!

When I ran out of ink—right in the middle of writing a manuscript—I immediately went looking for a new inkwell. However, it turned out that I couldn't find one.

“What a problem,” I sighed. I should have paid a little more attention. When you run out of ink, the situation is a little different from when you run out of soy sauce or sugar. After scratching my head with the tip of my ruler for a moment, I called the same number as always.

The answerer was a young, somewhat tactless girl.

— Um... there's no one available right now — she said, as if she were chewing something in the corner of her mouth.

— I'll be quick — I said — It turns out that my ink ran out right when I was in the middle of writing a manuscript, and I need to finish it by tonight. You probably already know this, but I can't write a single line with any other ink. I need that ink. And I need it within the hour. Okay?

— Buuuut... — the girl said, swallowing her food with the help of water, or juice, or coffee, or something like that. — Seriously, there's no one here. Everyone's gone.

— That's hard for me. It's a matter of life or death. It could be anyone, I just need them to come within the hour, please.

— But 'anyone'... — she started to say, but I hung up the phone before I could hear the rest. When the paint runs out, I get extraordinarily irritable.

An hour later, the front doorbell rang. When I answered, there was a girl of about twenty standing there, in a frilly dress. She was carrying a black briefcase that didn't look appropriate for the occasion.

— Since there was no one there, I ended up coming over — the girl said.

— Listen, do you know how to prepare the paint? — I asked.

— I never did, but here are the materials and the instruction manual, so I should be able to... heh, heh... I thiiiiink.

I put my head in my hands in exasperation. Custom ink involves an extremely delicate mixing process; even a small imbalance can drastically alter the style of the text. There is no way a student, working only part-time at the store, could do that.

But the girl, oblivious to these details, headed toward the kitchen. There, she boiled water in a pot and — measuring the amount with her eyes — poured a quantity of the concentrated liquid into a beaker. With a glass drumstick, she stirred the mixture noisily while humming a Wham! song.

Waaake meee uup

Befoore you go-go...

m

ワン(バウワウ)| wan (bowwow)

There was a man who collected only dog snouts.

— This one is from a Shih Tzu. The whole dog is worth 140,000 yen, but the snout alone is worth 80,000.

— They're really elastic; they almost feel like rubber, don't they?

— I get the snouts directly from the dogs, so they arrive fresh.

— By the way, who do you pay the 80,000 yen to?

— The dogs. I convert the money into dog food and, without the owners knowing, I feed it to the dogs every day.

— Secretly? It seems risky.

— Dogs can't bark, so their owners don't notice.

— So this dog doesn't have a snout?

— I put a prosthetic in its place, so you could say he does.

— And this one?

— Except for the one I showed you just now, all the other dogs have died; all that's left of them is their snouts.

- And what do the snouts eat?
- Anything. I just water them from time to time.
- What curious little things, huh? They even move.
- Yes, they wriggle around like that. Cute, isn't it?

The other day, the same man came for a visit and offered to sell the entire collection. I refused. The price he wanted was exorbitant.

i

Instead of the afterword, Shigesato Itoi

When I have to appear in someone's dream, I don't know whether to be happy or feel left out. I'm used to it now; but I'm forced to appear in other people's dreams quite often. I try to tell them to fulfill their dreams on their own, without my help; but a dream that relies on no one but oneself is also so shabby that I end up feeling sorry for the dreamer.

Perhaps the reason why my (Itoi here. Not Murakami.) identity—or something like that—is so weak is that it keeps getting sucked into other people's dreams.

I appear so often in all sorts of people's dreams that I'm basically busy the whole time other people are sleeping. Every day, when I open my eyes—I'm still exhausted for a while.

I, devoid of selfishness, don't look for others to help me with my dreams. Far from it: I try not to dream at all, so as not to cause any inconvenience. Despite this, the people who appear in my dreams often seem to play supporting roles in the waking world. As for the people whom I would like, on a rare whim, to ask to appear in my dreams — they probably have the stubborn determination to refuse the request.

In short: my existence is meager, and I have little willpower; I have no whims. My only request is that you love me anyway.

I would be so kind as to ask you to read this afterword of mine right after you read Haruki Murakami's foreword. If you will grant me this, I will be happy to appear in your dreams. I will chop wood, heat the bathwater, scrub the floor—you may even kill me or insult me, and even sex is not out of the question.

Both Haruki Murakami and I have truly become adults.