

STEVEN
HEIGHTON
THE DEAD
ARE MORE
VISIBLE

S T O R I E S

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The Stages of J. Gordon Whitehead

STEVEN HEIGHTON

THE DEAD ARE MORE VISIBLE

STORIES



ALFRED A. KNOFF CANADA

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For my sister, Pelly Heighton,
and my nieces: Tarah, Christine, and Julia

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About the Author

Now and then, the man and his boss discuss the weather

Principal Eguchi ordered scotch instead of beer. Scotch for both of us. We were meeting at Brain Noodle, as we did every week after the Saturday-afternoon cram class I'd been teaching for her since my arrival in Japan ten months before. In public like this, she was always formal with me, but today she was practically rigid and her English had developed a limp.

"You've promoted us from beer to scotch," I said.

"I have—pardon? Promoted you?"

I knew that Brain Noodle's manager and chefs and wait staff all considered Principal Eguchi a troubling phenomenon—a tall, polished woman who owned her own business and drank quantities of beer in public. And now *scotch*. She was not sipping.

"A manner of speaking," I said, waiting for her to slip out her pocket dictionary and demand details. I'd never had a student in Eguchi's school as meticulous about learning English as Eguchi herself, as if she had founded her American-English school simply as a pretext to improve her own grasp of the language. Officially we met each Saturday to discuss the students and any problems that might have come up during the week, but largely these meetings—like our other encounters—were tutorials for her. I didn't mind. My salary was good, Eguchi was intriguing on a number of counts, and the food at Brain Noodle was superb.

Today the dictionary remained in her pearl handbag, though she did snap the bag open to take out her matte silver compact. She wore as much makeup as any woman I'd ever met. Her hair was applied kabuki-style and, in times of stress, fine-tuned in public. She was a good-looking woman and I never saw the point of this hyperbolic rigour, but of course I said nothing.

"Is everything all right, Ms. Eguchi?"

"Would you care for another Suntory!"

"Should we order first?"

She seemed confused. Her eyes were always evasive—she tended to focus on my mouth when I spoke, which usually made me light a cigarette or reach for the toothpicks sheaved in the shot glasses along the sushi bar—but today her eyes could find nowhere to land.

"Uh, Ms. Eguchi ..."

"Some of the parents are compliant," she said in a rush, finally meeting my gaze.

"Compliant? You mean—in sending us their children?"

"They say the children are so happy in the *juku*."

"Oh, oh, you mean 'compliment.' As in—"

"*Too* happy, the children. Too much play, not enough work. These parents are ..."

I sat back. "Oh. These are complaints."

"Several complaints. More than several. How many is several, Sensei? In English?"

"Well ... I guess around three or four."

"Ah. How many is many?"

"There've been *many* complaints?"

"They say that recess is half the class, Sensei! That means, two hours or more."

I could only nod.

"And, you refuse to assign the housework."

“Four hours seems like a pretty long time to keep three- and four-year-olds at a desk. On Saturday.”

“You have said this before, Sensei. And I have said: Short recess, no problem. But not like this.”

“Some of the children aren’t even three yet!” Several. Many.

“Their parents are erecting to send them here. You are paid to teach them.”

I thought of how some of the smaller pupils couldn’t even understand the simple Japanese I had to use to give instructions. I’d tried before, diplomatically, to convey my feelings about the *juku* to Eguchi; she’d simply told me that Westerners—especially of my generation—could never hope to understand Japan.

“Perhaps I feel I have not given you enough time off,” she said, inscrutably.

“Have you told these parents that we learn English *during* the recess?”

“But how, Sensei?”

“Like I said before. I play games with them. They learn to count. They learn verbs.”

“English for playing the game is not what the parents want to learn for them.”

I had to look away. I signalled the waiter for two more scotches.

“All right. I can try shortening the recesses.”

“Thank you, Sensei. But ...”

“But only by so much.”

“But I have *promised* these parents, Sensei!”

She was looking at me in a kind of agony. I had seen this before. She was imploring me to take her meaning so that she would not be obliged to finish her sentence, to strip matters to the root. I decided not to help out. I finally sensed what was going on.

“I have promised to give shrift to their compliance, Sensei. I am very sorry. So sorry.” The scotches arrived. The waiter glanced at us sidelong. I picked up my scotch and drank it off. I then stood, eyes stinging.

“I gather you mean that I’m fired.”

“No!” she said, aghast. “Only that I must replace you at once!”

Each day, the child brings to the teacher an apple

A month into my stay in Japan I began to notice oddities in the primer I had been using to teach myself the language. I’d bought it in a used bookshop on a cul-de-sac in downtown Tōkyō. It was close enough to the Ara River that you could smell the water—sour, swampy—as you emerged from the cramped interior. The shop was about fifty feet deep and maybe six feet across—four feet if you deducted the width of the high shelves on either wall. I supposed at one time the space had been no more than an alley between buildings that would have sprouted from the ruins left by the American air raids of ’44 and ’45. I was in a hurry (on my way to meet Principal Eguchi for the first time: job interview) and didn’t spend long comparing the different primers that crammed a good three feet of shelf space. I chose one of the less foxed and fretworn paperbacks: *Japanese for the Beginners and Those Who Would Like More*. The authors shown in the discoloured photo on the back—bespectacled, beaming under a cotton-candy froth of flowering cherry trees—were professors in Kyōto, a pair of elder-

and venerable linguists. The book had been published in 1969. I supposed they would be dead by now. It cost just a hundred yen.

The vocabulary for lesson 1 was unsurprising: *thank you, pencil, dog, floor, home, why, where, this, that, him, her, good night* and so on. It was when I started memorizing the words for the next lesson that I noticed an oddness of tone and trajectory. This was a few weeks later when my honeymoon with the new was waning, giving place to spells of fatigue, claustrophobia, sensory saturation—all the usual markers of culture shock. Among the cats, the cars, the uncles and aunts, houses, doors, windows and other basic vocabulary, the word *shitai* appeared: “corpse.” The authors, Drs. Sato and Okubo, then perkily urged me to translate a number of Japanese sentences into English, including *My mother’s pencil is on the table, When Father comes home, he sees the good dog, and When I looked through the window there was a corpse on the floor.*

I flipped to the appendix to check my translations. All correct. Then, after a dozen or so other standard phrases, this: *My uncle says that there are some corpses in that house.* Bold now, I tinkered with the sentence and, seizing some lyric license, settled on: *In my uncle’s house are many corpses.* It went on like that. The oddness was diverting enough, but more than once, trying to study while packed among standing, dozing salary-men on trains that were like human trash-compactors, I glanced up and looked around, spooked, like a man reading a tepid letter that swerves mysteriously into threatening tones.

In my second month I moved a backpackful of worldly goods into a midget flat not far from the bookshop and the river. I spent little time there. I ate in noodle shops or sat in the park with a book when I wasn’t working, commuting. The flat never began to look lived in. Its vacant echoing never ceased—that audible sign that a tenancy has taken root. I was grappling now with lesson 3, which focused on the use of the past tense and introduced new vocabulary. The Second World War, or some discreetly unnamed facsimile, made its first appearance. I wasn’t completely surprised. Among the new words that I committed to memory were *rifle, battle, ruin, bomb.*

My aunt stayed with us here for dinner last night.

The sun was bright that day and the wind was warm.

My uncle has a rifle that he found after the battle.

A rifle is no match for a bomb.

I will, I shall, I am going to return

In my last lesson that Saturday, before Eguchi fired me, I’d introduced my students to the future tense in English. It seemed important that the toddlers in the class become acquainted with its nuances. As for the four-, five-, and six-year-olds, the concept would be novel for them as well, since there is no actual future tense in Japanese. *Tomorrow I go to the store. Next week I finish my studies. Before long I go home to Canada.* That was futurity, Japanese-style—simple, logical. By the end of the lesson, and not for the first time, I felt frustrated, mildly ashamed of my mother tongue with all its traps and catches, countless irregularities, first print, provisos, codicils ... If Japanese had a clear, military order and concision, English resembled a sprawling civilian bureaucracy. Hard to get a definite answer. Harder to find

your way around. Week by week, just as Eguchi alleged, I was extending the children's recess.

Japanese may have been the more logical tongue, but months into my study of it I was still not fluent; when I gave the children instructions in Japanese they would titter and shout out delighted corrections. My best student, Yukon, would approach me at recess or after the class to footnote these corrections with the mild and beguiling pedantry of a six-year-old happily instructing an elder. Yukon was the “class name” her mother had asked Eguchi to have me use when addressing the girl. I could see the word's attraction from the mother's point of view—it was Canadian, yet in sound it was close to several Japanese given names, and easy to say. All sixteen children had been assigned class names, either by their parents (Clinton, Rocky, ABBA, Milk Shake, Waylon, The Phantom, Marvin, Miami, Mickey Rourke) or by Eguchi, who favoured the sort of name she found in the chunky Victorian classics she was grinding through to improve her English: Dorothea, Clelia, Silas, Clement, Edmund, and—for the two-and-a-half-year-old Toshiko Watanabe, who, you could tell from her lumpy form and cowpoke wobble, was still in diapers—George.

Once the controlled chaos of recess was at its peak, Yukon would often withdraw from the action and skip over to join me by the chain-link fence that separated the schoolyard from a cool, high, sound-swallowing oasis of bamboo, an exhaling green jungle in the heart of Tōkyō. I would be smoking while watching the kids (this was the late eighties, and Japan), seeing how their games would permutate, blind man's bluff into tag, tag into hide-and-seek, intrigued by the brisk negotiations that momentarily broke the flow of play—though the flow, in fact, never really broke, not until I stopped it and herded the class back inside. There was something atomic, or quantum, in this constant, shifting action and repatterning, as if the players were linked so closely to a primal source of energy and motion that they would naturally re-enact it whenever conditions allowed.

Yukon would take my free hand and look up at me in her stern manner, her brow crimped hard under the pageboy bangs, lips clumped together as if ready to scold. Her skin was coppery dark. She spoke with a slow, dignified formality—possibly a personal style, but most likely her way of making sure I got the Japanese.

Sensei, chotto ii kangae ga aru yo ... “Sensei, I have a little idea. It might help you.”

“Is my Japanese improving, do you think?” I would always ask, flicking down my cigarette and swivelling my shoe on the butt.

“It certainly is, Sensei! However, you still talk like a woman.”

“I know. My verb endings. I know I have to be less polite.”

“And what did you have for your snack today, Sensei?”

A quarter pack of Camels, I thought, but I told her, “A muffin and milk.” Often at this point I'd have to break off to holler at one or more of the boys. It might be Clement or The Phantom hunkered down on the head of a smaller child like Rocky—a portly, bespectacled five-year-old who wore a tie and looked like a miniature banker—or maybe it was Mickey Rourke, whose name none of the kids could begin to pronounce, trying to wedge Dorothea into the tiny window of the plastic playhouse. “*Damé yo!*” I would call and stride over gathering George up in my arms to get her clear of the scrimmage, then bringing her back to the fence and holding her, hoping she would again make it through the afternoon without needing a change.

“Tell me, Sensei, do you have all these games at home in America?”

“Canada. Yes, we have versions of them.”

“Please demonstrate.” This she would say with commanding gravity, and often I would though one time instead I told her the story of how, in Mexico some years before, I and the woman I was with and some other travellers, one of whom had children, started a game of blind man’s bluff in the plaza of Oaxaca City. Local children began to gather. We thought it was because of the novelty of seeing adults at play, and gringo adults at that, but no, it was curiosity about the game itself. When one of our number, fluent in Spanish, asked if they wanted to join in, they said that they would like to but didn’t know the rules, had never seen the game before. Play, we urged, and they did join in, and before long they had taken over as we adults and two children backed out one by one, winded and laughing. We left them there, playing in the lamplight in the darkening plaza under ancient Montezuma cypress trees while their parents looked on, visibly tickled. And now (I told Yukon) what I wonder is this: has their game spread outward from that plaza, all through the state of Oaxaca, maybe across the mountains and into the next state—maybe throughout the country? All Latin America? Wouldn’t that be something?

Yukon, still holding my hand, gravely watched her surging schoolmates. She seemed to be giving my story consideration.

“Can you stay and keep teaching us, Sensei?”

George had dozed off, her head in the crook of my neck, a line of yellow drool snailing down my collar and onto the tie Eguchi insisted I wear.

Yukon added, “*Gaijin* sensei are forever leaving.”

“I think I will go home for Christmas,” I said. “I’ve been away from home for a few years. Eight years now. Imagine not seeing, say, your parents for that long.”

“I hardly ever see my father,” Yukon said. “I do see his bathrobe. It’s white!” Long pause. “If I might ask, will you see your father at Christmas?”

“Well, actually, no.” I released her small, cool hand and felt my shirt pocket for my cigarettes, then remembered George on my shoulder. I took Yukon’s hand again and explained that my parents had passed away some time ago.

“I used to have two grandfathers,” she said after a moment, then smiled.

“I should be back after Christmas, though.”

“Perhaps blind man’s bluff came to Japan from *Mexico*,” she said with force.

I nodded and made a thoughtful face; I saw no reason to quash the fantasy. It wasn’t impossible, after all. And it was good to be reminded that if reprehensible things could spread, spilling outward from their origin to stain the world, better things might spread as well.

Upon meeting, the two conceived an inward affinity

Principal Eguchi had hired me in January. She had asked me to meet her at a place called Brain Noodle. I’d wondered if, over the phone, she’d been mispronouncing “Brine Noodle” or something else, but no. When I entered, five minutes early, she rose from a stool at the sushi bar, her hands brushing her skirt as if bits of food might be clinging there, though at her place there was nothing but a glass of beer and an ashtray with a few butts of exactly even length.

and a fuming cigarette.

“Welcome,” she said, splaying her hands, though not widely or ostentatiously, as if quietly indicating ownership of the restaurant as well as her school. “Please join me.”

I was feeling buoyant. I had just arrived from tropical Singapore—where for a year I had been teaching at an academy expressly tooled to generate dutiful, dream-free logicians—and I was finding the relative cold of Tōkyō reviving right to the marrow. And the rush-hour uproar, the near-slapstick tumult of the streets and subway: welcome changes after the embalmed order of Singapore. Energy is optimism and I was ready to start over, one more time. A fresh start might sedate the fear that my years of travel were bringing me no closer to that place where the heart of life beat strongest, and were instead stealing from me the chance of belonging anywhere. I was about to turn thirty and it struck me as old. Old, at least, to have no connections or home, no woman, no child or even niece or nephew—and young to have no parents. Mine had died in a traffic accident several years before, while I was teaching at an American school in the tea-fragrant foothills of Uttar Pradesh, near Dehradun. Paradise, I’d believed. The news had not found me for several weeks. My oldest brother and our relatives had not forgiven me, as far as I knew, for being so irresponsibly unreachable.

She was tall for a Japanese woman, fit, smartly dressed. A charcoal skirt suit over a blindingly laundered white blouse. Hair back in a tight chignon. Black frame glasses of a style that would seem hip, youthful, a decade later, but at this point did not. In fact, they seemed chosen to make her look older. More formidably set apart. Her makeup was laid on thick enough that it was hard to guess her age. Asian adults look about ten years younger than Caucasians of the same age; she looked a little over thirty. Her expression during our meeting and through the months that followed was a repeating slide show of purposeful impatience, contained anxiety, and an openness, kindness, that came in what seemed accidental leaks and which she was always quick to deal with, like something that shamed her—a tampon, a bottle of pills or other sign of carnal frailty—flipping from a purse onto a floor.

Eguchi ordered beer for both of us without asking what I wanted. Hot sake was what I wanted but beer was fine. I was hungry and hoped we might order before discussing terms. She barged straight into them. Talking, she looked me over surreptitiously but steadily, as if interviewing not a potential English teacher but a sketch model or stunt double.

“I have made the schedule for you. Here are your hours.”

It should have worried me that she pronounced it “oars.” She handed me a neatly typed stack of sheets. Her fingernails were painted cerise, but clipped short.

I scanned the top sheet.

“So it’s true, what I’ve heard—we work Saturdays here.”

“So it must be,” she said, “for everyone.”

“Hmm.”

“You will find it the same at each school. And the Saturday is a half day, with the small children. An easy day.”

“Oh ... are small children easy?” I was trying to be droll, to disguise my disappointment, but it sounded almost aggressive.

“Here, yes. Especially if you are not the mother. You ... don’t like children?”

“It depends on the child,” I said frankly—an obvious mistake. Since I never settled in an

place for long, I'd developed the habit of saying exactly what I thought. I'd come to expect not to know people for long. With her gaze on me narrowing, I made a recovery, as I had to— I had just a few hundred dollars to my name. "But mostly, yes, I like them. I'd even say I admire them, if that makes any sense. And like I said on the phone, I have lots of experience."

She made a close study of my mouth. "You have none?" she asked.

"Pardon ...? No, as I said, I have lots."

"Ah! And how many is lots, Sensei?"

"Well ... it depends what we're talking about. Flights, money, continents ..." I reached for my cigarette.

"I mean *children*, of course."

"Six or seven would be lots."

"Six or seven! Very good, Sensei!"

I studied her, trying to get a read. She turned to the waiter, frowned, and signalled for more beer. The brisk demeanour seemed certain to rule out any advances by Japanese men, though her air of professional competence and energy was, to a foreigner of my background, attractive.

"I myself have none of them," she said.

"Oh," I said, "no, I meant that I—"

"But, so it goes, I do have hundreds, at the school. I think they are happy there. But we must work hard."

"*Hai, dozo!*" screamed the waiter, setting down two beers like live grenades and fleeing.

"Is it six, then," she asked me, "or seven?"

I lit my cigarette and offered to light hers. "Well ..."

"Ah!" she said. "By the way, as tomorrow is the weekend, you'll be starting."

Passive aggressive

Around three months into my stay, lesson 4 introduced scads of more advanced vocabulary including nouns such as belief, disappointment, delight, stamina, entrails, and lethality. In the next lesson, "Expressing the Tense-Future in Japanese," I was asked to translate a number of sentences climaxing with *Tomorrow at sunrise, they intend to shoot me*. Lesson 5, around four months into my stay, helped me learn to manage the oft-used passive voice in phrases that were built on the work of preceding lessons:

Tomorrow it is quite possible that I shall be shot.

Next week, perhaps, it is more likely that I shall be shot.

By the end of next month, at the very latest, I am almost certain that I shall be shot.

The lesson also contained some completely fresh material, like the sentence *Kodomo-tachi made mo korosare-mashita*: "Even the little children were slaughtered."

I was now sure that the authors, consciously or not, were trying to discourage the students from pursuing further study. Perhaps they hoped we would leave the country altogether. At one of my Saturday meetings with Eguchi, I did mention the book and its oddness, but in a subtle way, having learned enough about Japan that I figured specificity would embarrass her. Anyway, I couldn't remember the authors' names, and Eguchi was

distracted by business matters, so we let it go.

In the next lesson, toward the end of the rice-planting festival in June, casualties continue to mount and this flashcard narrative appeared: *When the bombs began to fall, there was nowhere for my children to hide. Many children were left without mothers or fathers. All through the night, we searched.*

Ghost in the looking glass

July in the schoolyard, sunlight searing through the breezy peaks of the bamboo to cast moving, ink-sketch shadows onto the asphalt. Yukon canters over and stops, dons a solemn face, takes my hand. A question is coming. In my years abroad I've developed into a decent linguist and my Japanese is now good enough for sustained dialogue.

"Sensei, can *gaijin* have babies?"

"Yes, they can!" I respond with enthusiasm. "That's why there are so many of us."

"I don't see many. Once I saw a black man. I was scared of him, but now I'm not."

"My parents had me, for instance."

"I never did see a *gaijin* with a baby. A real *gaijin* baby."

George is in my arms again, drooling against my neck; generally she requires a nap at some point during our now two- to three-hour recess.

"Then you'll have to go to Canada someday, to see. Maybe I'll go back and you can visit me."

For a moment she's pensive.

"What are bears for, Sensei?"

"For chasing and eating Canadian children. That's why there are so few of us."

"I thought you said that there were so many?"

"Well—I survived."

This Lewis Carroll logic seems acceptable to her.

"I wouldn't be discouraged by a bear," she says.

"Would anything scare you?"

"I suppose an extremely bad dream might. Do you have bad dreams, Sensei?"

"Yes. But I don't remember them."

Silence for a moment.

"Then how do you know you have them?"

"I see their tracks in the morning."

"I dream more when Father is away," she says, "but they're not always bad. But he's *always* away."

"That's why I don't have a baby. Because if I did, I'd be away, in Japan."

Through the looking glass again. She knots her brow. The frown releases in a wide, spirited grin that triggers an answering release somewhere in me. My students' minds offer their brief, sweet trancies from my own.

"Now we're playing hide-and-seek, Sensei."

I look over toward the play equipment. Silas is haunched down on Milk Shake's chest, apparently trying to force a handful of gravel into his mouth. In the distance we hear the *mochi*-cake peddler in his megaphone truck, inching through the streets, playing a mournful

minor-key jingle, like the theme of a funeral home. Tasty, tasty, *mochi*-cakes! The sounds and customs of another time.

“I’ll join you,” I tell her, “as soon as George comes to.”

“We would be so honoured,” Yukon says, bowing.

People of the Clock

Along with the sometimes macabre lexicon and phrases in my primer, there were dialogues at the end of each lesson that the student was meant to convert into English. Mostly these were untainted by the professors’ growing fondness for corpse-filled houses, moaning amputees, children cringing in bomb craters, executions at dawn.

Rather than translate them, I would flip straight to the appendix to read the English versions. Sometimes I would scribble dialogues of my own in the style of the book. It helped me kill hours on the congested, weirdly silent trains I rode back and forth to Eguchi’s school and to another school where I sometimes subbed. I read and studied, if with waning discipline, because there was little else to do but be ogled impersonally or doze off on those cars full of sleepers all nodding, twitching in eerie unison as we juddered along through the gloom of tunnels or the sodium glare of stations. Mornings I was the ghost alone among hurried, solid, purposeful burghers; on the night train back, I seemed the only living thing aboard a funeral train of wraiths.

I was aware of a tidal turn gathering somewhere within. For years I’d been in love with being an outsider. Japan, I thought, should have been my Eden, my eventual bride, and would have been, I think, had I been younger. A place I could feel I belonged forever by virtue of not belonging. Never belonging. Islands always rebuff belonging.

But I was falling out of love with distance, absence.

My favourite moment on the ride “home” to my *tatami* closet: as the train crossed under the river and climbed out of the tunnel and shot into the night, a line of huge neon billboards reared across the river like false-front structures in a midway, luminous, festooned, corporate phantasmagoria of imagery and Japanese characters and twisted English, all mirrored in the sluggish Ara. On a towering billboard, a wry *gaijin*—seemingly James Coburn—sipped whiskey above a slogan set in Gothic script, as if it were a plug for a prog rock band: OF YOU DREAM, BE HANDSOME CAD, FOR YOU PARTY LIFE AND NIGHTIES C BACHELOR FUN.

DIALOGUE 7: SLEEPING, WAKING

“Who knocks at the door?”

“Open, it is I.”

“Please accept my greetings.”

“Are you still in bed?”

“Why, what time is it?”

“It has just struck eight. What time is it by your watch?”

“It has stopped. I forget to wind it up.”

“Come, my good man, get up!”

“Morning sleep is so sweet. Please go away.”

“I don’t know how you can lie so long abed!”

“I have nothing better to do; I shall slumber a few minutes longer.”

“But a man’s life is so brusque! Come now, up, up, up!”

“Never.”

“Then I shall strike you, hence, with my cane.”

“No!”

“Have at you, you fop!”

“You are worse than the repeating alarm clock.”

On the march, he felt fortunate to have come to no harm

Eguchi was training for the Tōkyō women’s marathon, coming in mid-November. Sunday mornings I would run with her in the bamboo grove next to the school. The grove was twenty-acre square with a black asphalt path bisecting it diagonally, and a circular track, kilometre long, fitting just inside the perimeter. To either side of the narrow paths the bamboo rose in high, hedge-like palisades, so at dusk it was already dark. By day the light was a dim and anaesthetic green, the air almost cool. Where the track came closest to the grove’s outer edges, traffic sounds from the bordering streets were loud, yet the streets remained invisible. Eguchi—who confessed that for years she hadn’t left the vicinity of her school for more than twenty-four hours at a stretch—would finish these runs by sprinting the diagonal path to Mori Dori and into the school-yard to check on the Sunday-morning class taught by a gaunt, grim young Texan woman whose students were developing comic drawings especially on words like *dog* and *house*.

“You are not looking your best this morning, Sensei.”

We were on our fourth slow lap. Slow, but detectably accelerating. The leaf light didn’t do much for her complexion either, but at least her face showed no signs of strain. Mine must have. I was hungover. The day before, our weekly “meeting” at Brain Noodle had continued through late afternoon, evening, and on into the night.

In a snug salmon tracksuit with lightning-rod seams, Eguchi ran high on her toes with a silent, gliding gait, smooth but for the steam-house pumping of her arms. The lenses of her wraparound shades turned slowly toward me, seeming to monitor me as coldly as security cameras. Then they slipped down her nose, exposing liquid eyes glinting with irony. “In fact,” she said, “you resemble yellow.” She slid a finger up the bridge of her nose to push the glasses back into place. On our runs, her English gave up all its gains—the only sign of fatigue she ever showed.

“Look,” I panted.

“What?”

“I *look* yellow. You need to let me get more sleep.”

“And most of the aliens,” she said, “lose weight on the Japanese food.”

“It’s not the weight. It’s the smoking. Slowing me down.”

Eguchi smoked nearly as much as I did but it didn’t seem to affect her wind.

“Smoking only kills the germs,” she said. “In the lungs and chest. It’s good for us. Smoking expands the capacity of the lungs.”

“I’ve read that men gain weight. When they’re ready to settle.”

She laughed huskily, an astonishing sound effect, one that I heard only a handful of times over the ten months I knew her. I turned my head sharply. By the time I brought her face into focus, only the shade of a grin remained.

“What’s so funny?”

“Foreign teachers never stay. *Gaijin* never settle here.”

“I’ve seen some,” I said, my voice squeezed thin and small. Lap six. Silence but for the sounds of our mutual panting, close and loud in that narrow space. “I’ve seen some *married*. With a house. Kids.”

“Yet in their hearts, home is elsewhere.”

“I didn’t say *I* was ready to settle.”

“No, no. Of course not. Let us now do the wind sprint.”

Eguchi seemed to decree these sprints whenever we disagreed—on politics, say, or the way I was teaching for her, especially in the *juku*—or maybe she did it by mischievous instinct whenever I was tired. She surged ahead now, darting with the sleek, silent efficiency of a woodland huntress, me clomping along behind like a puffy old satyr. Her tracksuit was a flattering fit. At last she slowed to a trot. I caught up. While I was still gasping, she informed me that she’d decided I was a romantic in my view of the teaching. “Like that curious German,” she said. “*Dō iu hito deshō? Steinman, deshō ka?*”

“Steiner. Austrian, I think.”

“They are one race, Sensei.”

“We read him a bit. Teachers’ college. Thought kids shouldn’t be wakened too soon.”

“Awakened, Sensei—in the morning?”

“Metaphorically. Torn from a dream. Pulled into rationality too soon.”

“Childhood is not a sleep, Sensei—not now. There’s no time for that. Ah, time!” She brought the back of her wrist to her face and frowned as she read her Swatch. “Now we do lap at eighty percent of utter speed. Begin!”

Lately I’d been smoking Peace cigarettes, a cheap local brand.

“Not that I’m *happy* about it,” she said, raising her voice over the bellows of my breathing. “When I was a child, we spend plenty of time hunting insects with the nets. The fireflies are the *semi*. What is it, *semi*? Not the cricket ...”

“Cicada.”

Cheap and unfiltered.

“Your grasp is improving, Sensei ... We used to bring them back from the fields and the forest and maintain them in the cage with net for walls. We used to name them and play with them like the pets. Summer nights I woke up and came outside after everyone was asleep. To sit and watch the fireflies fly in their cage.”

She would not be willing to speak this way, I thought, if we were face to face.

“It’s years before, Sensei. Now, it’s necessary to work harder. Everyone here. It’s just to

bad, but so it must be.”

She smiled uncomfortably. The need to work hard was neurotically national; Eguchi’s need to maintain her school in the face of throttling competition and despite being a professional freak—a lone woman boss among a million male ones—was all her own. She would not slack or stint where her business, her baby, was concerned. “There’s no help for it—so it must be. Her fallback phrase. *Shikata ga nai*. And though I could now see the wisdom of occasional unromantic acceptance, surrender, I could not impose such a rueful wisdom on my student. A child is a romantic or no longer a child.

“Faster, Sensei! Don’t stop.”

“I need to stop.”

“Walk a lap,” she instructed. “After, we can walk back to the flat. You can have a bath and a rest again.”

“A rest,” I said, grinning as I gasped. “Right.”

DIALOGUE 9: LOVE & THE ROMANCE

“I am in love with a young gal. I fell in love with her.”

“You didn’t. You got a fancy. You imagine that you are in love.”

“My affection is deep-seated. She has the countenance of an angel.”

“You are infatuated with her. Your mind is clouded.”

“What? How dare you!”

“You fell into the snare of love. Cupid has snared you.”

“Not at all! She has a fine figure, a lovely face, an alluring smile. She has so many personal charms. She walks like a duchess.”

“Is that all? Has she good sense, intelligence? Has she good education, good breeding? What of her social position? Has she any big brothers? What kind of man is her father?”

“I know only that I love her dearly. Do not trifle with my love. My life without her would be a life of misery. And what is life without love?”

“You are a shapeless romantic. She may reject you.”

“Yet for her, would I chance all.”

“Shame on you! Friend you speak non sense.”

He had come to behave toward the boss with a befitting respect

“Do you have another book of matches?”

“Here, Sensei, you can light it with mine.”

“You can call me Curtis, Ms. Eguchi. I mean, here we are.”

“I prefer to say Sensei, even so.”

“And you still prefer I call you Ms. Eguchi.”

“*Sō desu*. There, you see. So easy to light you up.”

Even after nine months of this, it was hard to say when she was joking. Her manner was a deadpan. Her voice was even, low, and hoarse. Yet during the day, if the phone by the bed should ring and she grabbed it (and she always would, signalling me to be silent), her greeting voice was the standard public female voice of Japan: a breathless treble full of obliging little hiccups and bubbles, all service and subordination. Then she would hang up and, with no apparent self-consciousness, reassume the femme fatale baritone.

“I think maybe I should go back to my place,” I said. “I have to teach at the other school, sub class, first thing.”

“Ah, cheating on the side. Is that the phrase?”

“Close.”

“You are welcome to stay, Sensei. Stay another hour. It’s early. Here.”

I laughed as if being tickled. “You again.”

“How is that?”

“Deeply unethical. Hang on a sec.”

“There’s none more in the pocket, I think. Don’t you worry.”

“Packet. You’re not worried?”

“Stay, just so. There.”

“But *gaijin* all have AIDS—that’s the rumour. And that we’re *fertile*.”

“But I am not, Sensei.”

“You mean, at this time of the ...?”

“In my life. I did want them when I was young. Quite a bit. They never came.”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Eguchi.”

“Now, I could not have them even if I could. I’m a business. And a divorced one. Nobody marries such a woman. Nobody even takes her for the date.”

Except, I thought, *gaijin*. I wondered whom I had replaced and who would eventually replace me at the school.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Eguchi. I think they’re fools.”

“*O-seiji desu yo!*”

“No—I’m really not flattering you.”

“You’re improving, Curtis. Sensei.”

“This time I want you to look at me the whole time.”

I kissed her eyes and tasted kohl.

To describe one’s inner feeling

Genki (GENG-KEE): n. or adj.: phonetically eloquent word for vigour, health, high-spirited energy. “How are you today, Curtis Sensei?” “*Genki da yo!*” I’m well. Excellent. Fit as a butcher’s dog. No English word quite substitutes and I know that for the rest of my life whenever I feel the way I feel today, *genki* is how I’ll want to describe it. It’s that kind of day: autumn sky swabbed free of cloud, smog, or the faintest vapour, hardwood leaves in full ignition, the sun bestowing heat in a mood of mellow generosity, unlike summer’s violent excess. As I walk, heels snapping, from station to school through the bamboo grove in the exhilarating air, I recall similar days, years ago in my own abandoned country. Sounds carry

clear air and at dusk on fall Saturdays you would hear the caroming hollers of boys playing road hockey on distant streets in all directions compassing outward, while we—the kids of our street, at the navel of the known world—conducted our own passionate match. It seemed the whole universe was at play.

Working briskly, I conclude the lesson (Word Order in the English Sentence) after some fifteen minutes and announce that it's recess, which it will continue to be till the end of class time. Few, if any, of the students can tell time, but even they seem surprised that the lesson is over. Nor will I be giving homework. I will not withhold this day from them. The cold rains of early winter, I've heard, will soon arrive.

I agree to be the spinner in a game of *tanuki*. Standing in the middle of the yard, eyes shut, I pirouette on my heels while the children run off. On the backs of my eyelids they register a sonar map of scattering laughs and squeals. My right arm sticks straight out as I spin. When I come to a stop I open my eyes, yell "Freeze!" Whichever child I'm pointing at is out and stays frozen. Eventually only one child—today Rocky—remains.

I retreat to the fence beside the bamboo grove and lean back and light a cigarette, which I don't finish. The air is that sweet to inhale. On the east side of the schoolyard, under a row of mature beeches, Yukon crouches, gathering the gold and yellow leaves layered in a windrow against the fence, layers deepening even now as the wind culls further flurries from the boughs. When I emerge some time later from thoughts of lobbing a football with my father in such weather—striving for and never quite achieving that ideal, high-floating hosanna spiral—I see she's deputized her little acolytes George and Dorothea to help. I break up a minor fight (Edmund Oyama vs. the Phantom), reconvene the kids and organize a game of animal tag (all animal names to be yelled in English), and still Yukon persists with her project. From time to time she glances over, pretending not to look. Clumsy, clumsy espionage. I smoke another cigarette, this time finishing the job.

People will tell you, "I don't want a child because it just seems wrong to bring a child into a world like this." High-minded horseshit, in my view. A cut-rate cliché. When has it not been a troubled world? People have children or don't have them for their own selfish reasons, and that's fine and natural. No need to dress up the option as a philanthropic gesture.

For a long time I used that same excuse myself. At teachers' college and in the years after in the States and Mexico and two Asian countries. With several women who were interested in complicating our connections, maybe for worse, maybe better, who could say? It means the end of those affairs, and now, instead of being generationally webbed into the world—which no longer sounded like a trap—I found myself peripheral, placeless, the owner of an accent nobody could pin down, a citizen of departure lounges and unfurnished rental units.

As I pivot my toe on another dead butt, Yukon slowly approaches. George and Dorothea trail. Something is up. Normally Yukon will run up to me, abruptly stop, take my hand, speak gravely. Now in her cupped and sunlit hands something is hidden. She holds it near her cheek with great care and ceremony, as if it's a robin's egg, or a living chick. She extends her hand. They open slowly. I see a yellow rose. She peers up at me with a squint, the sun in her eyes, a shy grin. "Here, Sensei." I bend closer, reach out: it's a rose of yellow leaves. She has foliated the leaves in tight, concentric circles, perhaps around a pinecone or a stone or a plum pit. The full shape and the involutions are convincingly floral. A living flower out of dead leaves. I take it from her gently. A red hair-tie near the bottom seems to hold it together.

grip it there, pinched tightly, to hold it together.

Phrases for emergency

“I am looking for my son and daughter. Have you seen them anywhere?”

“I have not. I have been hiding.”

“Hiding! Friend, this is no time to hide!”

“Who would not be afraid at such a time?”

“Only think of the needs of your neighbours! Many call out for your help!”

“I will aid you in looking for your children, then. I resolve to help.”

“I am grateful.”

“When did you last set eyes upon them?”

“This morning, when they left for the school.”

“Where would they have gone at the sound of the sirens?”

“To the shelter, it goes without saying! But the shelter lies in ruin.”

“Is there anywhere else they could be?”

“Perhaps in the forest. Perhaps they have hidden there.”

“Shall I come to assist in your search?”

“I should be much obliged. I should not like to search for them alone.”

“In next to no time we shall find them!”

“Come, let us proceed now.”

“We shall. Be of good cheer.”

The floating world

I may have been jilted professionally, but not sexually, not yet. On Monday, when I went into the school to empty my small desk—and to inform Eguchi that I would be flying to Canada within the week and would need my final paycheque before then—she suggested awkwardly but frankly, that I should stay with her at least a couple of times before I left. In spite of the firing, I was too amused, and maybe flattered, to turn her down. Men are easily flattered; I should have seen that she was merely feeling in advance the loneliness of a vacant bed. She would not have admitted that she hated sleeping alone, but I knew it. Always, after the night's last sex and cigarette, we would turn away from each other and lie back to back, the space between us, to fall asleep, but when I woke up in the small hours she would be furling into me, face on my shoulder or pressed into my nape, sleeping hard.

Actually—be honest—I felt the same way about sleeping alone. Actually, in my sleep, I did the same thing as she did. Pressing myself into her, my heart full.

On a cold night of rain, the prospect of a good dinner and drinks and then sex and twine sleep—belly pleasures shared with a keen partner—stirs an expectancy under the heart that is a facsimile of real love. For drifters and outsiders, that may have to do. The night before m

flight out, we had an excellent dinner at Brain Noodle, hot sake, appetizers, sashimi and *chanko nabe*, all on her yen, then I walked her home through the rainy streets, sharing her umbrella, which I held. She slipped me a windowed pay envelope as we walked, hips jostling. "I thought it would be better to give it to you now, rather than afterward ... after tonight. In the morning." Behind her fogged glasses her look was as deadpan as ever, but her tone was distinctly droll. I laughed, a little drunk. I took the envelope and said, "I can't stay until morning, though. I wish I could. I still have some packing to do and I have to be at Narita at ten."

That night the sex sustained itself not just on the knowledge that this wouldn't be happening again, but also, I felt, on a covert fuel of aggression. She slammed her body against me, worked me mercilessly with her mouth, refused to let either of us rest, all the while locking me into a sexual staring match that was unnerving after almost a year in Japan where I was no longer used to maintaining eye contact for more than a second, even with her, a lover. Now her gaze was more like an assailant's. *You forced me to fire you*, her eyes seemed to say. *I didn't want to. I wanted this to go on. But my school is too important to risk.* I found that I was angry too, my bites and sucks and thrusts and clutchings all forceful, rough. A firing is like a jilting; even if you fully understand the reason, in your gut you feel pain and anger.

For a long while we couldn't exhaust that anger and desire, but at last, after an orgasm that for me was almost painful, as if pulled into being by the roots, I collapsed and we lay side by side, staring into space, for now too tired even to smoke.

"I'll need to go now," I told her. "Soon, anyway."

Her voice was amused: "Go means 'to come,' you know. In Japanese we say 'to go.' *Iku*."

"I think you told me that once. They don't mention that in my primer."

"I suppose you will forget your Japanese."

"I don't think so—not anytime soon," I said honestly. "You'll remember to say goodbye to my students for me? Especially the Saturday kids?"

"Of course. I'll say that you are called off by a family emergency."

"Which is hilarious. I have no family."

"You will have."

I propped myself on an elbow and looked at her—she did not look back—and it struck me that she was right. Somehow she knew it and, just then, so did I. The facsimile of love, however convincing, would no longer do.

I lay back down, emptied, my whole body in a flaccid state.

"I won't forget all my Japanese," I said, staring down at my pale paunch, still growing despite all the running and sex. "I'll always remember how to say 'corpse.'"

"Ah, yes, your lesson book. You asked. I intended to tell you. I know the one."

I turned to look at her again. In the near dark I could see how the makeup had smudged around her eyes.

"There was a scandal about that book. I was at a university then and people spoke of it. One of the professors was an officer at the war, and afterward he was imprisoned by the Americans, I can't recall the reason. But the other professor, Okubo I think he was named—"

"That's it—Dr. J. Okubo."

"He was *against* the war. He was a pacifier, in the university. So, he was imprisoned"

well, but throughout the wartime, by the imperial government. And then in the firebombing, his wife and children were killed. I can't recall how many children now. Maybe not his wife. But the children, yes—maybe three. It changed him. And the later bombing, too ...”

“Hiroshima,” I said, “and ...”

“*Sō desu*. He began to write books, history books, novels and the poetry, even this language book you use. He said Japan was not the aggressive one, but a victim. At the American occupation, they called him the whitewasher and forced him to depart the universe.”

“University.”

“Of course. But he kept on writing.”

“I suppose Japan *was* a victim,” I said. “You can be a bully and a victim.”

“Aliens would weaken the purity of the Japanese race and culture, he believed. He believed the aliens should not remain here.” She paused for a moment. “I think that both of those professors have now passed along. I have not heard of that book for a long time. Difficult to find, I think.”

“I’ve gotten to like it. Most of the time, it seems completely normal.”

“That’s Japan,” she said.

“That’s any place,” I said.

We fell asleep and I only woke at dawn, with Ikuko (her first name, which, out of respect for her wishes, I never used aloud) wrapped around me. She was warm and smelled wonderful. It took some time to disentangle myself so I could get up and clumsily dress and rush out to hail a cab to the station. She didn’t see me to the door. Nor did she say goodbye. As the gloom of a wet December dawn crept through the apartment, she pretended to sleep. Her face turned into the pillow and hidden by her hair and her hand.

Lesson 12

As the sun rose on that summer morn, the city lay in ruin, with the dead all about. The survivors felt a loneliness so great, words may not describe it.

Omoikiru

On the long flight east over the Pacific, passing under the sun and abridging the day, then the night, I skimmed through the final lessons of *Japanese for the Beginners and Those Who Would Be More*. I was exhausted, but sleep was nowhere. At one point I took Yukon’s rose of yellow leaves from my carry-on bag. I was trying to keep it fresh in a baggie; it was already starting to wilt. On airline postcards showing a tiny 747 leading a vee of Canada geese across a clear autumn sky, I wrote a note to Eguchi and, care of the school, to Yukon.

The professors’ final lesson was equipped with the usual vocabulary lists, lexically obsolete dialogues, and ordinary sentences alternating now and then with odd ones. *The living mourners remained, yet the house seemed empty with the corpse gone off*. Now and then I was distracted by the in-flight film—*Working Girl*—but as I reached the book’s last pages, my attention quickened at the sidebar definition of a verb I’d encountered on several occasions, never grasping the meaning. I’d meant to ask Eguchi about it. *Omoikiru*, the sidebar explained, is

compound verb formed out of the infinitives *omou*, “to think,” and *kiru*, “to cut.” Therefore, “*Omoikiru*” has the meaning: “to cut off all thought of something”; “to surrender the hope”; “resign oneself to the inevitable.” I put my head back, closed my eyes and wondered—what else—how I and billions of other non-Japanese speakers had ever gotten by without the word. For example: *To see again those I have cared for is impossible; there is no help for it but to “cut off all thoughts.”*

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