

# Tenma

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## 1.

On a morning when the clouds hung low and heavy in the sky, the writer Genryū<sup>1</sup> emerged from a brothel in Shinmachi,<sup>2</sup> Keijō<sup>3</sup>'s famous red-light district. He was a seedy-looking man, and he stumbled into the squalid street as if tossed there by the inhabitants inside. He stood at the gate for a while, wondering how to get back to Honmachi<sup>4</sup>, and then all at once plunged into the alley in front of him. The neighborhood being what it was, however, he soon found himself in a labyrinth of alleyways where squat, brooding buildings jostled with each other for space. Thinking to turn right, you end up going left instead; having gone left, you find yourself stuck at a fork in the road—it was that kind of place. Genryū trudged along, deep in thought, but an unexpected blind alley brought him back to his surroundings with a start. Every building had a gate smeared heavily with red and blue paint and mud walls that looked like they might crumble at any moment. He threaded his way back and forth among them, only to become hopelessly lost. Although it wasn't very early in the day, the streets were quiet, and the few customers on their way home stumbled past with their shoulders hunched in embarrassment. Somewhere in the labyrinth a salt seller was peddling his goods. His shouts echoed in the streets: "Saaalt! Salt here!"

Genryū halted at a three-way branch in the road. He slowly took out a Midori cigarette and muttered to himself as he surveyed the area. *I wasted the whole night on a lousy woman, and now even the walk back is giving me trouble.* But that was not the true cause of his anxiety, which flared up at times like a black cloud to constrict tightly around his heart. Due to certain unavoidable circumstances, he had to shave off his hair and join a Buddhist temple within the next two days. Ah, to think that the pleasures of this world would soon be out of reach forever! Last night he had grown so agitated that he had bitten the prostitute's cheek, shouting that it looked just like a melon. He had thought she would sympathize with him, but instead the woman had rushed out of the room in a panic. Extraordinarily gifted artists like himself were always being misunderstood.

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<sup>1</sup> Korean: Hyeonryong. His name is ambiguous; it is possible that Gen (Hyeon) is his surname, or that Genryū (Hyeonryong) is his first name.

<sup>2</sup> Sinjeong; present-day Mukjeong-dong

<sup>3</sup> Seoul was known by a number of names, such as Hanseong and Hanyang, before it was renamed Keijō (Gyeongseong) in 1910 upon Japan's formal annexation of Korea. The name was changed to Seoul in 1945 following liberation.

<sup>4</sup> Bonjeong; present-day Chungmuro

Genryū cursed under his breath at the unpleasant memory but then decided to push it out of his mind for the time being. Right now he needed to find his way out. He began trudging up a street that looked like it might be going uphill, hoping that an elevated vantage point would give him a clearer idea of where to go. After a number of dead ends and winding curves, he finally reached the crest of the hill. Rows of Korean brothels crowded the slopes, their roofs surging like waves all around him. With the tepid breeze of early summer wafting past it felt as if he were in a poem, like the one that began *I stand now on the mountaintop*.<sup>5</sup> A familiar loneliness flooded him. He could hardly believe this quiet place was the same brothel neighborhood of last night, where men had rushed about right and left and prostitutes had coyly called out to them in voices that echoed high and clear in the dark. Why did he have to shut himself up inside Myōkōji, that gloomy old temple, when there were thousands of young women lying around like washed-out sweet potatoes in these houses?

Genryū lit his second cigarette and blew out a long trail of smoke. Far off to the west, the lofty bell tower of a Roman Catholic church shimmered in the hot air. A number of tall buildings surrounded the church like chilly glaciers. That was it, that was where he wanted to go! Genryū glanced around, trying to find a way back down, and his eyes chanced upon a number of strange-looking utility poles with black power transformers attached to them. They were clustered towards the south, in what was most likely Honmachi. He snickered despite himself, remembering how he had wandered into that area once in a quest to find a urology clinic. *That's right, I can use the poles as a landmark.* —

If only Ōmura's voice would stop clamoring in his ears! "You don't want to go to the temple? The police are saying if you don't show some remorse, they're going to throw you in jail!" Genryū fled down the hill, away from that relentless voice.<sup>6</sup>

Honmachi Street wound its way east to west in a long, narrow procession through the most prosperous Japanese neighborhood in Keijō. By the time Genryū finally lumbered his way out of the red-light district, it was already past ten a.m., and the street bustled with people. He walked bowlegged through the crowds, eyes slightly downcast, hoping he might run into a friend from his literary or government circles. Genryū liked to insist that his absurdly broad shoulders were caved in as they were because of his activities as a master judo fighter. Whether or not that was true, it was a fact that his bowlegs were a recent development, having become that way sometime after his encounter with those strange utility poles.

The Genryū walking down the street now was a man haunted by a loneliness and agony from which there was no escape. He arrived at the Meiji Confectionary building without encountering a single person he knew. A memory of last night's meeting came back to him—the piercing expression on Ri Meishoku's<sup>7</sup> face as he threw the dish at Genryū, shouting, "You are a nightmarish parasite of Korean culture!" Genryū stood in front of the entrance meditatively, a small self-satisfied grin playing about his lips. *That rotten bastard, hope he's enjoying jail . . .*

Genryū straightened his back, squared his shoulders, and thrust the door open. The hall was empty but for two men who sat in a corner, whispering secretively together. Genryū deliberately sat down at a table in the center of the room. He waved a waitress over, but instead of ordering once she arrived he simply sat there staring up at her face. The waitress turned red under his scrutiny. "Coffee!" he abruptly barked, and the girl made a startled retreat.

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<sup>5</sup> Most likely a reference to the 1926 Noguchi Yonejirō poem "Ware sanjō ni tatsu" (I stand on the mountaintop).

<sup>6</sup> This paragraph was in the original *Bungei shunju* text but deleted in further editions.

<sup>7</sup> Yi Myeongsik's

Genryū smirked, hugely satisfied. He rose from his chair and then for some reason walked over to the kitchen. “Hey, there—sorry for interrupting!” he said, entering unannounced like a stray dog. All smiles, he thrust out a hand. “A moist hand towel, if you please . . .”

The reason for Genryū’s presumptuous informality lay in his confidence that the cooks would know who he was. And they did indeed know him, from the scandal that had taken place last night on the second floor. A group of Korean intellectuals had been in the middle of a passionate debate when Genryū suddenly began cackling from his place in the corner. This prompted a young man named Ri Meishoku to throw a dish at Genryū. The dish hit his head and he toppled to the ground, but even while lying prone on his back, he did not stop his sullen laughter. Ri was taken into custody by the police in attendance for inflicting bodily harm. —

The staff had been shocked by Genryū’s audacity then. But his unexpected reappearance—in the kitchen, no less!—flustered them even more. They looked dubiously at each other. No one laughed, although one person did venture to shake his head and make a gesture to indicate they had no hand towels. Genryū gave everyone a sidelong glare, then all at once dashed to the tap like a rat and turned the water on full blast. He stuck his head under the tap and industriously began rinsing his face.

Everyone looked on, amazed. Genryū exited the kitchen, laughing self-consciously—*heh heh heh*—all the while. As soon as he was gone, the man who had shaken his head spoke. “A madman, for sure.”

“No, it was Genryū.”

“That must be it.”

“It was that writer Genryū.”

The cooks peered out the kitchen door. They saw Genryū go back to his own seat and wipe his face and neck with a bundle of morning newspapers stacked nearby. Genryū spotted the cooks from the corner of his eye. Their attention flattered him, and he threw the inky, wrinkled wad of newspapers onto the table with a magnanimous air. In doing so, his eyes lit upon a large bedbug that was crawling sluggishly in one of the newspaper’s folds. It was swollen and red with blood, and it reeled from the weight of its own body. Genryū involuntarily grinned and leaned forward to watch its clumsy attempts at escape. Whenever the bug seemed like it would tumble over, he nudged it with his finger to prompt it into action again. He had always liked bedbugs, possibly because the sight of them crawling on the ground reminded him of himself. Or perhaps it was because he admired their shamelessness, their cunning. *Huh, it must have been on my neck all this time. I probably got it from that woman with the melon cheeks.* He felt a prickling irritation at the thought but shrugged it away with a *hihihi* of laughter. —But what was this? The bedbug was trying to flee behind the wall. He promptly pinched the bug and flipped it around. He watched it struggle with great interest, until his attention suddenly shifted to something astonishing.

The bedbug was picking its way across a headline, drawing his eyes to each word one by one. Incredible! Here was an opportunity so fortuitous it almost seemed, at that moment, a miracle from heaven—Christ himself resurrected on this earth! It was only one small item in the corner of the arts section, but it told him everything he needed to know: Mr. Tanaka, the renowned Tokyo writer and his own great friend, was visiting Keijō on his way to Manchuria and was currently lodged at the Chōsen<sup>8</sup> Hotel.

“I have to go see him.” Genryū heaved himself up and scuttled like a bedbug towards the exit, an urgent request in his mind. On his way out he almost collided with the waitress bringing

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<sup>8</sup> Joseon

him his coffee. He snatched the cup, gulped the scalding coffee down, threw a last contemptuous look at the astonished waitress and kitchen staff, and then hurried away.

Although it was still early in the afternoon, the area around Meiji Confectionary was packed with people: Japanese pedestrians in *geta* that clacked carelessly against the ground; housewives with their shopping; boys who rang their shrill bike bells as they shot through the crowd. Country bumpkins in traditional white garb stared at the buildings with their mouths agape, while old women marveled at the blinking dolls that lined the store windows. Behind them, *jige*<sup>9</sup> porters warred with each other for ten *sen* fares. Genryū hurried through this human sea, stopping finally when he came to the Chōsen Bank plaza. He dashed through the streetcars and automobiles into the haven of Hasegawa-chō.<sup>10</sup> Buried deep in Hasegawa-cho was a tall, old-fashioned wall with an imposing gate that looked even more ancient than the wall. Behind it was a magnificent Western-style building, surrounded by an expansive lawn. The building was said to have been used by some country's legation back in the days of the Korean Empire.

Genryū had walked all this way in a trance, but now he pushed through the revolving doors with rising excitement. "I'm here to see Tanaka," he announced self-importantly to the clerk at the reception desk, breaking the silence that greeted him. "My name is Genryū."

The clerk, his hair impeccably combed and parted, looked Genryū over as if mentally categorizing him with all the other riff-raff. "He's not in at the moment."

"He's out?" Genryū said incredulously, with the air of someone who had the right to be affronted by this news. "Who with?"

"I'm afraid I don't know," replied the clerk, somewhat cowed by his attitude. "I assume with someone from the magazine."

"Someone from the magazine?" Genryū was confronted with a sudden bad premonition, and a worried, disconcerted look passed visibly over his face. It could only be Ōmura. If so, he was in a lot of trouble. Genryū coughed. "Do you mean Ōmura from U. Magazine?"

Another clerk, this one middle-aged, angrily interrupted. "We don't know!" Tanaka had indeed gone out with Ōmura and a professor from a certain professional school, but the staff was fed up with all of the lazy, would-be Korean intellectuals who invited themselves to the hotel whenever a famous artist or writer from the metropole came. Genryū in particular had a habit of calling at the hotel almost every day, and even the clerks didn't know what to do with him anymore. "We can't remember the name of every single person who visits, you know."

"*Heh* I see, *heh heh heh* I guess you're right . . ." Genryū laughed obsequiously. All the same, his anxiety remained. "It probably isn't Ōmura. Yep, I'm sure it isn't," he added, and nodded vigorously to himself. He waved his hand in the direction of the lobby. "I'm going to borrow your sofa," he declared. He deliberately sauntered away, knowing they had no power to stop him. Come to think of it, his novels always featured hotels like this one, not to mention dance halls, salons, noblewomen, black chauffeurs, and the like. Genryū abruptly halted, having recalled something. Turning back, he yelled, "You better let me know when Tanaka comes back. *Heh*, I'm sleepy."

## 2.

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<sup>9</sup> An A-frame carrier traditionally used in Korea to carry large loads on the back.

<sup>10</sup> Present-day Sogong-dong

Genryū stretched out on the sofa and slept to his heart's content, his snores echoing loudly in the spacious lobby. He woke up a good four or five hours later. He grumbled as he sat up, and brushed the dust from his suit; languidly stretched his hands over his head, and yawned a few times. Acutely aware of his empty stomach, he decided he might as well leave, especially since it didn't look like Tanaka would come back anytime soon. He snuck a glance at the reception desk, but luck was with him: there was no one there. Genryū made a dash for the door.

The afternoon sunlight had waned, leaving the street obscured with lonely shadows, and a dry, sharp wind was kicking up eddies of dust. Genryū thought he might get something cheap to eat, then go around to all the places Tanaka might be. He muttered resentfully as he walked, although not even he knew why. It was outrageous that Tanaka hadn't sent a single postcard letting him know that he was coming. Even though he was *sure* he had repeatedly told Tanaka some outrageous story about having become a respected land owner since returning to Korea.

Genryū walked down Kogane<sup>11</sup>, the street that acted as a border separating Keijō's true Koreatown from the rest of the city. When he came to Café Lila, he popped his head inside on a whim and saw something through the haze of purple smoke that made him involuntarily beam. The poetess Bun Sogyoku<sup>12</sup> sat amidst the lounging café patrons like a lovely, unspoiled lily, dressed all in dazzling white. He charged into the café, almost stumbling from his eagerness. The customers inside instantly reacted to the appearance of the famous Genryū. Some nudged each other, some burst into laughter, and others deliberately looked the other way.

The poetess had been waiting for her lover, a young university student. She was so delighted at being approached by this famous writer at the center of everyone's attention, however, that she immediately forgot about everything else. "Mr. Gen, how unexpected," she remarked, a meaningful smile hovering on her full lips.

"*Heh heh*, what a very interesting place to meet..."

Genryū sank heavily into the seat across from her. All eyes were trained on them. The people in the café had been riddled with boredom before his arrival—or was it that they were the boring ones? These so-called "café types" were a particular race of people bred by contemporary Korean society: youths with a bit of learning but no job prospects, who parted their hair like Clark Gable because they had nothing better to do; shady movie men with wispy mustaches who dreamed of finding some young, rich fool who would pay their production fees; gold-mine brokers who plotted together in whispers; young mediocre writers who were convinced that you weren't a true artist unless you walked around with a manuscript forever grasped in your hand. The café was full of these people, but after a few hours even they had to wrack their brains for new topics of conversation. That's why Genryū's unexpected encounter with the beautiful poetess held such interest for them. There was no one in Keijō who didn't know of these two individuals and their illicit relationship.

The poetess put a handkerchief to her mouth in order to convey an air of bashfulness. "And how are you today?"

"Well, I've just come from Neustadt<sup>13</sup>," Genryū replied, giving her a smirk meant to arouse her curiosity.

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<sup>11</sup> Present-day Euljiro

<sup>12</sup> Mun So-ok

<sup>13</sup> Genryū is referring to Shinmachi, which literally means "new town." Neustadt means "new town" in German.

As expected, the poetess had no idea what the German words meant. “What?” she said, her eyes wide, and Genryū convulsed into laughter. He thought of last night and laughed again: *fufufu!* Sogyoku’s cheeks flushed slightly, and her wavy hair shook. Genryū stiffened, as if seized with a convulsion. His gaze bore into her.

Bun Sogyoku, a superficial poet at best, had the utmost respect for Genryū. She firmly believed him when he bragged that not only could he write poetry in Latin and French, he did it so exquisitely that he differed from Rimbaud or Baudelaire in nationality only. Her own work consisted only of a handful of derivative poems heavily borrowing from Rimbaud. Genryū had recommended these poems to second- and third-rate magazines, praising both her future prospects and her good looks. She developed pretensions of being a true poet as a result, and from then on made sure to attend every publication event she could. Whenever Genryū spotted her glamorous figure enter the room, he would leap up and guide her to the seat next to his.

One could say that she, too, was a misfortunate child of today’s Korea. In her youth she liked to utter the slogan “down with feudalism” with idealistic fervor. Upon graduating from girls’ school, she even brushed aside the question of marriage and instead went all the way to Tokyo for further study. She enrolled in a professional school there, but before she could take her revenge on feudalism, it got its revenge on her. Even if she had wanted to get married, there were no eligible bachelors; they had all married early. But there is no helping the hot blood of one’s irretrievable youth, and before she knew it she had fallen into a life of immorality. With each new affair she convinced herself that she was an iconoclast, a pioneer who was breaking new ground for free love. Genryū was just one of her many lovers. Only with Genryū, however, were both parties able to feed each other’s preposterous self-delusions with mutual satisfaction.

“Last night Ōmura from *U. Magazine* came by to see me again,” Genryū told her. “What’s more, he brought over some whiskey. He kept insisting he wouldn’t leave until I wrote something for him by the end of the night. Even I couldn’t say no to that. I gave him something I’ve been working on recently, a manuscript I want to send over to Tokyo. It’s an amazing piece, if I do say so myself. This big-shot magazine called *D.* has been hounding me to write it for over three months now.”

The poetess was clearly impressed; her small eyes shone. “I look forward to reading it.”

“I’m through with writing in Korean. The hell with Korean! It’s a talisman of a fallen age.” Remembering last night’s meeting, he added with empty bravado, “I’m thinking of returning to the Tokyo literary scene. All of my Tokyo associates are begging me to come back.”

But a woman like Bun Sogyoku obviously had no way of knowing about the meeting at the Meiji building last night, which had been attended by intellectuals who were sincerely dedicated to revitalizing Korean literature. Genryū himself had gotten wind of their gathering by chance, just in time to barge in at the very end. The participants had been in the middle of a passionate, tense discussion on the various problems afflicting Korean culture, and on the advantages and disadvantages of writing in Korean. Genryū retreated to a corner of the room, chuckling nervously. People were declaring that they wanted to create and foster a unique Korean culture with their own two hands. Doing so, they contended, would not only benefit all of Japan<sup>14</sup> but also the East<sup>15</sup> and even the entire world. Genryū looked searchingly at each face as the debate went on, smirking condescendingly all the while. For an instant his eyes collided with those of the literary critic Ri Meishoku. Genryū gave an unconscious start. Every nerve in Ri Meishoku’s body seemed to be trembling.

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<sup>14</sup> *nihon*

<sup>15</sup> *tōyō*

Suddenly, Ri launched into an agitated speech. “Of course I agree that one does not need to write *only* in Korean in order to produce good literature. But there is more than artistic quality at stake.”

“That’s right,” someone agreed. “Our position is different from the Irish, who advocated writing in Celtic simply for the sake of good writing.” Everyone listened quietly as Ri continued.<sup>16</sup>

“For hundreds of years we were unable to worship the light of enlightenment, oppressed as we were by the useless, obsolete study of the Chinese classics. And yet haven’t we slowly awakened to our own noble written culture? The jewels of our civilization were buried underneath the ground for five hundred years, shadowed by the misgovernment of the Yi Dynasty. For the last thirty years we have fought desperately to unearth those treasures, and have cultivated Korean literature to the state it is in now. Are you saying that we should re-bury the light of this literature, the seeds of our culture, with our very same hands, for no good reason at all? I am not speaking out of foolish sentimentalism. We are faced with a truly grave problem. Only 20% of Koreans are literate, and of those, 90% can only read Korean characters!”

“I am also convinced these are crucial issues,” confided a female writer, her eyes wet with tears.<sup>17</sup>

Right then, Genryū let out a *kikiki* of laughter.

“Silence!”

“Silence!”

The voices rose in the room like the wind.

“It’s fine,” Ri said, closing his eyes and struggling to regain his composure. He continued his appeal in a low, trembling voice. “It goes without saying that written Korean is essential for providing a ray of enlightenment and joy to our people. Our three major Korean-language newspapers play a crucial cultural role, and our Korean periodicals and publications enrich the hearts of the populace. Korean is clearly in a different class from the dialects of Kyushu or Tohoku. Of course, I am not opposed to writing in Japanese. I am not a language chauvinist. Those who can write in Japanese have a duty to inform as many people as possible about our way of life, our arts, our hearts. And those discontent with writing in Japanese, or those who do not have the ability to do so, should strive to establish translating agencies through the support and sponsorship of Japanese patrons of the arts. The demand that one must write in Japanese or else give up writing entirely is completely unreasonable.”

Ri abruptly pounded the table and rose from his seat. “And there it is! Genryū, what do you think about this issue?”

He glowered at Genryū, who recoiled. Genryū was one of those people who strategically hid behind the name of patriotism in order to slander others, charging that not only the act of writing in Korean but also *the continued existence of Korean itself* amounted to silent political treason. It was true that, due to the particular circumstances Korea found itself in, even the purely cultural activities of this literary group took on a political tinge easily misunderstood by the authorities, whose apprehensions had only increased since the Incident.<sup>18</sup> Genryū had quickly taken advantage of this situation. Wielding patriotism like a weapon, he sold his colleagues out left and right. How many innocent people had been plunged into anxiety, frustration, and an

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<sup>16</sup> This paragraph was in the original *Bungei shunju* text but deleted in further editions.

<sup>17</sup> In the original *Bungei shunju* text but deleted in further editions.

<sup>18</sup> A reference to the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937.

abyss of agony because of him? This meeting had in fact been convened to criticize Genryū and his ilk.

Genryū straightened up in his seat. “Korean?” he said, spitting the word out with great derision. He laughed scornfully: *kerakera*. This is when Ri, unable to hold back his emotions, threw the dish at him. The meeting immediately broke up in disarray. As previously mentioned, Genryū toppled to the ground but kept laughing sullenly even so, while Ri was arrested for inflicting bodily harm. —Recollecting the incident now, Genryū felt strangely embarrassed. He gave a small laugh and rose hurriedly, as if to conceal his emotions. “What time is it?”

“Don’t worry. Honestly, you are so impatient.” Bun Sogyoku glanced at her watch. “It’s not yet 6 o’clock. You, there—some coffee, please.”

“Well, if you’re getting something, maybe I’ll order some toast,” Genryū said, and obligingly sat back down. “. . . Where was I. Ah, since the president of the company came all the way in person, I really had to write something for him. The guy was so happy he dragged me out for a night on the town. Got me dead-drunk, too, and took me to Neustadt. But there was this woman with yellow cheeks like melons . . .”

He grew excited by the sexual connotation of his own words, and repeated them emphatically. “Just like melons.”

The poetess flushed, finally realizing where he had gone. Thinking that revealing her own discomfort would make him look down on her, however, she replied with cool disinterest. “How wonderful for you . . . Still, it’s strange that the man who wants to coop you up in a temple took you to such a place.”

“That’s what I’m saying!” exclaimed the writer, his face taut. “These damn moody bureaucrats don’t make any sense. Ōmura doesn’t get me at all. He doesn’t understand what it’s like to be a gifted artist.”

“That’s true,” the poetess agreed sorrowfully. Then for some reason she laughed: *ohohoho*.

“It’s not something to laugh about. Just think about how Rimbaud and Baudelaire were attacked by the common people.” Warming to his subject, Genryū began waving his arms around. “We artists of Korea lead such unfortunate lives. Our lands are in ruins, the masses are ignorant fools, the intellectuals don’t appreciate the nobility of art. I’m reminded of how Gogol despaired of the painters in Petersburg. People are all stupid and unhappy, and not a single person really values the artists of Korea. They’re left to struggle around in a heap of yesterday’s trash. I’ve become one of those victims. No one is closer to Ōmura than I am, and up to now we’ve consulted each other about everything. But after all that, he turns to me—me!—and tells me to go to a temple and sit in Zen meditation. I understand he means well, but that’s like asking an artist to commit suicide. Me a monk! Ha! Though, well, I did tell him he had a point. Baudelaire himself once wrote a poem about wanting some peace and quiet, after all.”

Although he smiled as he spoke, his face twitched strangely.

“It’s a kind of probation, then? Even though you aren’t a thought criminal. . .”

“That’s right,” Genryū said shakily, on the verge of tears. “Two days from now, I’ll be a monk in a temple.” He leaned forward, his whole body trembling violently. “But a wonderful thing has happened. Tanaka, the famous Tokyo writer and my close personal friend, has come to Keijō. He’s been dying to see me, so I dropped by the Chōsen Hotel just now. Apparently he got impatient waiting and ended up going out with Ōmura before I could get there. I feel bad about that, so I’m on my way to find them now. Do you want me to introduce you to them? The Korean George Sand, and my Liebe . . .”

The poetess smiled sweetly. She had completely forgotten about her meeting with the university student. “Why, thank you. I would love an introduction.”



“In that case . . .” Genryū gazed at the woman’s face. *I think I’ll take her back to my place tonight*, he decided in a flash. *It’s been a while*. “When Tanaka’s sister hears about this, she’s going to get jealous, *heh heh heh*.”

“Oh, so the lover you had in Tokyo was his sister? *Ohoho*—that’s quite interesting.”

“That’s right!” Genryū said triumphantly. “She kept insisting she would follow me back to Korea when I left Tokyo. It was a messy business. Anyway, Tanaka had a lucky break, and now he’s a well-known writer. How about it? You should join us.”

“Of course I shall.”

“By the way, did you know that Tanaka and Ōmura went to the same university? They’re very close.” Genryū sat up with a jerk and assumed a serious expression, one edged faintly with an almost pitiful glimmer of hope. “I’m hoping Tanaka will speak to Ōmura on my behalf. He needs to make Ōmura understand what it’s like to be an artist. This is even more serious than when I met that Paris girl, Anne. If Tanaka talks to Ōmura, I won’t have to go to the temple.”

“Oh, that would be wonderful,” the poetess said with obvious joy. Her shoulders shook, and her breathing came rapidly. “I do hope it’s as you say.”

The writer Genryū was not, in actuality, an evil person. He even had a little talent for writing. He was simply a great coward at heart. A long acquaintance with poverty, loneliness, and despair had disturbed his mental balance, and that peculiar society called “Korea” had driven him into greater and greater confusion. His father and brother disowned him when they found out about his neuroses. He did poorly in school, and had no means of supporting himself. So for fifteen years, he lived in Tokyo like a pathetic stray dog. As bad luck would have it, no matter how hard he tried to hide his origins, his body build and physiognomy declared him to be unmistakably Korean. Time after time, he was immediately denied lodgings first for his Korean face, and then for the tattered trousers he came in. Finally he hit upon a last-ditch resort that came like a revelation from heaven. He began spreading rumors that he was the son of a Korean nobleman – and, on top of that, a literary genius, a writer of the first rank among his Korean peers. By lying in this way, he hoped to lessen (even if just a little) the contempt and discomfort people felt towards him simply for being Korean. The bid succeeded beyond his wildest expectations, and he was taken in by a succession of women.

A few years of this made Genryū fall completely under the spell of his own lies. Then, one day, he was repatriated for slashing a woman with a knife. Back in Korea, he wrote stories in Korean that were either very eccentric or very obscene, and proceeded to plug them to low-brow magazines. He constantly went around with a cloth bag full of manuscripts slung over his shoulder. He wreaked havoc in cafés and bars; and when picked up by the police and asked his profession, he arrogantly declared, “I’m the great writer Genryū.” He appeared at meetings uninvited, and he interspersed his speeches with jumbled fragments of the French, German, and Latin words he vaguely knew. He stuck his chest out in front of people to show how he “ranked above a first-*dan* in judo.” He also bragged incessantly about how active he had been in the Tokyo literary circles. As if that would raise his status in Korea!

He was like this with everything, and so people gradually started dismissing him as a madman. Genryū was ecstatic with this turn of events. True geniuses, he boasted, were never accepted by the common masses. But as his true character was steadily exposed, even vulgar magazine outlets stopped accepting his work, and the intellectuals closed ranks and ejected him from their cultural activities. Cornered in this way, Genryū stopped mentioning judo when he drank. Instead he yelled, “You bastard, you wanna be thrown in jail?” at whoever his target happened to be that day. He grew to be feared by everyone as a man who was capable of doing anything. How tragic it is, that the artists and intellectuals of Korea must cower from the political

threats of even such a man as Genryū! As time passed, Genryū's mental state became even more unstable, and he wandered the streets committing wild acts of violence and intimidation. When rebuked by the police, he would simply cackle and yell out, "Just wait until Ōmura finds out about this!"

The man that Genryū always mentioned in such intimate terms was the chief of U. Magazine, a current affairs periodical dedicated to increasing the imperial patriotism of the Korean population. Ōmura was a former bureaucrat who had only recently arrived from the metropole, and as yet knew little about Korea or the state of its culture. That is why he could so adamantly believe that Genryū was—as the man himself insisted—a writer upon whose shoulders the future of Korean literature rested, and that his erratic personality was an indication of his prodigious talent. Thus Genryū, who had been on the verge of despair, found his fortunes improving as he easily wormed himself into Ōmura's confidences. But "shadows usually accompany light," as they say, and soon afterwards a set of extremely strange circumstances led to Genryū's arrest by the military police on suspicion of spying. —

One fine afternoon, Genryū was walking along Honmachi Street when he ran into a bewitching young woman from France named Anne. He approached her in high spirits, speaking the smattering of French he knew: *bon ami, mademoiselle, oui merci!* The young woman with the blue eyes seemed to understand; smiling graciously, she explained in broken Japanese that she was traveling here for pleasure, and that she was lost. Genryū became even more excited upon hearing this. He led Anne down the street while shouting all the French he knew, in a voice deliberately pitched to reach everyone passing by. *Bonjour! Très bien! Beau garçon! Ce soir!* He hustled the girl into a used bookstore and showed her a third-rate magazine that contained his profile. "Can you guess who this is?" he asked proudly, pointing to his own picture. The girl gave a little "Oh!" of surprise. Utterly delighted, Genryū stealthily tore out the picture and shoved it into her purse.

Soon after that, Anne was arrested on spy charges while attempting to cross the Tumen River. Genryū's picture was discovered in her bag, and he was detained on the same suspicion. Ōmura used all of his influence with the authorities to clear up the situation and convince them to release Genryū under his custody. As a result, Genryū now felt a lifetime obligation to Ōmura. He had already been abandoned like a stray dog by the people of Korea; if Ōmura too threw him away, there would be no other recourse but to die a dog's death.

Ōmura, meanwhile, found himself in a bind. Imperial fervor was on the rise even in Korea, and most of the early goals had been accomplished. Continuing to rely on Genryū, a man who disturbed the public peace and committed crimes in the name of "patriotism," might damage Ōmura's prestige. Criticism against the current administration regarding Genryū was intense, and the police had begun their own internal investigations. And so, out of a reluctance to hand him over to the police as well as out of an innate religious devotion, Ōmura had ordered Genryū to practice Zen meditation in order to do penance. The situation being what it was, Genryū could not possibly have disobeyed the command. That is why he now pinned all his hopes on Tanaka. He needed Tanaka to speak to Ōmura, and convince Ōmura to set him free. —

"I'm going to Shōro<sup>19</sup> to find Tanaka. I should head out soon." Genryū felt cheerful again. He shoved the toast into his mouth and got to his feet.

"I'll come, too. . . . No, please let me take care of that."

The poetess rose as well, plucking the bill from his hand. In the next instant, however, her expression unaccountably stiffened, and she stood rooted to the ground. Curious, Genryū turned around and saw a tall, spindly youth with a university cap pulled low over his eyes standing near

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<sup>19</sup> Jongno

the entrance. He had a pale, taut face, and he was glaring at Genryū. The seductive Spanish melody playing on the record came to an abrupt end, and everyone in the room turned their gazes to the three of them. Bun Sogyoku hastily tugged the young student outside while Genryū stared after them, looking shattered. He heard the crowd behind him laugh: *kikiki*. But not a handful of minutes had passed before the woman flew back inside to where he stood. She made a show of coughing. “He’s my younger cousin,” she murmured between coughs. “I completely forgot I had promised to go to the theatre with him.” As an afterthought, she whispered in his ear, “I’ll come by tomorrow morning.” She rushed out again.

“Wait, wait!” Genryū howled, and ran after her, waving his hands in the air. But there was no trace of them anywhere; they had vanished utterly into the dark.

### 3.

“Goddammit! Unbelievable! You’ll pay for this.” Cursing under his breath, the writer Genryū lurched his way towards Shōro, one of the most lively streets in Koreatown. *Even that whore is laughing at me. I can’t believe it.* It felt as if a precious jewel had been snatched away from his very hands. A vision of her flickered in front of his eyes—her disproportionately long torso, her strangely large rear—and a rush of blood filled his veins with painful pleasure. He groaned from the choking pressure of an uncontrollable desire. At that moment he thought he heard her voice whispering in his ear. He spun around, but of course there was no sign of Bun Sogyoku anywhere. A lone passerby was staring at him suspiciously. “Goddammit,” he muttered again.

Genryū walked past the white walls of the large Korean-run bank and found himself approaching the Shōro intersection. Rickshaws and automobiles rushed past with a noisy clatter, and the impatient warning clangs of the streetcars filled the air. The Washin<sup>20</sup> Department Store and Kansei<sup>21</sup> Building marked the start of a long procession of opulent structures that lined the main avenue to Tōdaimon<sup>22</sup> like a sea strait. The Shōkaku<sup>23</sup> Bell House stood right at the crossroads, the relic of a vanished age, and it was here where the beggars gathered. There were more this year than ever. Genryū shooed away the filthy beggar children who swarmed around him like locusts with a grand sweep of his arm.

Night vendors had set up their stalls on the sidewalks around the Kansei Building, and the streets were thronged with pedestrians and vendors alike. Standing near the front stalls was a country peasant wrapped up in a white hood, surrounded by a crowd of curious onlookers. The peasant was drunkenly waving his hands around and shouting something in a long, choked wail. Genryū craned his neck to get a better view. There was a *jige* sitting on the ground next to the man, its frame buried under a great riot of flowering peach branches. The sight of the heavy blossoms drooping against each other was somehow very poignant.

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<sup>20</sup> Hwasin

<sup>21</sup> Hanjeong

<sup>22</sup> Dongdaemun

<sup>23</sup> Jonggak

“When I married the missus, the two of us planted this peach tree. The missus died. She died!” he was shouting. “I wanna eat some white rice porridge, she said, so I went to the landlord to borrow some, but she died while I was away. I broke off all these peach branches and carried ’em all the way here. One branch twenty *sen*, I’m not askin’ for much, just twenty *sen*.”

The gathered crowd looked each other and at once broke out in a roar of laughter. Hands in his pockets, Genryū abruptly shoved his way to the center of the group. For a long time he stared hard at the peach branches, his whole demeanor that of one who has been deeply moved. He didn’t know why, but a kind of sadness had welled up deep in his chest. Genryū walked determinedly to the *jige*, propelled by some compulsion. He picked up a branch and gazed at the twenty or so pinkish blossoms that clung there, all of them in full bloom.

“How ’bout you, mister? I’m sellin’ these cheap ’cuz I wanna buy some booze and drink myself to death... Why’s everyone laughin’? Don’t laugh, please buy some . . . Hey, thanks! Thank you!”

Genryū had tossed down the handful of coins he had found while groping in his pocket for spare change. Overjoyed, the man knelt and bowed until his forehead touched the ground. Ignoring him, Genryū silently slung his peach branch over one shoulder and pushed his way past the crowd. Perhaps because of his own posture or for some unexpected and unrelated reason, he found himself picturing Christ carrying the cross. In doing so, Genryū almost felt as if he too was destined to lead the tragic life of a martyr—destined to shoulder the anguish and sorrow of the entire Korean people. Ah, only in today’s Korea could people like him exist and be allowed to act as they did in society. Genryū was struck with a revelation. *It is Korea, in all of its chaos, that out of necessity gave birth to a figure like me. Now that my duty has been fulfilled, it is trying to make me bear this cross.* A mounting sadness beat at his heart so heavily he almost wailed in lamentation from it.

But only for a fleeting moment. He noticed almost immediately that the pedestrians around him were staring at his strange appearance in alarm. This time he was unfazed; in fact, he felt a little flattered. *Stupid poet bitch*, he thought, cursing Bun Sogyoku. *If you’d followed me, you’d have seen what a legendary figure I make.*

Five or six beggar children had attached themselves to him for amusement. What looked like a fight broke out among the ones in front, and Genryū took the opportunity to double back and flee into a dark alley by the Christian bookstore. But the beggar children seemed to have been waiting for this moment, and in the alley they jostled against him with their hands outstretched. “Mister, show some pity,” they cried plaintively. “Show some pity.” He tossed some coins their way, feeling depressed despite himself. The children gave out a strange cry as they dived for their prey, their heads knocking together in the dark. Genryū looked back at them and laughed—*hihihi*—but then tears inexplicably sprang to his eyes. Flustered, he wiped them away with his hand.

Continuing down the alley brought him to the so-called hidden world of Shōro, where cafés, bars, *seonsuljip*<sup>24</sup>, *oden* stalls, mah-jongg parlors, brokerage houses, restaurants, and inns all crouch together close to the ground. The buildings are so many and so varied that you may find yourself shrinking back at first, eyes dazzled and mouth agape. The air is constantly filled with the rasp of record music, and people in both Western clothes and white Korean attire prowl the area. Prospering merchants, Korean workers from the general area of the Governor-General’s office, unemployed youths with money, modern boys<sup>25</sup>, café musicians, bar Marxists, and more will

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<sup>24</sup> Korean-style pubs

<sup>25</sup> *modan bōi*

gather in this neighborhood at night to talk passionately together, along with rich miners itching to throw their money around.

Genryū had finally reached his destination. Tanaka would no doubt come here eventually to savor a taste of the true Korea. *Please let him come with anyone but Ōmura . . .* With this fervent wish, Genryū tried each bar one by one. The children were still trailing him, smirking among themselves, but he made a firm resolution to not get distracted from his mission, not even if someone he respected tried to drag him away. That is why, when he pushed open the door to Café Shōro and heard someone calling out “Hey, Gen-san!” he simply went *heh heh heh* and retraced his steps; and why, when he cracked open a window in Café Shinra<sup>26</sup> and was greeted with jeers of “Crazy bastard, filthy beggar,” he simply reminded himself that he ranked above a first-*dan* in judo and retreated with a cackle. Once he found himself surrounded by a group of women in both Korean and Western dress. “Give us some flowers,” they cajoled. With great restraint, however, he refrained from smacking even a single bottom. Instead, he threw down two or three clusters and then beat a hasty retreat. He combed the neighborhood from west to east in this way, but with no success. An ever-growing anxiousness spurred him on, and a helpless anger.

Genryū continued to search in aimless circles, dragging his increasingly heavy bowlegs along. Two hours later, all he had earned for his pains was an aching weariness and an empty stomach. By the time he reached the deserted back streets around Yūmi<sup>27</sup> [Umi] Theater, he was so tired he felt he might die if he took another step. He nearly crawled into the closest refuge he could find, a dirty *seonsuljip* where a ragtag crowd was seated in groups of two or three, drinking boisterously together underneath the dim, dusty light. With the peach branch still slung over his shoulder, Genryū was the center of everyone’s attention as he trudged to the front of the room. There, a long board had been set up as a serving counter, and a trim, pretty bartender sat demurely on the other side. She poured him a light yellowish drink, and he downed the contents in one gulp. The drink was strangely sour.

Genryū raised his head and took a long look around the room, but he recognized no one. Whenever his eyes clashed with that of another, the other person would nervously clamp his mouth shut and look the other way. This did nothing to help Genryū’s mood. He moved a little farther down and grabbed some pig’s feet from the wire rack next to him. One of the best things about cheap Korean bars like this one was the fact that one could get both appetizers and a drink from a cup as large as a bowl for only five *sen* total. The time he normally would have spent to say a lewd joke or two he instead used to toss off one drink after another. The beggar children stuck their heads in from time to time, trying to gauge if he would leave anytime soon, but eventually they gave up and scattered away.

Once Genryū started drinking like this, some part of him would not rest until he drank himself into oblivion. With the watery alcohol being served, however, he would need to down something like sixty shots to feel dead to the world. He steadily went through drink after drink, until gradually a sluggish feeling of intoxication spread through his body, followed by a sadness that squeezed against his chest. He *had to* find Tanaka by the end of the night. Ah, that was it—he’d get as drunk as he could here, then head back to the Chōsen Hotel afterwards. He’d ask Tanaka for help, and everything would turn out fine in the end. With this thought, the idea of being sent away to a temple struck him as a pitiful farce. To think that *he* might be forced to shave his head like a *bagaji*<sup>28</sup>, dress up in monk’s clothing, and practice Zen meditation with

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<sup>26</sup> Silla

<sup>27</sup> Umi

<sup>28</sup> Korean word for gourd.

rosaries around his neck in front of some bald, runny-nosed fart, day in and day out! Genryū tried laughing to himself in an attempt to erase this painful image from his mind. But the sound of his own strangled, oddly shrill laughter startled him, and he found himself breathlessly clutching the peach branch to his chest. He stayed like this for some time. His mind seemed almost to recede from itself, as if his whole body were melting away. Suddenly he saw them: women, all around him, bathed in faint beams of light. The phantasms flickered wildly in and out of his vision. The XXXXX<sup>29</sup> woman with the melon cheeks. The poetess, smiling slyly in the shadows. *I'll come tomorrow morning*, she was whispering. That's right—he'd have to return to that depressing boarding house by tonight to wait for her . . . He started to hallucinate that her moist XXXXXXXX was bearing down upon his own body, slowly spreading and emitting hot choking breaths. —But where the hell was Tanaka?

Genryū wavered between reality and fantasy in this way as easily as others might turn left and right. Next he was confronted with a memory of Tanaka's sister, Akiko. When they first met, Tanaka was a young, struggling writer and his beautiful sister was a student at a woman's college in Tokyo. Genryū had loved Akiko with a burning passion, but his feelings were not only discouraged but in fact actively scorned by Akiko and Tanaka both. He took drastic measures to prove his love, such as walking the two miles between his place and hers just to see her, but she treated his brazen, obsessive desire with nothing but disdain. His claim that he was a brilliant Korean nobleman had not the slightest effect.

On his way home one day after yet another rebuff, he ended up spending the night at the house of a serving girl he knew. Earlier that day, he had deliberately visited Akiko while Tanaka was out of the house, but had failed to overcome her by force as planned. That night he took his anger out on the serving girl, slashing at her with a knife. For that he was deported from the metropole. Back in Korea, he began writing for various entertainment magazines and other media outlets. In his writings he gave free reign to his fantasies, mystifying his experience into a story of young love like that of Elena, the Russian girl, and the Bulgarian patriot Insarov.<sup>30</sup> People believed him, reasoning that surely not even Genryū would lie about such a thing. With each new piece that he wrote, Genryū too came to fall under the spell of his own lies, until the incident was finally transformed into a beautiful memory. *I wonder how Akiko is doing. I need to meet Tanaka soon so I can ask him about her. Ahh, why does everything cause me such pain these days?*

His head reeled, and he felt poised on the verge of some momentous action. Unexpectedly, the miserable cry of the country peasant from earlier that day came back to him. In the end, wasn't he just like that peasant? They were both human beings drowning in the depths of a bottomless despair, with no hope of salvation. He had long run out of obscene things to write about, and no one listened to his bragging any more. In his stories he had used and reused the paltry number of German words in his vocabulary; had spoken his thirteen words of Latin at least thirteen times; had made sure to write the French word *FIN* at the end of every composition. But people had stopped accepting his submissions, so it was goodbye to it all. His threats regarding his first-*dan* judo ranking had no effect anymore, and anyway the city crawled with second-*dan* and third-*dan* masters, not to mention boxers itching for a fight. He had no house, no wife, no children, no money. As a last resort he had tried to take revenge on everybody under the name of patriotism, manipulating Ōmura's power and influence, only to be outstripped by the flood of political movements that had arisen in response to the current state of affairs. Just thinking about it made him grind his teeth in anger. He couldn't even threaten to

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<sup>29</sup> The Xs indicate material censored in the original text.

<sup>30</sup> c.f. Turgenev's *On the Eve*.

have people thrown in jail anymore. All that was left to him was his aimless, directionless wanderings and his ability to drink even when penniless. *Now that even Ōmura's abandoned me, I have nowhere to go.* He hated Ōmura for using him and then abandoning him to a temple when he wasn't needed anymore. Completely exhausted, Genryū let the peach branch fall to the floor. Tears sprang to his eyes. He resumed his drinking, falling into an even greater gloom.

## 4.

It was around ten o'clock, and Genryū was hopelessly drunk. A stream of people had been coming in and out all night, but his senses kicked up when he heard two new customers speaking in crisp Japanese enter behind him.

"It's interesting to see how this place is quite busy, considering that Koreans are so lazy."

Genryū's ears pricked, caught by the familiarity of the voice.

"Well, I suppose back in the metropole it'd be called a *yakitori* restaurant or something. Why not have some Korean alcohol, now that we're finally free of those worthless *yōbo*<sup>31</sup>? We've earned it."

The two men stood near Genryū at the bar. The Koreans they were referring to were no doubt the same type of toadyish, would-be writers who swarmed around Tanaka with a disgusting show of servility. Genryū made himself look as inconspicuous as possible.

"Well, even so, I thought it was a good experience. To meet and talk with such people . . . It felt rather continental."

*That hoarse, pretentious voice—it's gotta be Tanaka,* thought Genryū, straining his ears.

"Hah, are you serious?" exclaimed the other man in protest. "You always find interest in the strangest things."

"No, I didn't mean it that seriously . . . But are those writers and playwrights actually as famous as they said they were?"

"That's right, those fools are the best," the other man said quickly, deliberately distorting the truth. "The other day I happened to read some stories of theirs that had been translated into Japanese, and the first thing I felt was relief. I was completely relieved. Even an amateur like me could write that kind of stuff! Those of us here really do have a duty to raise the quality of Korea's backwards culture with our own two hands. But how about a drink?" The speaker picked up a cup.

Genryū finally screwed up what little courage he had and craned his head towards the two men. What he saw made him frantically rub his blurry eyes. His mouth dropped. It was definitely Tanaka from Tokyo. Next to him was Tsunoi, a professor at a government-sponsored professional school in Keijō. The men were in the middle of taking a drink, but they were so surprised when they saw Genryū that their hands halted in midair.

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<sup>31</sup> A derogatory term often used by Japanese people during the colonial period to refer to Koreans.

“Tanaka!” Genryū shouted, lavishly wrapping his arms around Tanaka’s lanky frame. Everyone in the room watched the bizarre scene unfold with astonishment and even some revulsion, seeing him treat a Japanese person in such a way.

Tanaka had instantly recognized Genryū, whom he had been discussing with Ōmura and Tsunoi just before. He was taken aback by both the unexpected encounter and Genryū’s crushing embrace. Genryū spun around like a madman with Tanaka still in his arms. “Unbelievable! I hate you, I really hate you. How could you come here without telling me?”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Tanaka groaned, his words sounding like a plea for help.

“Alright then, let’s have a drink. Take a shot!” Genryū grabbed a cup. “I’m so happy that you’ve come to Korea, so happy!” He was even happier to see that Tanaka had come without Ōmura. “I knew you’d come. Take a goood look at this new Korea. I’m counting on you. C’mon, drink up!” He pounded Tsunoi painfully on the back, buoyed by a reckless euphoria. “Hey, Mr. Tsunoi, you have to drink, too!”

Tsunoi had met Genryū only once or twice at the U. Magazine meetings, and he found it an affront to his dignity to be treated so familiarly by Genryū. Tsunoi had come to Korea soon after graduating from college with a degree in law and had landed a professorship almost immediately. From the way he liked to throw his weight around in fields as unrelated as the arts, however, one could easily have called him the Japanese version of Genryū. Tsunoi shared a common failing among scholars who came to Korea to find work. Although he mouthed slogans like *naisen dōjin*<sup>32</sup>, in his heart he secretly thought of himself as better than everyone else. The problem was when he attended meetings on the arts. Only then did he feel a sense of inferiority, as he couldn’t compete with the Korean writers and artists there. So he hated them instead, and took great pains to belittle them at every turn. Whenever someone from Japan came to visit he redoubled his efforts with a passion that could rival Genryū’s, even canceling classes so he could take his guests to a bar and there vilify Koreans under a thin veil of academic-sounding vocabulary. *Ah, I was so relieved* was his pet phrase.

Running into Genryū, the writer he despised most, only made Tsunoi’s self-conceit swell even more. He pointedly turned his back on Genryū. But Genryū was a force to be reckoned with. Without a second glance at Tsunoi he spun back to Tanaka, who was still caught in his grip.

“Tanaka, I’m so worn out from looking for you all day. I was cursing you as I drank, you know. But now we’ve finally found each other. God, it’s been over six years! Speaking of which—how’s your sister Akiko doing? I still think about her even now.”

Tanaka, a timid person at heart, merely nodded perfunctorily at Genryū’s rambling words and pretended to take a sip of his drink.

Tsunoi was in the process of downing his second cup, but when Genryū brought up Akiko he burst out laughing. Then, perhaps thinking that wasn’t enough, he gave out another roar of laughter: *hahaha!* Earlier that evening, Tanaka had told Tsunoi about all the trouble Genryū had given Akiko—such as how Genryū liked to time it so he visited her when Tanaka wasn’t there, even changing into Tanaka’s padded kimono and stationing himself at his desk. When the man in question returned, Genryū would say things like “Now, isn’t this a surprise,” with the air of someone greeting a guest. There was also one evening where Tanaka bumped into Genryū on the street and was completely extorted out of all the cash he had on him because “something serious had come up.” Later that evening, however, Tanaka returned home to find that Genryū had bought a heap of apples and cream puffs and was forcing Akiko to eat them, laughing delightedly with a *kikiki* as he did so.

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<sup>32</sup> “Japan and Korea Under Impartial Benevolence.”



All of Genryū's sadness and pain had dissipated the instant he ran into Tanaka. He babbled on, the only happy one in the group. "When you go back, let Mr. S.<sup>33</sup> know I said hello. Be sure to mention how successful I've become since coming back to Korea."

Or else, "Is Mr. T. well?"

And then, "What's R. doing these days?"

And, "How's D.'s wife?"

Unfortunately, Tanaka was not the kind of writer who could run in the same circles as S. or T., and he floundered for appropriate responses. Tanaka had recently fallen into a writing slump. He hoped that by going to Manchuria, which was all the rage these days, he could invent a new label for himself. He was in Korea because a journal had commissioned him at the last moment to write something about the Korean intelligentsia. That was why he took such great interest in the wheedling young hacks who came to see him. Later he had asked Ōmura and Tsunoi for their expert opinions. According to Tsunoi's anthropological explanation, Korean youths were all cowardly and warped from birth, and were furthermore members of a shameless, factious race. Genryū, he pronounced, proved his point exactly. Why, even Ogata agreed! The well-known Tokyo author had met Genryū at a literary reception hosted by Ōmura. With the true acumen of an artist, he had been able to extrapolate the characteristics of the entire Korean race from Genryū in less than half an hour. *This is a true Korean!* Ogata had shouted, pointing a finger at Genryū. The Korean guests had been struck dumb by the pronouncement. But Genryū himself had chuckled with delight, immensely pleased.

Tanaka planned to stay in Keijō for only a day or two, and what little time he had would be mostly taken up by drinking. He was actually rather pleased to run into Genryū, a man whom Tsunoi had vouched as being a representative Korean, because he had just made a vow to himself to write a biting, original work full of observations that would rival Ogata's own. He had not the slightest inkling that Tsunoi's words were fueled by malice. *Now it's my turn to observe*, Tanaka thought excitedly. With the air of someone examining the whole Korean race, he said to Genryū, "I hear you've been writing in Korean since you've returned."

"That's right, that's exactly right," Genryū asserted ecstatically, as if he had been waiting for the question all along. "I published some amazing stuff as soon as I came back to Korea. People even started calling me a Korean Rimbaud, they were that impressed. But as I got more popular and famous, those snobby literary bastards became jealous and tried to shut me out. You've probably noticed this yourself, but Koreans are just hopeless. Listen—they're sneaky and cowardly, so they break up into factions and try to tear down anyone who's better than them."

At this, Tsunoi turned to Tanaka and gave a sharp jerk of his head, as if to say, *You see?* Tanaka nodded.

"They don't even know that my work got a lot of attention in Tokyo." Genryū stole a glance at Tsunoi. "They're all ignorant, uncivilized bastards!"

Whenever Genryū found himself in the company of Japanese people, a certain base instinct made him unable to stop heaping curses on his fellow Koreans—only by doing so, he believed, could he talk equally with the Japanese. His emotions burned like a great fire inside him. "Oh, Tanaka!" he cried brokenly. "I get so miserable whenever I think about this hopeless race. Please say you understand!"

He thought he might try to cry in a noisy howl, but instead he simply covered his head and sobbed convulsively.

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<sup>33</sup> Kim uses "Shimazaki-sensei" (Shimazaki Tōson) and "Tokuda-sensei" (Tokuda Shūsei) in the *Bungei shunju* text. Later versions read "S-sensei" and "T-sensei."

Tanaka was greatly moved. "I understand," he said, wanting to cry himself. "Of course I understand." *I'm glad I came to Korea after all*, he thought. He was fed up with the narrow, insular literature that resulted when one moldered away in Japan. Here was the suffering soul of the continental people. Here was the once-incorrigible Genryū, his whole body shaking with torment over something so much bigger, so much more essential! That was it—he should report this back to the metropole as the tortured soul-searching of a Korean intellectual. *Ogata can't beat my powers of observation*, he joyfully boasted to himself. *Those people who say they don't understand the Chinese are utter fools. If it only took me two days to understand the Koreans, I bet I could figure out China in four!* Tanaka began plotting out the framework of his essay in his head.

To Tsunoi, however, Genryū was just a ridiculous joke. With a sense of triumph, he fixed Genryū with a long, meaningful look and then turned to Tanaka. "Ōmura is absurdly late," he drawled, knowing full well that Genryū feared Ōmura as one may fear thunder.

"What did you say?" Genryū bolted up in his seat, looking in that instant completely sober. "Ōmura—Ōmura is with you?"

"That's right," replied Tanaka, looking puzzled. "He left to go buy something, though."

"I see!" Genryū said idiotically. "The thing is, Ōmura and I are working together to improve the Korean race. The problem is simple. Koreans need to break free from their narrow-minded ideologies, recognize that there is a new order in Asia, and receive the baptism of the Yamato spirit. I wrote some sensational essays along those lines for Ōmura's U. Magazine, even though people called me a madman because of it." He abruptly dropped his voice and leaned forward. "Did Ōmura say anything about me?"

"No, not particularly . . ." Tanaka said, trying to avoid the subject, but Genryū did yet another about-face.

"Ōmura is an amazing person, a real treasure in this day and age. He's done everything he can to help me, although I'm just a civilian. But it's depressing that even a man like him can't understand what it's like to be an artist, a true artist . . . That's why, Tanaka, I think you should enlighten him. He's no Hamlet, but he thinks it's fun to tell me to go to a temple and other crazy things. It'd be one thing if it were a nunnery, but no—a goddamn temple! What am I, Ophelia? I may not look like it but I'm completely sane, thanks very much!"

Tsunoi smiled privately at Tanaka, and tugged at the hem of Tanaka's suit to indicate that they should try to slip out. Right then, however, a dignified-looking gentleman around forty years old walked into the bar. It was Ōmura. Genryū flew into a panic. With a small whinny of laughter he put a hand to his neck, and then dropped his head. Beside him, Tsunoi burst into spiteful laughter: *kekeke!*

When Ōmura saw Genryū, he immediately fell into a bad temper. "What's going on here?" he shouted. "Are you babbling over your drink again?"

"Ah, Mr. Ōmura, uh, good to see you," stuttered Genryū, bowing low. "The fact is, that is to say, I spent the whole day searching for Tanaka. And I got really hungry, and . . . ended up here, *heh.*"

"Now look here, what happened to going to the temple? You don't have the luxury to waste a single day!"

"Yes, sir." Genryū fidgeted awkwardly. "I already know that."

Ōmura flashed Tsunoi and Tanaka an amused glance. He decided he should probably show them first-hand just how much he cared for the Korean people, especially since one of them was a visitor from abroad. "You have to show people you're sincerely penitent. Look, I'm doing this

because I don't want to see you taken by the police. I want to help reform poor souls like you. Renounce your worldly desires! All of them!"

"Yes, sir, that's why I . . ."

"Do you understand? Good." Ōmura straightened his shoulders with a self-satisfied air. The other customers all watched the scene before them with fascination, but Tanaka chose to listen with his eyes closed, deeply moved.

"Do you know how critical the political situation is right now? Skipping out on your bar bills, assaulting women, blackmailing people—these things are all unacceptable. You go around shouting *naisen ittai*, *naisen ittai*<sup>34</sup> like a madman, but not a single person in Korea is willing to take you seriously. It's time you reflected on your own behavior. You need to become a respectable human being again! Mark my words, I will *not* tolerate you taking advantage of my support in order to gain favor with people. You idiot! This is the first time I've realized how ungrateful you are." Ōmura was swept away by the sound of his own voice. "You ungrateful, worthless mongrel! Are you still clueless about what you did wrong? The phrase *naisen ittai* was made for people like you, to help raise you to the level of real human beings—to help you become like us Japanese."

"I know, that's what I've been telling everyone, but my passion for the cause gets taken for insanity. That's right, Japan is like a man holding out his hand in marriage to a female Korea. What reason is there to spit on that hand? Only by becoming one body will the Korean race finally be saved. But the Koreans just don't get what I'm saying. They're a suspicious, inferior race, the whole lot of 'em."

"Now wait just a minute," interrupted Ōmura, raising a hand. "You Koreans are too self-denigrating. All the Koreans I know love to abuse their own kind, but that's the first thing that's got to go. Understand? Of course, it's right and proper to repent of your shortcomings. But you have to respect yourself, too. Your lot is inferior to XXXXXXXXXXXXX<sup>35</sup> in that regard. Look at us Japanese! We're not like that at all."

"That's true, that's certainly true," Genryū cried wildly at random. He recalled some academic-sounding words he had used in one of his essays once, and seized the opportunity to use them again. "Whether you look at it geographically, or archeologically, or through anthropology, or biology . . ."

When Genryū began firing off words in this way, Tsunoi felt it his duty as a scholar to respond. "Look here," he said. "It's not anthropology but Anthropologie."

"That's right, so if you look at it through anthropologie, or philologie, the only difference between Japan and Korea is one between a man and a woman . . ."

Ōmura laughed to himself, amused by Genryū's pedantic excitement. Genryū caught the look on Ōmura's face but interpreted it to mean that he was back in Ōmura's good graces. Ecstatic, he suddenly leaned his entire body forward. "By the way, Mr. Ōmura!" he bellowed. "Tanaka and I are the closest friends in the world."

But Ōmura had had enough of Genryū, and without responding he turned towards Tanaka and Tsunoi. "Well, shall we call it a night? I'm sure you've seen enough to understand how things are here."

"Mr. Ōmura, are you leaving already?" Genryū hurtled out of his seat, reaching for Ōmura's arm. But the peach branch tangled itself up in his legs, and at once he decided to scoop

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<sup>34</sup> "Japan and Korea as One Body."

<sup>35</sup> Censored in the *Bungei shunju* text. Later editions read "to other races."

the branch up from the floor instead. He clutched the branch to his chest, his breath labored. “Mr. Ōmura!”

“What is it now?” Ōmura twisted around and gave Genryū a suspicious look. “Are you actually going to walk around looking like that? I’m done dealing with you.”

All the strength left Genryū’s body. “Mr. Ōmura, Mr. Ōmura,” he moaned. “The blossoms were so pretty, I ended up buying them from a peasant in the street.” He noticed with some embarrassment that Tsunoi was paying the bill, which included his own drinks. Genryū hurriedly went over to Tanaka and tugged at his sleeve. “Tanaka, there’s something I want to discuss in private with you. Stay with me a little longer. Just a little bit longer.”

“Er—those are some nice flowers,” Tanaka stammered evasively.

Genryū felt his spirits lift at the words, and he slung the peach branch triumphantly over one shoulder. “They are, aren’t they?” he crowed. He marched out the door, looking just like a child playing at soldiers. “They’re peach blossoms, peach blossoms,” he chanted, his voice loud and resounding. In his current mood, he would have followed these worthy gentleman anywhere.

With resigned smiles, the three Japanese men filed out after Genryū. A pale moon hung low in the empty sky, but the alley was as dark as ever. Genryū advanced a few paces, the branch dangling rather comically from his shoulder, but something made him come to an abrupt stop. He threw back his shoulders, looked up at the sky, and pulled the branch down past his legs, almost as if he intended to ride it. Then, as if signaling to the heavens, he raised his arms and let out a cackle of laughter: *kerakera*. The other three passed him silently, pretending not to see. In a rush Genryū spoke, his words ringing out sonorously in the dark:

*“I will rise to the heavens, I will rise, Genryū will ride these peach blossoms and rise above the sky!”*

Genryū charged past the men like a warrior riding a wooden horse, or like some extraordinary mystic from beyond this world. The peach blossoms bowed mercilessly at the stems, scattering petals in all directions. Genryū suddenly remembered something and turned back. Tanaka was peeing into a stream of garbage in the dark. *It’s now or never*, Genryū decided, and flew to Tanaka’s side. “Tanaka,” he whispered raggedly. “I’m relying on you to talk to Ōmura. Don’t let him shut me up in a temple. Please, anything but a temple.”

His tone was so despairing that Tanaka looked at Genryū with surprise. Genryū’s whole face seemed to be caught up in a tremor, but in the next instant the expression collapsed into a ghoulish smile.

Genryū dropped a hand on Tanaka’s shoulder. “You know how it is with bureaucrats—they don’t like it unless you say yes to everything they say. They don’t understand what it’s like being an artist . . .” He added carelessly, “I’ll see you at the hotel tomorrow.”

Once again Genryū straddled the peach branch with an exaggerated flourish. He dragged it along as he went, and with his face turned to the sky he began to shout again. “Genryū is rising to the heavens! He’s rising to heaven!”

Ōmura and Tsunoi took the opportunity to usher Tanaka towards the main street. There they raised a hand to hail a car, even as Genryū’s exaltations continued to echo behind them.

## 5.

In the end, he was unable to rise to heaven. He awoke the next morning in the same cramped room as always, his body drenched with sweat and aching all over. He had been caught in a nightmare; someone had been strangling him with a rope. He shut his eyes and let out a series of long rasping breaths. Was his neck all right? With trembling apprehension, he raised a hand to his collar, only to have his fingers immediately brush against something rough. *Maybe it was true*, he thought with astonishment, his eyes still shut. Praying that he was wrong, he cautiously brought his other hand up and felt around his neck. There was definitely something there! He froze like a Buddhist statue. After two or three minutes had passed, his emotions at last began to calm down, and he tried again to determine what was around his neck. It may have been his imagination, but the thing seemed to shake a little when he touched it. *Strange*. He seized the object in his hand and examined it with fumbling fingers.

“*What!*” Genryū jumped to his feet when he realized what the thing was. He shook it off and it fell to the *ondol*<sup>36</sup> floor with a loud rustle: what else but the peach branch, caked with dirt. He let out a whoosh of air and wiped the sweat from his neck. All of a sudden he cackled madly: *kerakera!* His voice sounded the same as ever, like a pottery crock breaking, and he was relieved that nothing seemed to have been damaged.

Judging from the dim light that filtered into the filthy room, it was still early in the morning. (The room was like a cellar that received no direct sunlight all day, but the changing brightness of the paper sliding doors acted as a kind of clock.) In the dirt floor kitchen to the rear, the old woman who kept the house was shouting her usual curses at her husband as she fed the fire in the furnace. Smoke began to filter in through every open crack: the tears in the oiled *ondol* paper, the holes in the sliding doors, the chinks in the wall. Genryū coughed painfully a few times, trying to clear his throat of the smoke, and stared down at the peach branch with a grim, twisted expression. The blossoms had all scattered, and even the stems had broken off. It was the mere shadow of what it had been, a truly miserable sight. A rush of irritation filled him. Here he was, a man whom all other men had feared and avoided, upset over a ridiculous dream! In its cruelly stripped state, the peach branch could have almost been a symbol for himself. The pitiful figure of the peasant came back to him in close-up. He thought he could even hear the man’s despairing voice. “Why’s everyone laughin’? Don’t laugh, I’m at the end of my rope. Don’t laugh!”

The room was now enveloped in a curtain of smoke. Genryū wrapped his arms around his head, trying to block out the words. He fell to the floor and writhed in agony. *I’m at the end of my rope, too! I’ll show everyone . . . I’ll run out right into the middle of the Shōro intersection and smash myself to pieces like a bomb!* Genryū had been thinking a lot about his own death since last night. If he was going to die, he wanted to make it a traffic suicide. *To die horribly in the middle of the road—that’s the ultimate way to get my revenge. Then, maybe, my soul can rest in peace.* The room turned pitch dark and grew clamorous with the sound of people sneering with a *wahaha* of laughter at the sight of his wrecked body. It was unbearable. “I’m not gonna die!” he shouted frenziedly, trying to disperse the voices. He waved his arms about as if fighting someone off. “I’m not gonna die!”

The smoke blurred his vision and made it hard for him to breathe. Like a man out of his wits he crawled around and around the room, his kneecaps knocking together. *Wahaha, wahhaha* continued the voices. He clapped his hands to his ears to drown them out. Red flames leapt towards him, burning with relentless intent. The hallucinations were out of control. Pierced through with fear, he floundered towards the exit, shouting incomprehensibly. *What is that madman up to now?* thought the old woman in exasperation, but what she saw from the door

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<sup>36</sup> An under floor heating system used widely in Korea even to this day.

made her shake to her bones. Genryū chose that moment to throw himself at the patch of light on the ground made by the open door. The old woman shrieked and stumbled back. Genryū lay on the floor, eyes wide and rolling. Gradually his breathing grew more steady, and the hallucinations eased as well. Clouds rent the sky.

The poetess Bun Sogyoku arrived as she had promised, only to find Genryū still collapsed on the floor. At first she froze with astonishment at the scene before her, but it did not take her long to regain her composure. She clapped her hands loudly together and convulsed with high-pitched laughter. “My goodness, what’s happened to you?” she said, drawing close. Genryū stared up at her vacantly. The old woman disappeared into the kitchen, muttering darkly under her breath. Bun Sogyoku was somewhat discomfited to find herself alone with Genryū, but with resolute determination she dragged him up with what strength she had.

After returning home last night, Genryū had immediately thrown himself face-first into bed and drunkenly cried himself to sleep. Because he hadn’t bothered to undress before going to bed, he was still wearing the same clothes as yesterday. The poetess brushed some dust off his shirt. “What on earth has happened?” she said again. “Mr. Genryū, you look like you’ve seen a ghost. We should leave soon—it’s about to start.”

Genryū had been sitting on the floor with a horrible grin plastered to his face like an idiot, but her words seemed to spark in him a small flash of lucidity. “What’s about to start?” he asked suspiciously.

“Oh, dear.” She took a step back, startled by his expression, and hesitated. “Today is a festival day, remember? We’re going to the shrine.”

“Shrine?” Genryū repeated, as if remembering something with great difficulty.

“That’s right.”

Genryū laughed with ill humor. Hearing the word “shrine” had made him suddenly irritated. There had been a time when people had avoided going to the shrines, arguing that the gods there were Japanese ones. He had been one of the first to go regularly, in a bid to gain favor with the Japanese. The ploy had worked; he became a person of some note, and was entrusted with so many different tasks that he felt as if he had a halo around his head. But times had changed. Now swarms of Koreans descended upon the shrines like clouds thronging together, and he loathed every one of them.

Bun Sogyoku shrank away from him. “I’m going, then,” she said faintly, and made a hasty retreat. Watching her go, Genryū cackled with spite: *kerakera*. The sky had turned gloomy, and the clouds were surging ever north. He was suddenly seized with desire for Bun Sogyoku’s warm, sweaty body. Now was the time to catch her. He flew through the broken gate and past the garden, into the alley beyond. There, houses jostled each other like garbage cans, and the air was stuffy with the foul smell of nearby sewage. A fierce wind swirled ash and dust into the air.

Genryū exited the alley and caught a wavering glimpse of the poetess’s fleeing back, far off in the distance. He ran after her with an ill-natured glee, pumping his bowlegs as fast as he could. The woman turned around once and spotted Genryū coming after her with his arms waving in the air. The sight must have alarmed her, because she immediately began running again. The more Genryū chased her, the more aroused he became; at times he even howled from the excitement. A handful of children playing in the mud clapped their hands and cheered when they saw him.

Bun Sogyoku finally managed to stumble her way into the safety of Kogane Street. As Genryū turned the last corner, he heard the peal of bugles coming from the main thoroughfare. He came to a quick stop, his whole frame shaking despite himself. In the next instant he pressed his body behind a nearby house, as if he were the one now being chased. He held his breath and

peered in the direction of the main street. A long procession was marching towards the shrine, led by a troupe of buglers. For some reason he was overcome with the feeling that they were trying to seize him. Students wearing military gaiters paraded by, followed by teachers in national defense uniforms and reporters from various newspapers and journals. Here and there he even spotted some writers he knew.

Hidden in the shadows, Genryū watched with dull eyes as the procession disappeared into the distance. He had completely forgotten about the poetess, who had melted into the crowd long before. He started to run down the street, in the opposite direction of the procession. His head felt like it was filled with sand. At times the words *hotel* and *temple* flashed up in his mind like glittering mica, only to have the sandstorm descend upon him again in the next instant.

It was a chilly day. *It's the kind of morning where you might still see the moon*, some small detached part of him observed. But there was no moon; instead, a dreary drizzle began to fall. Pedestrians began noticeably picking up their pace. Like a mad dog, Genryū made his way aimlessly towards the middle of the streetcar tracks. His head was drenched from the rain, and his shoulders drooped as if struggling under the weight of the water. A car almost clipped him as it sped by, and a streetcar behind him let out a shrill warning bell. The sound eventually penetrated his awareness, and he dodged the streetcar in silence. This pattern repeated itself for a while. At times he would turn around and shake a fist at the offending driver, shouting like a maniac. "You idiot, you wanna kill me?"

He walked for about half an hour. Once he reached the teacher's college, some compulsion drove him to turn into a dark side street nearby. He kicked at the puddles with mud-splattered shoes. The drizzle had become a steady rain. People hurrying through the alley paused when they saw him and then looked back as they passed, shaking their heads. The alley seemed to stretch out forever, on and on and on. As if in a dream, he turned left and then right, weaving his way through the streets. A dim desire to find the temple shot through his nerves like a thin, single thread. *I'm sure this street will lead me to Myōkōji if I just follow it to the very end.*

Once again Genryū found himself in the spidery labyrinths of Shinmachi. His deluded eyes transformed the alley before him into a wide avenue lined with poplar trees, and the muddy sewage into a brook of clear, clean water. A phantom chorus of frogs was deafening him with their croaks. A brutal wind swept down the avenue, shaking the poplar branches so wildly they looked in danger of crashing to the ground. He would stumble and fall into puddles, then drag himself up again.

The frogs suddenly began bellowing at him from the ground. "Yōbo!"  
"Yōbo!"

Terrified, Genryū blocked his ears. "I'm not a yōbo!" he cried. "I'm not!"

He had done his best to escape today's tragedy, the tragedy that came from being Korean. All at once, the explosive chorus of frogs in his eardrums stopped. It was replaced by a strange noise that arose all around him, growing louder and clearer with every second. Then he heard it: *Glory to the Sutra, Glory to the Sutra!* They were chanting the Lotus Sutra. Thousands upon thousands of people, chanting to the beat of the temple drums. He dashed around in a panic, trying to seek shelter from that roiling sea of sound. But the maze had its own way and held him fast in its grip. A burst of irritation broke through his confusion. "Those goddamn monks are cursing me with their sutras!" he yelled. He ran, stumbled, slowly dragged himself up, stumbled again. With his gleaming red eyes, he looked like a crazed bull. It was a horrible sight.

He felt that this time for sure he would rise to the sky, drifting on the sea breeze that brought with it the chanting of the sutras. Deep down, he was actually well aware that he was in the brothel district, and as he wandered around some rational part of him looked for places he

knew. But every building was painted with the same red and blue paint, and the pouring rain obscured his vision. He raised his arms and shouted a few words to the skies. Then, like a bull in its final death throes after a bullfight, he burst into a run and began pounding on gates one by one.

“Save this Japanese man! Save me!” he screamed, gasping for breath. He flew to the next house and pounded on the gate.

“Open up, let this Japanese in!”

Breaks into a run again. Bangs on the front gate.

“I’m not a *yōbo* anymore! I’m Ryūnosuke, Gennou Ryūnosuke! Let Ryūnosuke in!”

Somewhere the thunder was growling.