



We, the Children of Cats

Tomoyuki Hoshino

Praise for Tomoyuki Hoshino and *We, the Children of Cats*

“I see [in Hoshino] an ability to truly *think* through fiction that recalls Kōbō Abe. This superlative ability makes even the most fantastical details and developments read as perfectly natural.”

—Kenzaburō Ōe, Nobel Prize-winning author of *Nip the Buds, Shoot the Kids* and *Teach Us to Outgrow Our Madness*

“Like a heat shimmer on a summer’s day, Tomoyuki Hoshino’s stories tantalize and haunt. From ‘Paper Woman’ to ‘A Milonga for the Melted Moon,’ Hoshino writes of people stranded between poles of reality and dream—with each option as uncertain as the other. Wonderfully translated, selected, and presented, this collection of works will be required reading.”

—Rebecca Copeland, Washington University, author of *Lost Leaves: Women Writers of Meiji Japan* and translator of *Grotesque* by Natsuo Kirino

“[Hoshino’s] stories are filled with images like sacred spaces: even as each seems perfectly self-contained, they secretly refuse their apparent closures, spinning forever across limitless expanses, dropping seeds along the way for further growth. As they travel always towards some distant other place, they live on through myriad forms that possess no tidy resolution, no real end.”

—Mayumi Inaba, award-winning author of *Hotel Zambia* and *Portrait in Sand*

“These wonderful stories make you laugh and cry, but mostly they astonish, commingling daily reality with the envelope pushed to the max and the interstice of the hard edges of life with the profoundly gentle ones.”

—Helen Mitsios, editor of *New Japanese Voices: The Best Contemporary Fiction from Japan* and *Digital Geishas and Talking Frogs: The Best 21st Century Short Stories from Japan*

“What feels most striking and praiseworthy about Hoshino’s work is how he deals with ambiguity—not as a fusion of multiple meanings, nor as their simple coexistence, nor as symbolic of meaning’s absence; rather, he deftly weaves these concepts together and then, in the space between them, makes his escape.”

—Maki Kashimada, award-winning author of *Love at 6000°* and *The Kingdom of Zero*

“The loosely linked stories collected in *We, the Children of Cats* home in on everyday events of millennial Japan only to slowly pan out onto alternate realities—voyages, crimes of passion, cultural histories of treason, sudden quarrels, and equally sudden truces. Bergstrom and Fraser’s translations brilliantly capture the emotional tones and shape-shifting nature of Hoshino’s language. These stories explore the longing to be somewhere, sometime, or even someone else so strongly that reality itself is, before you know it, transfigured.”

—Anne McKnight, Terasaki Center for Japanese Studies at UCLA, author of *Nakagami, Japan: Buraku and the Writing of Ethnicity*

We, the Children of Cats

Stories and Novellas by Tomoyuki Hoshino

Edited and Translated by Brian Bergstrom
with an additional translation by Lucy Fraser

FOUND IN
TRANSLATION

PM

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Contents

PREFACE

To All of You Reading This in English

Stories

Paper Woman (2000)

The No Fathers Club (2006)

Chino (2000)

We, the Children of Cats (2001)

Air (2006)

Novellas

Sand Planet (2002)

Treason Diary (1998)

A Milonga for the Melted Moon (1999)

AFTERWORD

The Politics of Impossible Transformation

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To All of You Reading This in English

As you know, on March 11, 2011, an enormous earthquake struck eastern Japan. At the time, I was home in Tokyo working on a novel. The shaking was unlike anything I'd experienced before. It went on and on, up and down and side to side, as if I were in a small boat tossed by angry waves; minutes passed, but still it didn't stop. The book-cases and walls swayed like wind-buffed trees.

I'd never thought earthquakes were frightening, but in this moment, I felt true terror in my heart. This is how my life will end, I thought. I felt the strength leave my body, and, afraid I would collapse right there, I put my hand against the wall, using all my might just to get through it.

As soon as the shaking subsided, I turned on the television. Tsunami warnings were sounding. The tsunami arrived unbelievably quickly. There was no sense of reality to it at all. It crashed over the coastline and rushed across rice fields with amazing speed. Images of it swallowing fleeing cars and fleeing people were broadcast live from helicopters. Watching them, I felt my heart break a little somewhere deep inside.

That wound has yet to heal. And if someone like me, shaken up in Tokyo and watching the tsunami on television, was so affected, how must it be for those the tsunami touched directly? When I think of them, my body trembles.

Twenty years ago, I lived in Mexico, drawn there by a love of Latin American literature. Doing so taught me that what I saw before my eyes at any given moment was not the entirety of reality. Latin America is a place where, for good or for ill, extraordinary events ordinarily occur. I was frequently faced with absurd occurrences I could do nothing about, but on the other hand, it forced me to be creative and resilient as I confronted whatever may come next. I found my powers of imagination growing more expansive as I lived there in that society.

Now, faced with this enormous earthquake and tsunami, what I need, as my heart threatens to break apart completely, is the will and imagination to confront another reality I can do nothing about. As I read back through the pieces in this anthology on the occasion of their translation into English, I felt the need all the more keenly. That's why I write stories in the first place, I thought.

In every story, the characters attempt to confront an unyielding reality using the power of their imaginations. The characters in these stories all share a certain measure of minority. This minority is invisible to the eyes of the majority. Which makes it as though it never was. But reality is made up more than just what meets the eye. In these situations, those in minor positions call upon their powers of imagination to create spaces of belonging. This imaginative power creates worlds that affirm their being rather than deny it. With a strength that rivals that of reality itself.

The earthquake and tsunami, as well as the resulting nuclear crisis, have transformed, in the blink of an eye, the position of the majority, who had been simply living their lives normally up till then, into that of the minority. And those who had already been living in minority positions have been driven to one even more minor. Especially now, because the damage they've sustained has been so great, various people existing in positions of minority have disappeared entirely from the world's view. Those calling for "reconstruction" imagine only the reconstruction of the majority, leaving those in the minority behind once again.

Truth be told, after the quake, it hasn't been uncommon for me to feel writing literature to be rather ineffective. Yet, at the same time, it is only by writing stories that I am able to inhabit a future at all.

The stories included in this anthology are, without exception, ones for which I feel a deep affection. My fiction may be a bit different from the image that comes to mind when you think of modern

Japanese literature. But these fictional worlds are minor Japanese realities (even as several have Lat
America as their setting).

My wish is for the words in these stories to overcome our various differences and lodge themselv
within the bodies of all of you.

Tomoyuki Hoshino

June 2011

Translated by Brian Bergstrom

It's been two years now since I became a novelist, and I've found myself thinking more and more about just who it is who reads the things I write. This may be simply due to the relatively poor sales of my own books, of course, but it may also be due in no small part to my recent pondering of what larger meaning a novel's existence might bear. After all, statistically speaking, the number of people reading novels is decreasing, part of a general decrease in the sales of literature, but I think the real problem may be that fewer and fewer people really read any more, really consume literature as if printing the words on the interiors of their bodies.

As I've continued my professional writing career, I've come to think of it as an art that wavers, like heat shimmer, between joy at the prospect of becoming something else and despair at knowing that such a transformation is ultimately impossible. One could say that a novel's words trace the pattern of scars left by the struggle between these two feelings. Which is why a novel should never be seen as a simple expression of an author's self.

For this reason, I use my novels to write about things other than myself. But I am nevertheless always aware that what I end up creating will never be more than a portrait of my own imperfect transformations, that what the reader is deciphering while reading my novels is merely my psyche. And as they do, they'll also be reading their own psyches, which are likewise caught in the process of trying to become other than themselves. A true experience of reading is always located in the territory where the two forms of consciousness intermingle.

The moment this intermingling occurs, a professional writer becomes a professional reader. I myself have written more than a few critical essays about the work of others, and have even earned money reading the rough drafts of aspiring authors. In the majority of cases, what I find in their works is an arrogant assertion of the author's self at the expense of all else. Or, alternatively, an author covertly draws attention to the spectacle of his or her attempt at transformation, thereby inadvertently creating a one-sided assertion of authorial self anyway. It's been said that as the number of readers has dwindled, the number of authors has swelled, and I would add that this is linked to the proliferation of ferocity posing among these authors. On the Internet, within fanboy culture, anyone can pose as anything. But I increasingly get the feeling that no one is truly attempting to become something else, or rather, that no one has anything in particular to aspire to be, that they don't have any real idea what they want to become at all. It's impossible for anyone who's never truly attempted to become something else to comprehend the despair of inevitably finding oneself unable to. Someone who has never felt the despair of trying every means possible to do the impossible has no way to imagine the unhappiness of another. So there's no reason to think such a person could ever truly write a novel.

Of course, if one asked them, "What do you want to be?" or "What do you want to do?" one would receive perfectly normal answers, such as, "I want to become a creator, and work for myself," or "I want to find a job that will allow me to maintain a stable household," and such answers would indeed be the result of earnest consideration. But this resolve reveals its fundamental unsteadiness once push comes to shove, once one's conviction to pursue whatever goal is forced to stubbornly weather seeming impossibility to persevere. One could say that most people are only living their lives halfway when compared to the passion of someone like the Paper Woman, whom I met a year and a half ago. Or at the very least they could be said to be missing out on an essential part of life.

The Paper Woman was another of these writers attempting to become a novelist. She wrote

fantastical tale about a woman who could eat only paper and eventually became entirely composed of the stuff, and it moved me enough that I took it upon myself to contact her and set up a meeting.

As I surveyed the teashop where we agreed to meet, I picked her out at a glance, saying to myself, "Aah, that has to be her." She was as pale as if she were the woman in the story come to life, her short hair dyed a beautiful silver. Of course, her diet turned out to include more than just paper, and she brought Darjeeling and orange-marmalade-slathered scones to her lips with relish. "Do you sometimes dribble soy sauce onto sheets of paper and wrap them like seaweed around your rice?" I asked, and she replied with a touch of contempt. "I'm not a literal bookworm, I don't actually eat paper. Besides, no matter how much paper a bookworm eats, it's still just a worm in the end, no? Wanting to become paper and eating paper are two different things."

"Good point. If eating paper turned you into paper, all a little kid who wanted to be a soccer player would have to do was eat other soccer players to succeed."

"Have you eaten many authors, Mr. Hoshino?"

"No, no, I've never spent any time wanting to become an author. Become a novel, maybe."

"If you're still saying things like 'I want to become a novel,' you've got a long way to go, I'd say."

"Would you?"

"I mean, I was thinking things like that when I was still in elementary school and keeping a diary. I realized that diaries were lies, that they were filled with omissions and inaccuracies, so if I wanted to write the details of my days precisely, down to the smallest second-to-second fluctuations in my mood, my life and my writing would have to overlap exactly. In other words, I'd have to become a novel."

"You were quite precocious."

"I was just a bookish little girl. And you were a late bloomer, right, Mr. Hoshino?"

"So how is wanting to become paper different than wanting to become a novel?" I asked, getting a bit more serious.

"If you took the matter a bit more to heart, I think you'd see what I mean for yourself. But to answer you anyway, in elementary school I was working with some papier mâché and I realized that it was a lot like brains. You know how you make papier mâché, right? You soak newspaper in water until it gets soggy and starts to mash up, and then you add some glue. So, in other words, within this gluey substance are countless words and letters all smashed together. It's like my brain as I read books and then think, my thoughts forming out of the mashed-up words I've put into my memory that I rearrange to make something new. Brains are just so much papier mâché."

"So your brain is hardened and stiff?"

"I just have to make sure it isn't exposed to the air. Anyway, I began to think of myself as formed out of papier mâché, which made me better able to understand how it must feel to be paper itself."

"Such anthropomorphism is quite typical of young girls."

"It's not anthropomorphism. Pay attention. What I realized was that the feeling of having no feelings was how it felt to be paper. In other words, I was attracted to paper, but paper itself, as banal as it sounds, has no inner self, can only absorb characters and words into itself without assigning them meaning. That's how I wanted to be, I realized. And I simultaneously realized that the more I wanted to be paper, the farther I got from actually being like it, which made me sad."

"So that's why you wrote that story."

The little girl protagonist could only eat paper, which upset her stomach and made her pale and thin. One day she went to school and almost no one noticed her, and she was caught off-guard by the reflection she glimpsed of her profile in a window out of the corner of her eye. She was almost invisible from the side, as thin as a page. She began to worry that she was more paper than girl.

“Have you ever thought much about mermaids, Mr. Hoshino?”

“Well, to a certain extent. There’s a part of me that’s always been rather enamored by fish. I even wrote a story called ‘The Mermaid Myth’ when I was in grade school.”

“You should publish it sometime! I went through a Mermaid Girl phase myself, though it was high school in my case. My boyfriend at the time had what you might call a ‘mermaid fetish,’ to the point that everyone called him Merman, actually, and he always told me that I’d make a good mermaid. It sounds like a joke when I say it now, but at the time I did all these things to please him, growing my hair out until it reached my butt, wearing a bra made of scallop shells, making myself a spangled tailfin. I would invite Merman over when my parents were away and wait for him on the bed dressed like that.”

“Costume play, huh? Do you have any pictures?” “God forbid.”

“And you’re right, it makes for a funny story, but you can also feel the special sadness of the mermaid myth, too. What makes them so attractive, so moving to contemplate?”

“It’s the impossibility. But it’s also a gender issue, I’d say. These days there are all sorts of people who are neither man nor woman, or who are mixed racially, and it seems like it wouldn’t be too huge a leap to think about humans mixing with animals, or even mixing with plants and trees. We can imagine these things precisely because of the times we live in. Mermaids are simply ahead of their time. It makes the sorrow all the more palpable.”

“I think I understand. You want to become a hybrid child of human and paper.”

“Indeed. Well, paper doesn’t have blood, so I couldn’t really blend with it that way. I think I want to intermingle at a level deeper than blood.”

“So, at a spiritual level? Though paper doesn’t really have a ‘spirit,’ either, so ...”

“It’s difficult, right? What does it really mean to be paper? There are so many things I’ve yet to learn.”

It was a few days afterward that we began living together, and it was four months after that when we married. I called her Paper. Indeed, she became my Paper Doll.

It didn’t feel as if I’d literally wedded myself to paper, of course, but I was happy all the same. Paper conformed to my personality with almost alarming speed and soon came to resemble me almost exactly. It wasn’t just a matter of liking the same food or music or places. She began to resemble me in all ways: getting hungry at the same time I did, growing annoyed at the same things and in the same way, using the same words and phrases I would when discussing a movie we’d just seen. When I’d display my pleasure at this, she’d just reply happily, “I have a lot more blank pages left in me!”

And truly, I was happy and comfortable. But I worried that I was the only one who really was. Was Paper able to tell that in my heart of hearts I didn’t really feel that she was paper, and did this make her sad? And was she on the verge of slipping into a vortex of depression from that very emotion, since feeling sadness was itself simply yet more proof that she wasn’t really paper?

So I made every effort to treat Paper like actual paper. I got a hint from a British movie I saw for an erotic game we could play. We called it “The Earless Hōichi Game.” I’d use a variety of pens and brushes to write stories all over Paper’s skin. At first this tickled her, but soon Paper’s pale skin would grow flushed and sweaty, her breathing ragged. Goosebumps would appear and she would murmur hoarsely and from time to time she’d open her eyes and watch my hand move across her, trembling as she did. When I’d still my hand and read what I’d written aloud, she’d be overcome again, her body twisting and turning, gripped with a new type of excitement. There was no need to make her earless like the real Hōichi, so I used a fine-tipped pen to inscribe the lobes and curved inner surface of her ears. She was especially sensitive there, and seemed to orgasm under my pen.

I, too, was filled with an uncommon pleasure as I wrote. Egged on by the heat that would rise from

Paper's body, from the perfume of her sweat and other fluids, from the sound of her moans, I would write and write and write. My whole body would flush with heat as a tingling pleasure engulfed it, and my nerves grew so sensitive that I could no longer bear to wear clothes. At the same time, I felt a clarity within me that made me feel like I was not one man but ten. Was this what omnipotence felt like? Writing was making me all-powerful.

We'd end the game when I finished writing, or when I'd run out of space on her body, or when one of us grew too tired to go on. And that was when I'd punish Paper. *If you were really paper, you'd feel nothing, you'd just lie there and allow yourself to be written on. You're a counterfeit Paper Woman. You don't deserve to be written on. I'm erasing it all.* Berating her like this, I'd dunk her in the tub and wash her body clean. Paper would always weep then, wrenchingly, despairingly, and murmur her desire to be tattooed.

Surprisingly, Paper would remember the things I wrote across her body perfectly. By "perfectly," I mean down to the exact characters I chose. She claimed to remember them with her skin. She said the feeling of the pen moving across her skin would return sometimes, and even though she fought against it, she'd feel pleasure as it did. So I'd type what she told me I wrote on her into my word processor. Soon our "Earless Hōichi Game" became the method by which I wrote everything. I became unable to write anything that didn't have Paper lying beneath it. I wrote my stories during this period as if painting them. And you could say that Paper was my muse in this sense.

Our tragedy, as is usual with these things, began with Paper's pregnancy. We'd been having sex without taking precautions since even before we got married. So it was hardly a shock when we got the news eight months after the wedding, but Paper became withdrawn nonetheless, sighing to herself while gazing out at the setting sun from the veranda. I tried to placate her at first, saying things like, "It's perfectly natural that paper would become pregnant," or, "A child of paper might turn out to be paper too," but Paper would just look up at me and say, "That's not what I'm concerned about," refusing my comfort.

"You know I don't literally want to take the shape of paper. Don't talk to me like a child."

"I'm sorry. I guess I just overestimated how alike we'd become, thinking we'd merged completely body and soul. It seems I've been neglecting my efforts to get even closer to you."

"Don't say such things. It makes me want to die. It's me who's lost the ability to become you."

"What are you talking about? Your ability is nearly supernatural!"

"But I understand now. I've lost my ability to be made into things. So I've gotten pregnant. Becoming a mother is the same as becoming an author. I can no longer just accept the words of other people now I have to produce my own. My time as paper has come to an end."

I understood Paper's sadness. It was the same as the terror that haunted me as a writer. One trades one's self-hood for the ability to write. It's the choice one makes the moment one decides to be an author. Or, not just an author. Taking one's place in the world involves a choice like this for everyone, and no one is exempted.

"If that's how you really feel about being pregnant, maybe it would be better to get an abortion. I can't feel sorry for the child."

"I can't do that. I've made the decision to accept anything, to hybridize spiritually, physically, in every sense, and so I can't decide to expel something from me as if cleansing my blood. It's not our place to decide who deserves pity."

"Tomoyuki, it is up to you to save me."

"I want to become more paper-like too, just like you."

Paper ended up loving the little boy she birthed and raised. Naturally, she didn't try to make him

into paper, and we gave him a normal enough name, Kazuyoshi, by reversing the characters for Hōichi. ~~helped her raise him too, of course, and while he slept I'd use Paper as paper like always, caressing her~~ with my pen, drawing illustrations and completing manuscripts on her body, reading her favorite stories to her as she closed her eyes to relax. In order to become more like paper myself, or, to put it more precisely, to become more like Paper as she strove to become more paper-like, I began to read much more than I had previously. I read all the books Paper told me she'd read, one after another. I tried to guess what she was thinking when she stared blankly into space, using all the information about her that I gleaned to attempt to replicate her thoughts down to the letter. Whenever I'd succeed in expressing Paper's feelings even better than she could, or supply her with the exact word she was grasping for, she'd smile like an artificial flower blooming underwater. I loved this smile of hers above all.

Even so, the void inside Paper never filled. Its edges spread wider and wider, and I found myself unable to keep up. Paper taught Kazuyoshi words, and though he couldn't speak yet, he could recognize and point at them with his finger, but as she stared at her child trying to vocalize, her expression would darken, the skin on her face would harden, and she'd appear to fall into that deep hole within herself out of which she was unable to crawl. Perhaps taking after his mother, Kazuyoshi's ability to memorize words was astounding. But this seemed only to add, however slightly, to Paper's sadness. When I asked about it, Paper told me that faced with her child's genius, the shining white of the blank pages in her memory would dim, seem dingy. "My pages are ripping out," she'd lament, weeping.

"Don't the pages filled with writing outnumber the ones ripping out?"

"What good is that? What good is a book with missing pages?"

"Paper wears out. It's a mistake to think that you can keep it pristine forever."

"I want to be a perfect archive, though. For Kazuyoshi."

"A library of everything? A famous author once wrote that you'd have to become the whole world to become a perfect archive."

"I know that. Look who you're talking to, I'm the woman who told you that in order to keep a perfect diary she'd have to become one."

"But a person cannot become a world. A person can never be any more than just a part of one."

"You've become quite a degraded being, haven't you? I don't think you could get any more broken down than you are now!"

"I'm just an ordinary man. That's why I can understand your pain at not being able to truly become paper, right? It's not just you, Paper, anyone can feel this way, be gripped with regret and sadness at the prospect of never truly being able to understand another person's feelings completely. As an ordinary man, I can want to understand you as much as I can, become you as much as I can, and still I can't avoid reaching the limit of my ability to do so. But isn't reaching this limit satisfaction enough?"

"It didn't matter who it was, Merman or anyone else: all I ever wanted was to understand everything there was to understand about the people important to me. I want to understand the you that even you don't understand. I use words to absorb things into myself. If I could really become paper, really become a book, I'd be able to absorb all of the people important to me into myself. But I can't become that kind of paper, so there's no way I can become you the way I want to. And I can't bear to be such a flawed model for Kazuyoshi. My very existence has lost its meaning."

"I still need you, Paper. You are the only thing that allows me to write. I can only commune with things outside myself through writing. I'm a limited, unremarkable man, so I still need words to do that. And paper."

It became a daily chore to convince Paper to go on. All my time and energy were exhausted just with childcare and stabilizing Paper's emotions, so nothing was left over to devote to stroking Paper with m

words. And Paper, in turn, took this cessation of my pen's play across her skin to mean that her utility in even this arena had come to an end, agitating her even more. So I pushed myself to write something on Paper's skin at least once every other day, no matter how tired I was. But as I scrawled the pale approximations of the sentences that used to flow across her, Paper would feel the difference on her skin and her expression would cloud. And eventually, my exhaustion rendered me unable to produce any more words at all. In the end, the mere sight of Paper's tired, lackluster skin would fill me with despair and irritation.

Paper, for her part, was growing visibly emaciated. Her hair whitened even without her bleaching, and it would fall out like withered grass if brushed too hard. Her appetite disappeared as well, and soon she resembled nothing so much as a collection of bones and dehydrated skin. Her tongue grew mossy, her eyes perpetually widened in seeming fright, her gaze fixed. This drastic change occurred so quickly I didn't even have time for it to sadden me.

It was about a month ago that strange words began to flow from Paper's mouth. I should have taken more notice then. I'd been pouring all my energy into writing on Paper's "human parchment" when she suddenly murmured, *water definitely flow definitely insect*. Though she sometimes moaned or made other sounds during our writing sessions, we never conversed, so this brought me up short. Running her fingers along the folds in the skin around her pelvis, she continued, murmuring, *yo e ro sun*, just nonsense syllables. "What is it?" I asked, and she replied, "I see characters, characters besides the ones you've written," and then she started pointing to the words I'd just written on her. "Look, you wrote the water radical, 氵, right here, and 'definitely,' 必, here. Put them together and you get the character for 'flow': 泌. And below that, look, combine that 'u' (ウ) with the 'definitely,' (必) plus 'insect' (虫) and you get 'honey' (蜜)! And over here, along the left crease of my groin, *yo ヨ e エ ro 口 sun 寸* combines and becomes 'investigate': 尋!" But all I saw where she pointed were so many wrinkles. Every time she moved, the wrinkles would shift, and it seemed that they'd form new words for her to read. *Wa ki shi nichu yo mata na sai hi*, she'd burble, taking apart the characters for "chatterbox blossom" I'd just written, and soon I couldn't take any more. I was gripped with despair. I took a sleep mask I'd been given on an airplane from my dresser to place over Paper's eyes and dressed her in clothes that exposed the least amount of skin possible.

It was around that time that I started to seriously consider tattooing Paper. I thought that if the words on her skin were fixed and meaningful, she'd stop getting so caught up in the chaos of the characters' formation, and her mind would grow more ordered as well. I decided to write out a translation of *Don Quixote*, a book we both esteemed above all others, in as fine a print as I could manage, then find a good tattoo artist to complete my plan.

But it was already too late. One day, Paper was dozing in a sunbeam on the living room floor, scratching absently at her dry, nearly eczematous skin, when she suddenly informed me, "I think I've finally completed my transformation into paper." And thereafter, I was forbidden to write on her, to touch her skin, or even enter her room. Outside the times she needed to take care of the bare minimum of her bodily needs, Paper remained holed up in her room, holding Kazuyoshi in her arms and reading to him from books only she could see. Weeping, I ended up having to enlist the aid of the tattoo artist to tie Paper naked to a bed and force sleeping pills into her mouth, and thus we were able to finally tattoo her with *Don Quixote*, starting with the first chapter.

Paper remained docile during the tattooing even after she woke up. Though she'd sometimes moan in pain, she also read along as the words were drilled into her skin, laughing at the characters' antics. This was the final step on the journey Paper had undertaken to connect with the world solely through books. Though my passion failed to even approach Paper's, I still embraced a similar desire to hers as a

author, so I vowed in my heart to pour as much energy into my future tappings at my computer as Paper was devoting to her body now.

Paper wanted her whole body covered, but I decided to leave her face blank, telling her she could always fill it in later. The words *Don Quixote: The Ingenious Gentleman of La Mancha* ran down her backbone. "Let's compare spines!" exhorted Paper, so we lined her up with the new *Don Quixote* translation that had just come out from Iwanami Press and took a picture. Of course we couldn't fit the entire thing on her body, but I assured her that we'd try to fit more onto her in the future.

Characters inked in midnight blue now covered Paper's body like a swarm of tiny insects. Her body as she stood palms out, arms spread wide, looked like a jacaranda tree in full bloom, the dark blue seeming almost to glow. Transfixed by the sight, I kissed the lines of text that striped her skin. I ran my tongue along them as if using it to read. Goosebumps appeared just as they had when we'd first begun to live together, and she sighed heavily. I felt satisfied, as if I'd somehow become like Paper as well as she. She completed this final step in her transformation. "I am paper!" exulted Paper loudly. I nodded in agreement.

The next day, I headed to the clinic at Paper's request to take Kazuyoshi to get his DPT vaccination. I did a little shopping too, and ended up returning home about four hours later. I knew something was wrong as soon as I opened the door. I was greeted by the thick odor of petroleum. Paper's figure standing in the living room and silhouetted in the light of its southern exposure, glowed blue. Before I had time to say a single word, Paper struck a match and lit her gasoline-soaked hair. Faster than the blink of an eye, flames engulfed her head and rose toward the ceiling. Fire leapt up in front of me, too, even as I started to run toward her. Paper spread her flames to the gasoline-soaked surroundings. All I could do was clutch Kazuyoshi to me and retreat as I screamed incoherently into the flames. Kazuyoshi started screaming too, as if he were also on fire. Paper's voice cried out, "At last! I'm so happy! I am finally, truly paper—look at me burn!" Brushing embers from me, I watched as the blue-black writing melted into the oils bubbling up from her skin and transformed into flame and smoke. "No, no, this is wrong!" I wailed, sobbing. *You're wrong, there is no paper, no words that exist in a state of perfection, no pristine and hidden from human eyes, such paper is not really paper at all, you have me, you have Kazuyoshi, we can read you, we can write on you, we can still give you meaning, you know the promise of eternity is a lie.* But my words failed to reach Paper. She collapsed into the flames and burned up as I watched. Fleeing the spreading fire, I finally ran out the door, delivering myself and Kazuyoshi into the embrace of the silver-suited firemen rushing to the scene.

I haven't written a word since. My writing's meaning burned up along with Paper. As if tracing patterns in her ashes, I would begin this or that story, but it hurt too much—every word felt ripped from my very skin. And yet I have no other way of writing left.

Paper's absence taught me that novels are already meaningless, that their meaning has always been illusory. There is no one left who craves words like she did, who wants to absorb them completely and let her read herself in turn. And she wanted me to do the same to her, to absorb her and let her read herself on me. I responded as well as I could, imperfect as I am. But I was all she had. She wanted so much to connect with so many more, but only I ever made the attempt. And it was too much for me to be alone. Now all I have left is a mouth full of regret. These lonely words hurt more than I can say.

The No Fathers Club (2006)

The No Fathers Club got its start not only because my days were filled with free time, but because my friend Yōsuke took me to see a game of No Ball Soccer.

No Ball Soccer was just like normal soccer, only there was no ball. The five members of the team would pass and shoot as if one was really there. The opposing side's goalie would jump and make a save as if intercepting a ball actually flying toward the net. The shooter would be crushed. And the crowd would go wild, raising their voices to the heavens as if they truly had just witnessed an unbelievable save.

I was the only one who couldn't see it. The players and fans and referees all watched the non-existent ball. They'd steal this absent ball from each other, dribble it between their feet, feint one way then move to the other, leaving their opponents to overcompensate and fall. Careful not to overlook a gap in the defense, the offensive player would find one and shoot the absent ball through it like a bullet. It would hit the bar. The offense would raise their hands to their heads and shouts of "GOOOAAALLL!" would fill the air. A ring of celebrating players would form. The invisible ball rolling around near the net would get a kick from the sulky, defeated goalie.

At first I felt uneasy watching, thinking I was being tricked, that everyone was in on a joke that excluded me. Or like I'd been invited unsuspectingly into a cult, listening blankly to a charismatic zealot's overheated sermon. But as I kept watching, at some point I started to catch the fever too, I'd stand up and cheer with everyone else for a particularly spectacular play or boo and give "thumbs-down" to a bad call. I still couldn't see the ball, but it was really there. I even began to hear the faint thump as it connected with a player's foot.

I hadn't been this excited since I was in sixth grade, playing chicken in the dirt-filled expanse of an unfinished housing development during the summer and winning. The game was to race along as fast as our bikes could carry us, aiming for the furrows and jagged protrusions that scarred the area and then to launch our bikes into flight, and the one who could go the longest without braking was the winner. I wore my red windbreaker and practiced my falls for when I wiped out, and in the end I held victory in my hand, the rest of my body bloody from being scraped across the ground.

I'd just been killing time, perhaps, since the day I was born. I was raised in aimless plenty, average in my academics and athletics, in my looks and my conversation, in the economic status of my two working parents. Maybe that was why my passion had thinned. Despite my youth I already felt like I was just living out the rest of my days. When my father died in an airplane crash when I was eight, I felt as sad as anyone, but he'd hardly ever been home and I barely had any memories of him playing with me, so I became accustomed to his now eternal absence soon enough. He left a small inheritance and some life insurance money behind for us, and between that and the settlement from the airline, there was no danger of falling on hard times, so, though both my younger sister and I felt a bit uneasy about it, our days continued to overflow with leisure just as before.

Though I should have had my time occupied when I enrolled in a midlevel high school, my free time only increased exponentially, and it started to weigh heavily on my body. It got hard to breathe. I joined the soccer team, but the interactions I had there were just like in any other school activity, and as I flipped switches within myself I first played the role of newbie, then that of the experienced senior two years later. I'd wanted to play flat out, wild and willful like Brazilian players did, but it was impossible for someone as lacking in passion as I to even figure out how to act willful or wild in the first place.

I started hanging out with Yōsuke when I found out that his father had gotten sick and died when

he was in fourth grade. Don't get me wrong, though, it wasn't like we found each other and started sharing our tales of woe about our single-parent households or anything.

One evening in early spring, near the end of our freshman year in high school, a particularly tiresome older teammate was threatening to keep us late after practice and Yōsuke tried to excuse himself, saying, "My father's coming home tonight after being away for a long time, so I have to be home in time for dinner." The older boy responded angrily, "What are you talking about, idiot? You don't have a father!" Yōsuke dipped his head and gave his accuser a dark look. Everything grew quiet around them. Feeling bad, the older boy muttered, "Sorry," to which Yōsuke drew himself up and replied fiercely, "He's expecting me," then gave a curt nod and left.

The next day, I greeted Yōsuke in a loud voice when he came through the door. "So was your father glad to see you?"

After a beat, he twisted his lips into a grin and said, "He gave me a whuppin', 'cause I was late."

"He hit you? Even though he comes home so rarely?" I pressed him, and he replied, "Well, it didn't hurt much, since he's dead and all."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," I said, going along, "I massage my dad's back sometimes, but it never gets any better, 'cause he's a corpse."

"You too? Don't worry, it's just your mind playing tricks on you. His back's not stiff, he's just dead."

"But I press down and it doesn't give! So you're saying he's not stiff, he's frozen?"

We couldn't help but go on and on like this.

It was thrilling. No one else could join in. First the older boys, then everyone stopped talking to us. The atmosphere of the place grew frosty, the air palling balefully around us. Even though it seemed like we were making everyone angry, we couldn't stop.

After that, Yōsuke and I would talk about our fathers from time to time. Regardless of whether anyone was around to overhear, I couldn't suppress the breathless excitement I felt when we started to get carried away with our father talk. When we became sophomores, we performed a two-man stand-up routine at the welcome banquet for new members called "Let's Talk About Papa." Naturally, no one laughed, and we even heard people muttering darkly to each other, "It must be nice with their parents dead, no one to bother them. They should think about how we feel." The two of us felt our teammates' anger swell almost to bursting as we chattered away.

It was around then that I watched my first game of No Ball Soccer. It occurred to me as I did that we could use this approach for our problem. If a ball could materialize out of thin air that had more substance than any real ball just by having everyone agree to act as if it were there, wouldn't a father more real than any real father materialize if we just acted as if we believed he was there with every fiber of our beings?

So we quit our increasingly hostile soccer team and started the No Fathers Club. We admitted only those whose fathers truly didn't exist in this world, so children of divorce were out, though illegitimate children who didn't know their fathers were in. The idea was to pretend we really had fathers every second of every day, leaving no room for sharing feelings or talking about our pitiful situations, so those seeking therapy: sorry. We announced our conditions and even required the production of official family registers as proof, so we were shocked when we ended up admitting nineteen members, including some from other schools.

At our inaugural meeting, everybody introduced themselves and then we opened the floor to discussion called "My Father's Like ...". We shared the problems and conflicts we had with our fathers and discussed together strategies for dealing with them. I told everyone how my father was perhaps too understanding, and that while it was nice that he let me do as I liked, I sometimes wondered

if he really just didn't care.

~~“So when I came home all bloody from playing chicken with my bike, my mom chewed me out, but my dad just said, ‘If he dies, he dies. What can we do?’ I thought, is that what he'd say to the papers if I committed suicide? And then later, when I drove the car around even though I was only fourteen, all my dad said was, ‘In Mexico they let kids your age learn to drive on their own and just get licenses for the car later.’ It makes you wonder, right? Aren't parents supposed to judge their children's behavior just a little bit and teach them right from wrong?”~~

And the girl who then said, “Actually, I'm envious of you, Joe. Your father sounds like he really understands children,” was the girl I ended up dating, Kurumi Kunugibayashi.

“If you told a kid who had a real interest in cars that driving around when you're fourteen was no big deal, he'd keep driving, right? But if that kid was just trying to act big by doing it, he'd lose interest. With just a few words from your dad, you lost interest and stopped trying to sneak the car out, right, Joe?”

I was dumbstruck. You got me, I thought.

“Well, actually, yeah. That's what happened, I heard him say that and I stopped trying to drive.”

And I even muttered to myself under my breath, yeah, that's right, my dad was right all along. Muttering to myself like that really did the trick. At that moment, my father truly felt real to me.

“Yes, he was right all along,” agreed Kurumi, overhearing me. She went on.

“So that's why I was thinking, maybe all the issues with our dads that we've been talking about only seem like problems 'cause we're still just kids. We just don't understand what they're trying to do yet. In my case, it took five years after the issue came up before I could look back and see what he was trying to do, to come to terms with it.”

When Kurumi first got her period at eleven, her father gave her a rather explicit sexual education. Showing her all sorts of things, from Hollywood sex scenes to pornographic woodcuts, he explained that it was just a natural part of life, like eating or drinking or breathing or menstruating, so there's no need to make a big deal of it. It was just that if you're too careless eating or drinking you'll end up poisoned or dying young from alcoholism, so by the same token, if you're careless about sex, you'll end up pregnant before too long, so to avoid getting into trouble you should be slow and careful as you progress past your first time. It's just like how you only start eating real food after getting slowly weaned from your mother's breast, he explained.

“It was like torture. While he was showing me the woodcuts I kept thinking of all sorts of things, like when we'd go into the bath together when I was little, stuff like that. He started seeming dirty to me, and I was embarrassed and so angry I thought I'd explode, but he wouldn't let me run away. I didn't speak a word to him for a while after that.”

Kurumi paused, and surveyed the room.

“But what I understand now is that my father was also fighting down the same explosive embarrassment I was. It wasn't that he wanted to talk about those things with me, it was just that my mom had dropped the ball and wouldn't do it. So my dad had to take the dirty job and give me the information I needed. Though if it was appropriate to do it so explicitly to an eleven-year-old girl, I don't know. But I do know that thanks to him, I'm well prepared for how perverted boys can be.”

The boys in the group chuckled a bit at this, though I was moved by her words once more. “Your father was trying to become your mother too,” I said, almost at a whisper. Kurumi's eyes opened wide in surprise as she looked at me, and she nodded her agreement.

The only thing that intruded on the intimate space forming between us was the guy who then asked, “But that never happened, right? Were you talking about your made-up father? Or were you

remembering when your real father was still alive?" In response, I warned him, "You're about to lose your membership here, saying things like that. The rule is that we act like we truly have fathers, every moment of every day, in our thoughts and words and actions." Guys like that, with weak powers of imagination who couldn't keep up their concentration, ended up dropping out of the club before long.

Though, even I had trouble at that time thinking very deeply about what kind of person my father really was. The father I created now didn't have to be a continuation of the father who died nine years ago. The way he parted his hair, how far his belly stuck out, what health problems he might have, how he'd romanced my mother when they were young, what he was like when he was in school, how old he was when he lost his virginity, all these things, even things a son would never know about a real father, I didn't create them for him he'd remain insubstantial. Imagining myself having to create absolutely everything, down to how he acted as a child and what kind of people his parents were, I felt faint at the prospect of the potentially endless labor ahead of me.

Even so, as we kept meeting and sharing tales of our fathers, the words began to come more easily like flowers blooming, and my father began to take on an independent existence, to "take his first steps" so to speak. The most important thing at this point was the responses I would get from the other members. Especially Kurumi, when she gave her interpretations of my father's actions I felt I got a whole new perspective on him I'd never had before.

We started going out after two months passed, when summer started, and 70 percent of what we talked about was our fathers. Nervous, I made up all kinds of things, last weekend I drank beer with my dad, he told me about trying to start a small textile business, he's Hong Kong- crazy and knows everything about Hong Kong movies, I rattled on and on. Kurumi responded in kind, happily jabbering about skipping school and helping out at the supermarket her father manages, about the things the other workers would tell her about him, about how he's pretty popular with the ladies there but he's too pure hearted to notice, things like that. Our conversations were so taken up by talk of our fathers, we hardly knew anything regular couples knew about each other, not our interests or backgrounds, nothing. We went on a trip, just the two of us, to Hokkaidō during summer vacation, and even then we'd do things like imagine how we'd be acting if our fathers had come along, buying picture postcards and souvenirs for them, and we ended up seeing the sights as we traveled half through our fathers' eyes.

Thinking back on it now, that might have been the peak of our relationship. The membership of the No Fathers Club took a sharp dive at the beginning of the second school term. All sorts of excuses were given, "I'm busy with my job," "My schedule's full with school activities," "My father's sick," but what was really happening was members getting tired of the faux father game. When even second-in-command Yōsuke stopped coming, I confronted him, asking, "What about your responsibilities as a leader?" Yōsuke replied with a serious expression. "My father died." Appalled that he'd say such a thing I shouted at him harshly, "If he's dead you can just bring him back, can't you? That's what we do!"

"It was a suicide. He drank a bunch of poison. He left a note saying, 'Let me rest in peace.'"

"That's impossible. A made-up father has no right to die. We've put so much into creating and supporting him, he can't just disappear like that. If he did, it's 'cause your commitment is weak, Yōsuke. Just try again, do it like we started all this, like playing No Ball Soccer!"

"I started that, you know. 'Cause I wanted to play soccer. I don't want to live with a fake father forever. So, I quit. Say hi to your dad for me."

And with that, the No Fathers Club shrank to just Kurumi and me. I told myself that the other members were just jealous of our deep connection. Just overwhelmed by the extreme realness of our fathers.

It was a mild, sunny day in early autumn, and we were discussing once again how we'd take care of our fathers in their old age. As we were imagining ourselves nursing our elderly charges in the future, the

words, “But we’ll still be together then, right?” escaped my lips before I quite knew what I was saying. Kurumi looked me slowly up and down, then tilted her head slightly and said, “Well, I’d always thought so. You know what, I kind of want to meet your father, Joe.”

Meet my father? Not knowing how to respond, I sat there for a bit in stunned silence. Kurumi added, “I think our fathers would get along, don’t you?”

“So we’d all get together, the four of us?”

“Yeah. Why don’t you come by my house next time? I’ll play host.”

“Well ... Dad’s kind of busy ...”

“So’s mine. That’s why if we don’t do something about it, they’d never get a chance to meet. You haven’t said anything to your father about me, have you? I’ve told mine all about you. He seems to want to meet you too, and your father.”

I flinched. I didn’t know if I had it in me to start talking to my father alone at home. I could think up all sorts of details about my father to talk about with Kurumi, but it seemed impossible to start conversation with him when I was by myself. Kurumi’s father suddenly seemed more grounded, more real than the one I’d created, and I felt passed up by her. Or, to be more precise, by the unwavering firmness of her commitment to her father.

“In any case, I’ll talk about it with my dad,” I said, then fled.

As I climbed into bed that night, I tried as hard as I could to imagine Kurumi in her house having conversation with her father. If I couldn’t even imagine that, I’d surely misspeak when the four of us all met, and Kurumi would coldly criticize me, say things like, “Who do you think you’re talking to? My father’d never say something like that,” and that would be the end of it. Just like when you play No Ball Soccer, if Kurumi and I weren’t completely synced up, we wouldn’t hear the words of the silent conversation the same way.

Telling myself I couldn’t fail, I peered into the darkness and hesitantly started to speak to my father, made of air. There was no answer, but still I launched myself into conversation. At first I was afraid of the silence and devoted myself to filling the air with words, most of them about Kurumi.

After a while, I started to get into the rhythm of the conversation, and suddenly my father began to talk back. The things he said caught me by surprise.

So this Mr. Kunugibayashi, I think I know him. He manages the Maruhan supermarket in Yoshino-cho, right?

Uh-huh ... I muttered, and left it at that, his words leaving me otherwise speechless.

I’ve never dealt directly with him, so we’ve never talked, but I’ve seen him around. I might have seen his daughter, too.

Now that I thought of it, they were in industries that would bring them into contact. Of course, that was before they both di—I put a lid firmly on the doubts that started to boil to the surface, and told myself that I could do this.

So, do you want to come with me to visit the Kunugibayashis? I squeezed the words out.

I do.

‘Cause you want to meet my girlfriend?

You’re being childish, Jōji . I know what’s going on here. Kurumi looks at her father and sees that men of our age don’t have very many true friends. A man preoccupied with his work mistakes the other men he works with for friends, but in truth he has no one he can really rely on. It’s actually easier to work that way. But no one wants to face such a lonely truth, so everyone acts like they’re buddies. It’s sad, but what can you do?

So Kurumi’s trying to give you and her dad a chance to make a real friend?

Isn't she?

And you don't have that many friends either?

What do you think, Jōji?

Well. I don't know.

I wouldn't think you would.

Am I too much of a child?

Do you have many friends, Jōji?

You've gotten rather talkative all of a sudden, haven't you, Dad?

It's just because I'm looking forward to meeting Kunugibayashi and his daughter. Set it up, would you? I'm asking you seriously.

I don't know how dependable I am, but I'll try.

Good. Well, good night, then.

Good night.

As I fell asleep, I was absently aware of my father's presence receding before it finally faded from the room completely.

I didn't have a chance to talk with my father again before the big get-together, but my excitement continued to build, a ceaseless fluttering in my chest like blades of grass shivering in the breeze. Confidence suffused my body from head to toe.

When the big day arrived, I bought a cake large enough for four people to share and went to the Kunugibayashis' house accompanied by my father. Kurumi's dad was quite a bit taller than mine, and he welcomed us into the house with a booming voice and a hearty shake of his firm, thick-skinned hand.

Just as Kurumi had predicted, our fathers got along swimmingly. They began by talking about work, but, sensing that they were squandering their opportunity to get to know each other, they began talking about us instead, and then my father asked, *Is it true you like soccer?* Soon we were all swept up in hotly debating which J-League team was better, JEF Chiba or the Urawa Reds, and then the discussion jumped to Hong Kong movies after someone brought up *Shaolin Soccer*, and before we knew it we were planning a four-person trip to Hong Kong for the beginning of the new year. Soon there was less and less room for Kurumi and me in the conversation, and our presence became unnecessary to keep it going. Kurumi, smiling ear-to-ear, refilled our teacups again and again. My father started visiting the bathroom frequently, probably from drinking too much tea. When he did, Kurumi's father would turn to me and say things like, *Your father's a nice guy*, or, *What a jolly sort*. I'd reply, *No, no, you're the one who's a cheerful soul*, things like that. And I'd mean them.

Kurumi's mother was about to get home, so that day we left the Kunugibayashi household before dinnertime.

My relationship with my father grew ever more profound. It was probably for just that reason that we had our first big fight.

It was over something little. I was talking to him about how I wanted to live my life on my own terms, and then it suddenly came to me that a student's life was not for me, so I made up my mind not to continue on in school. I said as much to my father: *I think my boredom with life comes from always being at school, and I think I'd be more fulfilled if I worked in the real world. So I'm not going to apply for college, I'm going to look for a job instead.* My father erupted like a volcano.

Don't be naïve! You don't know what you're saying, you just like the way the words sound! That's the worst. You're just being gutless, using "getting a job" as some kind of out. Whether you go to school or go on the job market, I don't really care, but you have to take your decision seriously. You think your parents will just give you money if you decide to go to school, right? How can you hope to succeed in the real world

with an attitude like that?

~~With these last words came a slap across my face. The span of Dad's palm was the width of a fan and I flew back and hit the wall behind me. I cracked the back of my head hard and things went black for a second, and after I came to, my father was nowhere to be found.~~

I was shaken. I ran my fingers again and again across my cheek where it was hot and tingling painfully and cried as I drank the blood from my split lip that filled my mouth with the taste of iron. *Was this how substantial my father's presence had gotten? He was able not only to converse with me face to face, but could even slap me around?*

I wanted to share my excitement at this development with Kurumi, but for some reason I hesitated. I had the feeling Kurumi would do something to dampen my mood. So I never mentioned it. But it seemed impossible to have a secret just between my father and me. Kurumi and I could have secrets, but how could I with him? And yet, now I had one, and I felt guilty about keeping it.

In return for the previous invitation to their house, this time we had the Kunugibayashis over at our house in the middle of the winter, right when JEF Chiba became first-time J-League champions. We gathered around the clay *nabe* stewpot and started drinking at noon. Though Kurumi and I were only allowed one glass of beer each.

After a while, Kurumi's father, still in high spirits from JEF Chiba's win, started telling the story of his bungled, premature attempts at sex education with his daughter, making us all laugh.

Sure it's a funny story now, but at the time I thought I'd never be close to you again, Dad. It was really hard.

These days, I'd probably be accused of sexual harassment, or child abuse. It sounds weird to say that but when I met Joe here, I was relieved from the bottom of my heart. I could die without regrets, I thought.

I laughed, a bit unnerved.

We're only sophomores, Dad.

Age is hardly a factor in these matters.

Kurumi's dad really was a pure soul. Compared to him, my father seemed positively lewd.

You two seem as close as if you've been together for decades. Doesn't it seem like we've been friends that long, too?

It does, it does. We're blessed as fathers, aren't we?

We sure are. Want another, Nobuo?

Sure, sure, Hisashi. Here.

.... ..

.... .. *aaaah.*

You know, it took a lot of courage to do that as a father, Nobuo. A lot of confidence. That's what I thought when you told that story, anyway.

Ha ha. Well, thanks, but let's not talk about that anymore. How to be a good father, things like that. You just try to be the best parent you can, you know?

When I opened my eyes, the room was pitch dark. I felt like I'd been sleeping for a long time, tucked under the *kotatsu's* heated blankets, but when I looked at the clock it was only five in the afternoon. I turned on the light, woke Kurumi, and turned on the gas heater.

"Where are our fathers?"

"They went out for a walk to clear their heads."

They were nowhere to be found. The food in the cold *nabe* looked almost completely untouched. The beer was about half empty. Kurumi and I exchanged a sheepish, somewhat awkward look.

"Well, we should ..."

“Yeah.”

~~It was almost time for my mom and younger sister to come home, so Kurumi jumped to her feet even before I finished my sentence and pulled on her coat.~~

“Sorry for leaving you to clean up.”

Kurumi said this at the doorway, looking at me with a lost expression on her face. *Say hi to your dad for me*, I almost said, but stopped myself. I just stood in the doorway for a while instead. I heard a sound like a walnut cracking somewhere in my chest.

The four of us never got together again after that. Kurumi and I decided that our fathers were getting along so well that there was hardly room for us in the equation, and they spent all their time on drinking or going on little trips together. Our fathers wouldn't talk about things like that with their son or daughter.

“So that's true friendship, I guess. I think it's great. That's what I wanted to have happen.” Kurumi's face was expressionless as she said this to me.

“Yeah. I don't talk much to him about what I talk about with you, or what we do together anymore.”

“I do, a little. Just enough to be polite.”

I wondered if Kurumi was talking less and less to her father as well. Or, not just talking less, but finding it impossible to talk to him even when she wanted to. Because he wasn't there anymore. The sight of the cold, untouched *nabe* appeared behind my eyelids once more. It seemed that day we'd gone as far as we could go with this.

“The Hong Kong trip looks like it'll be put off, too. Well, they're both busy men, so what can you do? Besides, we have our entrance exams starting then. Maybe we can go during spring break, though.”

Irritated at Kurumi's refusal to accept the end of things gracefully, I told her about the incident I'd told myself I'd keep secret.

“Dad's grown pretty independent of us, so I guess it doesn't matter if I tell you this. He hit me once, you know. Split my lip on the inside, the blood really gushed out. Here, look.”

I folded back my lip so she could see the inside of my right cheek.

“I kind of get what you mean, but I also kind of don't ...” “It was swollen up all that night, like I had the mumps. I said I didn't want to go to college, that I wanted to get a job instead, and he was like ‘Don't be naïve! How's a kid as immature as you going to hack it in the real world?!’ And then, WHAM! It really opened my eyes. Dad's trying to show me what it means to stand on my own two feet, so he's ignoring me on purpose and paying more attention to your father.”

“I think your father was right,” said Kurumi with a sigh, looking at me with a mix of sadness and irritation. “So did you decide to take the entrance exams?”

“Well, you know ...”

“Let's both promise to take them, for the sake of each other's independence.”

I groaned. “Isn't it kind of early for that?” I protested weakly.

“I've already signed up for the spring training course.” The No Fathers Club, already down to just Kurumi and me, fell apart completely. But I was satisfied it had served its purpose well: our fathers had come back and attained an independent existence, and we'd filled our free time with rich, rewarding days together.

It was after school on the first day we'd come back from spring break to start our junior year. I decided to accompany Kurumi on her way home. We made small talk about little things like the entrance exams and such, and then I asked her a question.

“Do you still talk to your father?”

Kurumi shook her head.

~~“Don’t you think that’s a good thing?”~~

Kurumi drew a deep breath, and then let it out.

“Our connection was always through our fathers, wasn’t it? If they disappear, we don’t have anything in common anymore, do we? I don’t understand what you’re trying to say, Joe.”

“But if our fathers disappear, doesn’t that just give us room to get that much closer to each other? We can’t always relate to each other through our fathers, can we?”

“The idea was always to be a foursome, though. Remember? We were going to stay together to take care of our fathers when they got too old to take care of themselves.”

“Take care of who? I’m going to have to care for my mom, but other than that ...”

“All you ever really wanted was to say goodbye to your father. He disappeared before you could do that, so you forced him to come back and let you perform some sort of farewell ceremony with him. Now that’s done, so you don’t have any use for him anymore and you feel like you’re your ‘own man.’”

“It didn’t matter to either of us if we had fathers or not! We were just trying to pass the time, so we wouldn’t go crazy with boredom! But what’s gone is gone, there’s no denying that.”

“So you were spending all that time with someone who didn’t matter enough to you to even care whether or not he really existed? You really are a shallow one, Joe. Is that what you think building a deep relationship with someone is? I promised a bunch of things to my dad. Like if I met someone more wonderful than him, that’s who I’d spend the rest of my life with.”

“Then you’ll spend the rest of your life alone, Kurumi! Your father’s just some ideal man you’ve made up in your head!”

“Maybe so. But I’d rather have it that way. It beats putting up with someone with passion as thin as yours for the rest of my life, that’s for sure.”

“If your father really was still alive, maybe we could have met as two self-sufficient individuals.”

Kurumi looked at me with a scornful look on her face. “And what, exactly, is a self-sufficient individual?” she snorted.

“If our fathers had been alive, there wouldn’t have been anything to bring us together. It’s ridiculous to think we’d have gotten together without them.”

I sighed. “Maybe you’re right,” I agreed. And as a parting shot, I said the line I’d forbidden myself from uttering: “Say hi to your dad for me.” Kurumi’s final words to me were, “I’ll pray for your father’s health and happiness.” It was like attending my own funeral.

Chino (2000)

Translated by Lucy Fraser (Town and village names in this story are fictionalized)

The trip down was good. I was still thinking it would be one-way. It had been about a month since I came to this small country below Mexico. I'd knuckled down to some intensive Spanish study, gotten to know the ways of the people, and learned to handle the spicy food.

Preparations complete, I boarded the bus, filled with the excitement of a man about to blast off the face of the earth. Here I was, about to plunge into infinite space!

Well, infinite space was pretty cramped. Just as we were about to depart, a chubby, greasy-looking man with a turkey dangling from his arm barged on board and sat down next to me. Our vehicle was an old yellow school bus bought cheap from some foreign country, with patched-up seats that were meant to fit two people each. A Mamá the size of a small mountain, with a kid on her lap, was already sitting to my left, so no matter how skinny I might be, this guy deciding to join us was like a sumo wrestler plopping down into a brimming bathtub. Something had to give.

I smiled and let them crush me.

Most of the bus windows were stuck shut, so it was hot and muggy inside. The combination of cooking tinged body odors and animal smells was nearly overpowering. The brat next to me squirmed constantly, shouting and singing and laughing hysterically. The turkey, both legs tied so it couldn't move, lifted its gangly head like a cobra and squawked. The driver was playing Latin music, all trumpets and drums, so loud the sound was breaking up. Meanwhile, rolls of fat came weighing down on me from both sides, breathing was becoming a challenge.

This, I told myself happily, was culture. The spice-scented flesh and heat clinging to my thighs and arms—all of it was culture. The important thing was, here and now in infinite space I was in immediate contact with people from a culture very different to my own.

Half just wanting to breathe more easily, I turned and asked the guy next to me, in my newly memorized Spanish, "How much for that turkey?" He shifted and mumbled something, but I didn't get it. I couldn't even tell if he'd understood my Spanish.

I gave up on my conversation with Señor Turkey, who was shyer than he looked, and turned my attention to Mamá. Her skin was brown, but the shape of her cheekbones, her flat nose, and her straight, thick black hair were all similar to my features. She must be, like half the population, mestizo—of mixed Spanish and native Indio blood. The kid on her knees, who suddenly shut up the minute I looked at him, had eyes like marbles, but his flat nose and thick lips were identical to his mother's. I grinned at Mamá and she nodded back without smiling. I pointed to the kid and tried to say he was a nice child—"Niño, bien"—which launched her into a flood of explanation. I could understand a few words here and there, but all in all it was gibberish to me. I couldn't bring myself to tell her that, yes, although I had initiated the conversation, I was unable to understand a word she was saying. So I pasted a friendly smile on my face and nodded, though actually I was gazing out the window beyond her, at some vultures.

The vultures were perched in a scrawny tree, seemingly doing nothing. Who knows, there might have been a dead body under that tree. For nearly thirty years, the country had been at civil war, with guerrillas—many of them indigenous Maya—battling the government. Vast numbers of people were missing, or were forcibly "disappeared." I wondered if the vultures ate their corpses. Just like in Tokyo, where the number of large black jungle crows increases with the amount of food scraps and garbage scattered out on the curbs, maybe over here the number of vultures swelled along with the number of missing

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