1

*Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman*

When I closed my eyes, the scent of the wind wafted up toward me. A May wind, swelling up like a piece of fruit, with a rough outer skin, slimy flesh, dozens of seeds. The flesh split open in midair, spraying seeds like gentle buckshot into the bare skin of my arms, leaving behind a faint trace of pain.

It’s like the silence in his right ear deepens to the point where it crushes out any sound on the left side.

And that span of time had created a translucent barrier between us that was hard to traverse.

Nobody said as much, but they’d pretty much given up hope that his condition would ever improve.

“They stay inside the woman and eat her flesh— naturally,” his girlfriend said.

Pushing his way through the thick blind willows, the young man slowly made his way up the hill. He was the first one ever to climb the hill once the blind willows took over. Hat pulled down over his eyes, brushing away with one hand the swarms of flies buzzing around him, the young man kept climbing. To see the sleeping woman. To wake her from her long, deep sleep.

“But by the time he reached the top of the hill the body had basically been eaten up already by the flies, right?” my friend said.

“In a sense,” his girlfriend replied.

“*In a sense* being eaten by flies makes it a sad story, doesn’t it?” my friend said.

“Yes, I guess so,” she said after giving it some thought.

“What do you think?” she asked me.

“Sounds like a sad story to me,” I replied.

In a certain sense, the husband explained, you can see a person’s whole life in the cancer they get.

‘Don’t worry. If you were able to spot some Indians, that means there aren’t any there.’

I pictured my friend’s girlfriend, microscopic flies nesting in her ear. Sweet pollen stuck to their tiny legs, they burrow into the warm darkness inside her, sucking up all the juices, laying tiny eggs inside her brain. But you can’t see them, or even hear the sound of their wings.

2

*Birthday Girl*

There was something cold and hard about her: if you set her afloat on the nighttime sea, she would probably sink any boat that happened to ram her.

“Happy birthday,” he said. “May you live a rich and fruitful life, and may there be nothing to cast dark shadows on it.”

They clinked glasses.

*May there be nothing to cast dark shadows on it:* she silently repeated his remark to herself. Why had he chosen such unusual words for her birthday toast?

She was at a loss for words. One wish? Whipped by the wind, raindrops tapped unevenly at the windowpane. As long as she remained silent, the old man looked into her eyes, saying nothing. Time marked its irregular pulse in her ears.

The old man kept his gaze fixed on her, saying nothing, hands still on the desk. Also on the desk were several thick folders that might have been account books, plus writing implements, a calendar, and a lamp with a green shade. Lying among them, his small hands looked like another set of desktop furnishings. The rain continued to beat against the window, the lights of Tokyo Tower filtering through the shattered drops.

“What I’m trying to tell you is this,” she said more softly, scratching an earlobe. It was a beautifully shaped earlobe. “No matter what they wish for, no matter how far they go, people can never be anything but themselves. That’s all.”

3

*Dabchick*

It was an authentic corridor that was all corridor and nothing but corridor.

I kept walking: two hundred yards, three hundred yards, maybe half a mile, not thinking, just walking, no time, no distance, no sense that I was moving forward in any way. But I must have been. All of a sudden I was standing in a T-shaped intersection.

A T-shaped intersection?

It was a plain, simple concrete wall with no distinguishing features other than those shared by other concrete walls. No metaphysical doors, no symbolic doors, no metaphorical doors, no nothing. I ran my palm over long stretches of the wall, but it was just a wall, smooth and blank.

All around me, the air was gradually congealing.

4

*Man-Eating Cats*

Reading aloud is different from just following sentences with your eyes. Something quite unexpected wells up in your mind, a kind of indefinable resonance that I find impossible to resist.

A few bees popped up from somewhere to lick the jam that a previous customer had spilled on the table. They spent a moment lapping it up, then, as if suddenly remembering something, flew into the air with a ceremonious buzz, circled the table a couple of times, and then—again as if something had jogged their memory—settled once more on the tabletop.

You are all precious beings, chosen by God, and the cat is not. That’s why you should eat all thefood yourself.’

In the town square there was a statue of a hero of Greek independence. He had led an insurrection on the Greek mainland and planned an uprising against the Turks, who controlled the island then. But the Turks captured him and put him to death. They set up a sharpened stake in the square beside the harbor, stripped the hapless hero naked, and lowered him onto it. The weight of his body drove the stake through his anus and then the rest of his body until it finally came out of his mouth—an incredibly slow, excruciating way to die. The statue was erected on the spot where this was supposed to have happened. When it was first built, it must have been impressive, but now, what with the sea wind, dust, and seagull droppings, you could barely make out the man’s features. The locals hardly gave the shabby statue a passing glance, and for his part the hero looked as if he’d turned his back on the people, the island, the world.

Once you make up your mind to get rid of something, there’s very little you can’t discard. No—not very little. Once you put your mind to it, there’s nothing you can’t get rid of. And once you start tossing things out, you find yourself wanting to get rid of everything. It’s as if you’d gambled away almost all your money and decided, What the hell, I’ll bet what’s left. Too much trouble to cling to the rest. I packed

I packed everything I thought I’d need into one medium size blue Samsonite suitcase. Izumi took about the same amount of baggage.

All I could recall about my own son was the smell of that soap.

I stood at the crossroads, wondering what to do, which direction to take. Izumi must have heard the same music at this very spot. And I had a distinct feeling that if she had she would have headed toward it.

*The real you has been eaten by the cats. While you’ve been standing here, those hungry cats have devoured you— eaten you all up. All that’s left are bones.*

But now they were all gone forever. And I’d obliterated them myself. Never again in this lifetime would I hear those records.

The moon was a cold rock, its skin eaten away by the violence of the years. The shadows on its surface were like cancer reaching out its awful feelers. The moonlight plays tricks with people’s minds. And makes cats disappear. It had made Izumi disappear. Maybe it had all been carefully choreographed, beginning with that one night long ago.

Until the eastern sky grew light, I was held in the grip of the moon. Then, suddenly, I pictured those cats, starving to death in a locked apartment. I—the real me—was dead, and they were alive, eating my flesh, biting into my heart, sucking my blood, devouring my penis. Far away, I could hear them lapping up my brains. Like Macbeth’s witches, the three lithe cats surrounded my broken head, slurping up that thick soup inside. The tips of their rough tongues licked the soft folds of my mind. And with each lick my consciousness flickered like a flame and faded away.

5

*New York Mining Disaster*

My friend owns a nice used car, the collected works of Balzac, and a black suit, black tie, and black shoes that are perfect for attending funerals. Every time someone dies, I call him and ask if I can borrow them, even though the shoes are one size too big for me.

“Cats and dogs are your run-of-the-mill-type animals. Nobody’s going to pay money to see them,” he said. “Just look around you—they’re everywhere. Same thing with people.”

A poet might die at twenty-one, a revolutionary or a rock star at twenty-four. But after that you assume everything’s going to be all right. You’ve made it past Dead Man’s Curve and you’re out of the tunnel, cruising straight for your destination down a six-lane highway—whether you want to be or not. You get your hair cut; every morning you shave. You aren’t a poet anymore, or a revolutionary or a rock star. You don’t pass out drunk in phone booths or blast out the Doors at four in the morning. Instead, you buy life insurance from your friend’s company, drink in hotel bars, and hold on to your dental bills for tax deductions. At twenty-eight, that’s normal.

But that’s exactly when the unexpected massacre began. It was like a surprise attack on a lazy spring day—as if someone, on top of a metaphysical hill, holding a metaphysical machine gun, had sprayed us with bullets. One minute we were changing our clothes, and the next minute they didn’t fit anymore: the sleeves were inside out, and we had one leg in one pair of pants, the other in a different pair. A complete mess.

But that’s what death is. A rabbit is a rabbit whether it springs out of a hat or a wheat field. A hot oven is a hot oven, and the black smoke rising from a chimney is what it is—black smoke rising from a chimney.

One cold rainy night just before Christmas, she was flattened in the tragic yet quite ordinary space between a beer-delivery truck and a concrete telephone pole.

“Clothes aren’t important. The real problem is what’s *inside* them.”

I can’t explain it, but I felt as if the ground had silently split open and something was crawling up out of it. And then there was this invisible thing on a rampage in the dark. It was like the cold night had coagulated. I couldn’t see it, but I felt it, and the animals felt it, too. It made me think about the fact that the ground we walk on goes all the way to the earth’s core, and I suddenly realized that the core has sucked up an incredible amount of time.”

“When you switch it off, one side ceases to exist. It’s him or us. You just hit the switch and there’s a communications blackout. It’s easy.”

He switched the TV off again. “I don’t want to say anything about other people,” he said, “but consider the fact that there are ways of dying that don’t end in funerals. Types of death you can’t smell.”

“Neither legally nor morally a murderer.” I didn’t want to, but I reviewed the points she’d made. “But you did kill someone.”

*In the dark, the miners huddled together, straining to hear one sound. The sound of pickaxes. The sound of life. They waited.*

*They waited for hours. Reality began to melt away in the darkness. Everything began to feel as if it were happening a long time ago, in a world far away.*

6

*Town of Cats*

Tengo had visited him there no more than twice—the first time just after he had entered the facility, when a procedural problem required Tengo, as the only relative, to be there. The second visit had also involved an administrative matter. Two times: that was it.

Father and son: each was locked in a deep, dark embrace with his own secrets.

Once the afternoon train disappears down the track, the place grows quieter than ever. The sun begins to sink. It is time for the cats to come. The young man knows that he is irretrievably lost. This is no town of cats, he finally realizes. It is the place where he is meant to be lost. It is another world, which has been prepared especially for him. And never again, for all eternity, will the train stop at this station to take him back to the world he came from.

His expressionless eyes made Tengo think of two empty swallow’s nests hanging from the eaves.

His father nodded. “When a vacuum forms, something has to come along to fill it. That’s what everybody does.”

His father’s nostrils flared. One eyebrow rose slightly. “If you can’t understand it without an explanation, you can’t understand it with an explanation.”

He is a flesh-and-blood human being with a narrow, stubborn soul, surviving in fits and starts on this patch of land by the sea. He has no choice but to coexist with the vacuum that is slowly spreading inside him. Eventually, that vacuum will swallow up whatever memories are left. It is only a matter of time.

7

*Scheherazade*

Lampreys think very lamprey-like thoughts. About lamprey-like topics in a context that’s very lamprey-like.

Life is strange, isn’t it? You can be totally entranced by something one minute, be willing to sacrifice everything to make it yours, but then a little time passes, or your perspective changes a bit, and all of a sudden you’re shocked at how its glow has faded.

8

*UFO in Kushiro*

You are good and kind and handsome, but living with you is like living with a chunk of air.

He had the impression that he was witnessing some moment from the past, shoved with random suddenness into the present.

No matter how far you travel, you can never get away from yourself.

It’s because that box contains the something that was inside you. You didn’t know that when you carried it here and gave it to Keiko with your own hands. Now you’ll never get it back.

9

*The Kidney-Shaped Stone*

She turned toward him and pressed her shapely breasts against his side. Then quietly, as if sharing a secret, she said, “You know, Junpei, everything in the world has its reasons for doing what it does.” Junpei was falling asleep and could not answer. In the night air, her sentences lost their shape as grammatical constructions and blended with the faint aroma of the wine before reaching the hidden recesses of his consciousness. “For example, the wind has its reasons. We just don’t notice as we go about our lives. But then, at some point, we are made to notice. The wind envelops you with a certain purpose in mind, and it rocks you. The wind knows everything that’s inside you. And not just the wind. Everything, including a stone. They all know us very well. From top to bottom. It only occurs to us at certain times. And all we can do is go with those things. As we take them in, we survive, and deepen.”

It sits exactly where it is supposed to be, as dark and kidney-shaped as ever.

But all that reached him were new layers of silence.

You change yourself, or rather, you *have* to change yourself or you can’t survive. When I come out to a high place, it’s just me and the wind. Nothing else. The wind envelops me, rocks me. It understands who I am. At the same time, I understand the wind. We accept each other and we decide to go on living together. Just me and the wind: there’s no room for anybody else.