

Muddy River

Miyamoto Teru

Translated and with an introduction by Andrew Murakami-Smith

Cornell’s Asian Studies Department has awarded the 2015 Kyoko Selden Memorial Translation Prize to Andrew Murakami-Smith for his translation of the 1977 short story “Muddy River” (“Doro no kawa”) by contemporary author Miyamoto Teru. Set in the city of Osaka in the late 1950’s, the story won the Dazai Osamu literary award the year it was published in Japan. In 1981, it became the basis for the well-known film of the same name, directed by Oguri Kōhei. Another of Miyamoto’s works, Phantom Lights, has been made into the acclaimed Maborosi, directed by Koreeda Hirokazu in 1995. Professor Murakami-Smith teaches at the Graduate School of Language and Culture at Osaka University and is a specialist in the language, literature, and culture of the Osaka area. He is a previous winner of the William F. Sibley Prize offered by the University of Chicago.

[See here for more information about the prize and to submit an application.](#)

Introduction

Miyamoto Teru was born in Kobe in 1947. Nationally famous in Japan, the works of this prolific writer include Kinshū (1982, translated as Kinshu: Autumn Brocade), the six-volume Ruten no umi series (1984-2011), Gaikotsu-biru no niwa (2009), and numerous short stories, some of which have been published in English translation in the collection Phantom Lights.



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“Muddy River” (“Doro no kawa,” 1977), however, was the work that made Miyamoto famous. “Muddy River” is set in Osaka and steeped in the atmosphere of that city. The rhythms of Osaka dialect flow through the speech of the characters, and the descriptions of the humid river burnished by the light of the sun perfectly catch the sweltering, oppressive atmosphere of Osaka’s summer.

The opening sentences set the scene, at the

western tip of Nakanoshima in downtown Osaka:

The Dōjima River and Tosabori River come together, change their name to the Aji River, and flow into a corner of Osaka Bay. Where the two rivers mix together are three bridges. They are Shōwa Bridge, Hatategura Bridge, and Funatsu Bridge. ... Looking from Shōwa Bridge directly across the Tosabori River, at the approach to Hatategura Bridge, was the Yanagi Diner.

The Yanagi Diner is an udon noodle restaurant run by the parents of Nobuo, the eight-year-old protagonist of the story. The customers of the Yanagi Diner are the captains of the boats that ply the rivers. This is the “City of Water” (*mizu no miyako*), one of Osaka’s monikers, which resonates with the days of Meiji, when the city was dubbed the “Venice of the Orient” by Westerners. But this is not the romanticized Osaka of the Meiji era, nor the sanitized one of today’s tourist brochures. The river flowing by the Yanagi Diner is, significantly, a “Muddy River.”

Today, where “The Dōjima River and Tosabori River come together,” there is a memorial commemorating “Muddy River.” Carved on the stone face of the memorial, after the opening sentences quoted above, is the following description of Nobuo’s first sight of the boat where his new friend Kiichi lives with his mother and sister:

“Over there. Under that bridge...
See, that boat there.”

Squinting his eyes, Nobuo could in fact see a boat tied up below Minato Bridge. But to Nobuo it

looked like a fragment of muck clinging to the bridge piling.

One might think a more beautiful scene should have been chosen for inclusion on a memorial, but in “Muddy River,” all beauty is compromised and brought down to earth: the fair-skinned, pretty face of Kiichi’s older sister Ginko is balanced by the skinniness of her body and a mosquito bite on her shin; the sensual beauty of Kiichi’s and Ginko’s mother is that of a prostitute; Kiichi’s eyes gleam with a mesmerizing light in his dirty face; and the beautiful, haunting blue flames in the climactic scene are products of Kiichi’s cruelty. These honest, realistic descriptions reflect the pragmatic, unromantic attitude of the typical Osakan, and also reveal a pervasive ambivalence that runs through the story.

First, the setting of the story (in both place and time) is itself ambivalent. In his 1932 *Kindai Osaka* (Modern Osaka), Kitao Ryōnosuke had singled out the southeast-northwest road that crosses over the Hatategura Bridge and Funatsu Bridge on its way to Kobe as the point probably having the heaviest traffic in Osaka,¹ and predicted that it would be a transportation nexus and gateway for future development.² But transportation today passes by on a freeway soaring high above the ground (and literally overshadowing Miyamoto’s monument). It is no longer anchored to the street-level of Kitao’s detailed observations and photographs of “Modern Osaka”: gas stations, bridges, buildings, neon. The optimistic, Modernist vision of a bright future that he depicts in *Kindai Osaka* was derailed just a few years after publication of his book by Japan’s adventures in China and the subsequent Pacific War.

At the time when “Muddy River” is set, this place was not yet literally a backwater, as it was still important for river transport. The location is, however, ambiguously coded in the story, as is appropriate for a point in time after

the collapse of Kitao's vision of the future and before the start of postwar high economic growth. The moment in time narrated by the story is multivalent. For Nobuo's father, it is a relatively peaceful and happy time after the horror of the war, but he is somehow unfulfilled, and looks forward to moving to Niigata to pursue his ambitions. For Nobuo, this is a point in time at the end of childhood and the beginning of adolescence, and his encounter with Kiichi and Ginko hastens a kind of loss of innocence. The final scene, in which Kiichi's and Ginko's boat is towed away, prefigures Nobuo's own family's coming relocation to Niigata. Thus the setting is seen to have been only a point of transit; Nobuo's childhood home on the bank of the river did not have the stability of dry land, but was in fact nearly as unstable as Kiichi's family's boat rocking on the waves of the river.

Nobuo is himself "in transit" from the stability of childhood to the upheavals of adolescence, from the comfort and warmth of the child's parent-centered world to a wider world fraught with contradiction and conflict. Amid the occasional scenes of beauty - the natural beauty of the rivers and the physical beauty of Ginko and her mother - Nobuo must confront some ugly truths about death, prostitution, prejudice, the inability to understand others, parting, and loss.

Thus "Muddy River" is one version of the universal story of growing up, as is befitting for the work of a writer who is able to touch the hearts of so many readers in Japan and beyond. And yet the story is also grounded in the specificity of Osaka in the immediate postwar period, in a place where rivers meet and people's lives cross briefly during one sweltering summer.

Note: "Doro no kawa" has also been published in [an English translation](#) by Ralph McCarthy, in *Rivers* (Kurodahan Press, 2014)

The Dōjima River and Tosabori River come together, change their name to the Aji River, and flow into a corner of Osaka Bay. Where the two rivers mix together are three bridges. They are Shōwa Bridge, Hatategura Bridge, and Funatsu Bridge.

Overlooking this easy-flowing, ochre-colored river bearing straw, fragments of boards, and rotten fruit, an old streetcar crossed slowly.

Though it was called the Aji River, shipping companies' warehouses and innumerable boats crowded both banks: this was already the territory of the sea. But shifting one's gaze back in the other direction, to the Dōjima and Tosabori Rivers, small houses lined the banks, and one could see that they continued in straight lines far upstream, to business districts like Yodoyabashi and Kitahama.

The residents along the rivers do not think that they live close to the sea. And in fact, surrounded by rivers and bridges, one's body shaken by the roar of streetcars and the screech of three-wheeled automobiles, it is difficult to sense any marine ambience in the surroundings. But at high tide, when the rivers, swollen with seawater flowing upstream, rise and fall directly below the riverside houses, sometimes bringing a smell of brine, people realize that the sea is nearby.

In the river, putt-putt boats pulling big barges came and went all day long. In spite of their exaggerated names - "S.S. River God," "S.S. Thunder King" - the putt-putt boats, their fragile rectangular hulls shored up with many layers of paint, eloquently attested to the poverty of their captains. With their lower bodies sunk inside the cabins, these men glared with strangely dauntless eyes at the fishermen on the bridges. Then the fishermen would hurriedly reel in their fishing lines and withdraw to fish from the approaches to the bridge.

In summer, most of the fishermen would gather

on Shōwa Bridge. This was because Shōwa Bridge was provided with a large, arched superstructure, which threw shade onto the roadway at just the right times. On clear, hot days, lingering in a corner of dark shade on the clamorous Shōwa Bridge could be found the fishermen, and passers-by who peered into the water beyond the ends of the fishing poles and did not move on for a while, and others who merely gazed idly at the putt-putt boats as they coughed forward, shredding the empty, golden heat haze rising from the water's surface. Looking from Shōwa Bridge directly across the Tosabori River, at the approach to Hatategura Bridge, was the Yanagi Diner.

"I'm buyin' a truck next month, so you want this horse, Nobu-chan?"

"Really? You'll really give it to me?"

The summer sun shining in the door of the restaurant made a halo of light behind the man. Every day after noon, the man would come from across Hatategura Bridge with a horse pulling a wagon. He would spread out his box lunch at the Yanagi Diner, and later, eat shaved ice. During this time, the horse would wait quietly outside the restaurant.

Nobuo went to his father, who was grilling kintsuba bean-jam sweets, and said,

"He says he'll give me that horse."

Pouring treacle on the shaved ice, his mother Sadako glared at him.

"The kid and his dad here don't get jokes, you know."

Unusually, the horse whinnied.

In Osaka in the late 1950s, the number of automobiles was quickly growing, but such men with horse and wagon could still be seen.

"A dog and a cat, and three chicks in the tatami room. Ain't so much Nobu-chan as his father

who's into these animals. And now a horse? Even now, I bet he's thinkin' 'Yeah, there's room for a horse...'"

The man laughed loudly.

"It's Mom who don't get the joke, right, Nobu-chan?" said the master Shimpei, and handed Nobuo a kintsuba. Not kintsuba again, thought Nobuo, looking up at his father.

"I don't want any more kintsuba. Gimme some shave ice."

"Don't want it, don't eat it. You're not getting' any shave ice, either."

Nobuo hurriedly crammed it into his mouth. Grill all the kintsuba you want, they won't sell in the summer - Nobuo screamed these words of his mother's to himself.

"This ain't your toilet," Sadako said with a grimace, going out front. As was its custom, the horse had dropped manure in its regular place in front of the restaurant.

"Sorry to always cause trouble," yelled the man remorsefully, and beckoned Nobuo over.

"I'll give you half of mine, go get a spoon."

Nobuo and the man, sitting across from each other, ate a single serving of shaved ice. Nobuo glanced surreptitiously at the burn scar on the man's face. His left ear looked torn and melted. Nobuo wanted to ask, What happened to your ear, but every time he was about to say it, his body burned with embarrassment.

"In Osaka 10 years after the end of the war, there's a limit to how much you can make still using a horse and wagon."

"You're really buyin' a truck?" asked Shimpei, sitting down next to the man.

"Used, you know. Can't afford a new one."

“Used or not, it’s still a truck. You done good. You’re a hard worker. Now you’ll be sittin’ pretty.”

“The hard worker’s that horse. He done his best for me, without once makin’ a face.”

Opening a bottle of beer, Shimpei set it down in front of the man.

“This is on me. Drink it as a prepa’tory celebration.”

Thank you, thank you, the man said, drinking the beer.

“Even after you start driving a truck, stop by the Yanagi Diner ever’ once in a while. After all, you was my first customer after I opened the place.”

“That’s right. It was back when there were still lots of burned ruins round here.”

A strawberry-colored cold thrust up into Nobuo’s brain. With the spoon still in his mouth, he twisted his body involuntarily. It’s cause you eat it too fast, said Shimpei, wiping Nobuo’s mouth with the palm of his hand.

“Nobu-chan was still in your belly,” said the man to Sadako, who was cleaning in front of the restaurant.

“Yeah, we go way back, don’t we?” said Sadako to the horse, holding out a bucket of water. The sound of the horse drinking water and the sound of the putt-putt boats from afar mingled in the humid restaurant.

I died once, you know, said the man.

“I really did. I remember every detail. I went sinking down, down, down into a dark place. Some kind of butterfly or somethin’ went to flyin’ in front of my eyes, and when I grabbed onto it, I came back to life. My breathing and pulse stopped for about five minutes – that’s what my commanding officer said; he kept

holding me the whole time. They say death is the end of everything, but that’s a lie.”

“I’ve had enough of war.”

“One of these days, some idiot somewhere’ll start another one to keep himself busy.”

Saying he was off to Utajima Bridge, the man stood up. He looked somehow happy.

“Got a heavy load today. Wonder if he’ll be able to get up the slope of Funatsu Bridge?”

It was a hot day. The streetcar rails were wavy in the heat.

“Nobu-chan, how old are you now?”

Gazing into the horse’s kindly-looking eyes, Nobuo puffed out his chest.

“I’m eight. I’m in second grade.”

“Is that so? My kid’s still only five.”



「Illustration Ichiro Kamiya」 「画：神谷一郎」

Leaning against the door at the front of the restaurant, Nobuo saw the man and the horse off.

“Hey mister!”

The man looked around. Nobuo had just called him, for no particular reason. Suddenly shy, he threw the man a meaningless smile. The man smiled too, and, pulling the horse's bridle, walked away. A fat, silvery fly flew after them, glistening.

It turned out that the horse could not climb the slope of Funatsu Bridge. He tried it time and again, but his strength would give out at the last moment. It was obvious that both man and horse were becoming more and more tired and anxious. Automobiles and streetcars and pedestrians had all stopped and were staring at the man and the horse.

"Giddap!"

In unison with the man's shout, the horse gathered all its strength. Weird muscles flexed on the burnt sienna body and shimmered violently in the heat haze. Copious sweat ran down the belly and dripped onto the roadway.

"How 'bout dividin' the load and crossin' in two trips?"

Turning at Shimpei's voice, the man gave a great wave and went around behind the wagon. Then, pushing the wagon, he ran up the slope after the horse.

"Giddap!"

The horse's hooves slipped on the goeey asphalt melted in the heat. Above Nobuo's head, Sadako gave a scream.

The man, pushed down by the suddenly reversing wagon and horse, was crushed beneath the scrap-iron-laden wagon. The rear wheel rolled over his abdomen, and the front rolled unevenly over his chest and head. And then the horse's hooves, thrashing as he backed up, stomped over the man's whole body.

"Nobu-chan, stay right here!"

Shimpei ran to the man, and then came dejectedly back and called an ambulance.

"He ain't dead, is he? He's all right, ain't he?" whispered Sadako in a tearful voice, and squatted down in front of the restaurant. Shimpei got a rolled-up rush mat from where it was leaning in a corner of the kitchen, and went out again.

"Nobuo, come inside."

Sadako was calling him, but Nobuo could not move.

Shimpei placed the rush mat over the man. It was a mat with a pattern of irises, for spreading outside to enjoy the evening coolness in summer. Squatting in the depths of a pool of sun, Nobuo was staring at the brightly colored irises that had suddenly bloomed on the sun-baked asphalt, and the blood that trickled out from beneath them to wind its way to the side of Funatsu Bridge. In a while these were hidden by a wall of people.

"Poor thing, he must be thirsty. Nobu-chan, give him this water." Shimpei filled a bucket with water. Carrying the bucket with two hands, Nobuo crossed the road and approached the horse. The thick saliva like arrowroot gruel that was hanging from the horse's mouth sprayed down on Nobuo's face along with the horse's panting breath.

The horse made no move to drink the water. He looked back and forth from Nobuo's face to the water in the bucket, but then shifted his gaze to his master lying dead beneath the flowered mat and stood still, enduring the summer heat.

"He won't drink the water," pleaded Nobuo when he had run back to his father. Repeatedly wiping the sweat from his brow, Shimpei said,

"He prob'ly thinks he killed his master..."

"That horse is gonna die! Dad, that horse is

gonna die!” Nobuo’s body was suddenly covered in goosebumps. Clutching his father’s knees, he wept.

“Can’t be helped. Ain’t nothin’ you or me can do for him.”

After a while the horse was unhitched from the wagon and taken off somewhere, but the wagon itself stood abandoned at the side of the bridge for many days thereafter.

Beside the wagon left exposed to the rain, standing motionless with no umbrella, was a boy. The wagon was covered by a straw mat, but under the mat it was still filled with scrap iron.

A typhoon was approaching.

The houses crouched silently, boards nailed across every window. Along with the fine rain, tufts of straw and the remnants of smashed wooden boxes flew up the street.

Upstairs, Nobuo opened the rain shutters a crack and stared at the boy’s back. It was the first time he had ever stealthily watched a person that way. The green of the thrashing branches of the big willows seemed about to entwine the boy standing alone at the side of the gray road, now free of people and automobiles.

Taking care not to be noticed by his parents, Nobuo crept downstairs and quietly went outside. Then he approached the boy. Paying no heed to being wet by the rain or buffeted by the wind, Nobuo approached as if drawn in by something.

Nobuo stopped two or three paces behind the boy and stood motionless in the same way. Then, in a voice so high-pitched it surprised even himself, shouted,

“Whatcha doin’?”

The boy started, and turned to stare at Nobuo

with dripping face. Then he grinned and said,

“You could sell this iron for a lot, you know.”

Realizing the boy was trying to steal the scrap iron, Nobuo yelled in a bossy way,

“You better not! This belongs to someone, you better not steal it!” He was thinking that this was merchandise belonging to the dead man.

“I know that... I’m not stealin’ it,” said the boy, smiling again cajolingly. Nobuo was watching the boy as if he still could not be trusted.

The whistle of a cargo ship sounded from afar, and at the same moment the rain suddenly increased. In the rain, Nobuo stealthily peered into the boy’s face. He had round, charming eyes that strangely attracted one’s attention. His thick lips were half-open, showing small, white teeth.

“This iron belongs to the man with the horse ‘n’ wagon, don’t it?”

“Yeah...” Nodding, Nobuo wondered why the boy knew that.

“That man died here the other day,” whispered Nobuo, looking up from under lowered brows. Nobuo always did this to buy time when he was at a loss.

“That guy came to our place sometimes,” spit out the boy, staring intently into Nobuo’s face. For a while the two glared at each other wordlessly.

“My place is over there.” The boy suddenly pointed up the Tosabori River, but all Nobuo could see were the railings of a small bridge standing hazily in the rain-misted distance.

“Where? I can’t see good.”

Crossing the streetcar tracks, the boy ran to the middle of Hatategura Bridge. Nobuo followed.

“Over there. Under that bridge... See, that boat there.”

Squinting his eyes, Nobuo could in fact see a boat tied up below Minato Bridge. But to Nobuo it looked like a fragment of muck clinging to the bridge piling.

“That boat there.”

“Hmm? You’re livin’ on a boat?”

“Yeah. We was further upstream, but we moved here yesterday.” The boy leaned on the railing and rested his chin on his hand, so Nobuo stood next to him and did the same. Nobuo was a little taller.

“Ain’t you cold?” asked the boy.

“No, I ain’t cold.”

Both of them were drenched. The rain would pummel them strongly from the side, and then gradually die down, and then suddenly grow strong again. This cycle repeated endlessly.

Then the boy, who had been gazing down absently at the muddy water that had risen to just beneath the houses, gave a loud cry and grabbed Nobuo’s shoulder.

“The monster!”

“Huh? What? Whaddya mean ‘monster’?” Following the boy’s gaze, Nobuo also peered down into the dim river.

“It’s a monster carp. Look there! There, you see the huge carp swimmin’?”

The pouring rain made innumerable ripples on the clay-colored surface of the river. Deep blue water swirled in whirlpools, forming streaks within. A clump of filth collided with a bridge piling and whirled about. Wiping away the drops of rain with his palm, Nobuo frantically searched the river’s face. And then he found himself yelling,

“Whoa!” A giant carp the color of ink-wash was slowly circling on the surface, as if it had surfaced to expose its body to the rain.

“First time I ever seen such a huge carp.”

The carp was in fact about as long as Nobuo was tall. Each scale edged with a line of pale crimson, the round, plump body seemed to glow from within with an eerie light.

“This is the third time for me. Seen it twice where we was livin’ before,” said the boy, and then, putting his mouth next to Nobuo’s ear, whispered,

“Don’t tell no one.”

“Don’t tell no one what?”

“About seein’ this carp.”

Nobuo did not understand why he was not supposed to tell anyone, but he clamped his lips shut and gave a big nod. The fact that he shared a secret with this unknown boy thrilled Nobuo. The carp soon turned its body and dove into the fast current of the Tosabori River.

“My house is that udon restaurant,” said Nobuo, pointing.

“Really? An udon place?” The boy looked like he wanted to say more, but he turned on his heel and ran across Hatategura Bridge without looking back, and disappeared into the arched superstructure of the Shōwa Bridge. As if trading places with the boy, a large board, blown by the wind, came flying toward Nobuo, and he hurriedly ran back inside his house.

That night, Nobuo ran a high fever.

“What business you got goin’ out in this rain?” Sadako naggingly asked him over and over, but Nobuo said nothing. Listening to the sound of the rain and wind, stronger now, his mother’s smell seemed to reach out cloyingly to envelop his body moistened by fever. Nobuo

closed his eyes. Riding on the back of the carp, the boy went up the muddy river.

“Don’t move, an’ rest. Sweat a lot an’ chase out the fever.” Smiling, his father Shimpei wrapped Nobuo’s body in the blanket. Would it be all right to tell about the monster carp, if it was his father he told?

“This giant carp - ”

All the lights in the vicinity went out in a power outage. In the short time until the light of candles spread, in a darkness that seemed to pull him in, Nobuo suddenly recalled the man with the horse and wagon who had died. He groped for his father. The flame of a match struck by Shimpei danced in the darkness like a butterfly.

“What about a giant carp?” His father’s shadow wavered on the ceiling.

“I... wanna catch a great big carp.”

“All right, I’ll catch you one sometime.”

“Where?”

“At the Central Market.” Giggling, Nobuo and Shimpei rolled around on the futon.

When, after a while, he was sure his father and mother were asleep, Nobuo crept out of bed and, from the small window in the stairwell that faced the river (this was the only window that had missed being boarded up), looked for the boy’s “house.”

The lights of candles lit in the houses on the opposite bank made a flickering line in the gusting rain. And near Minato Bridge, almost at the level of the water, he spied a yellow light, feebly rising and falling like a will-o’-the-wisp.

Oh, so that’s that kid’s house, thought Nobuo, pressing his face against the glass and continuing to watch as if drawn in like a moth.

The rosy light of dawn was simmering moisture out of the river. Tatters of clouds went flying. The sounds saws and hammers came from here and there along the riverbanks, and mixed with them the joyful shouts of children could also be heard.

After the passing of a typhoon, mixed in among such things as tatami mats and window frames, down the river came unexpected flotsam like an oil painting still in its frame, and a wooden animal statue that had once graced a tokonoma alcove. The children of the neighborhood, each bearing a long pole or net, would gather on the riverbanks and, fishing out likely-looking flotsam, would then dry them beneath the sunny sky. This was something to look forward to after a typhoon. And on days like these, groups of carp and crucian carp would rise to the surface and leisurely rest their wearied bodies all day long.

“Can I get up yet?” Nobuo asked his mother repeatedly.

“What’re you talkin’ about? You rest today. A weakling who’ll run a fever for the least reason.”

The children’s voices grew louder. Each was shouting something. Looking out the window, Nobuo saw that the twin brothers of a family called Toyoda were churning up the river in a small boat. The brothers were in middle school, and had a small boat. With a boat, one could capture alive the fish that gathered beneath the bridges and where the rivers flowed together. As if to sneer at the other envious children, the brothers would always set off in their boat after school.

While they hated these brothers, Nobuo and the others never forgot to smile ingratiatingly. This was of course because they wanted a ride in the boat, but also because they wanted to see the large fish pond the brothers said they had dug in their backyard. How many times Nobuo had looked up into the brothers’ faces

as they spread out their arms, saying, We got a carp bigger'n any you guys ever seen.

Today, as his gaze followed the brothers picking out only the choicest pieces of flotsam, Nobuo swam in a feeling of superiority. No matter how much the brothers boasted, there was no way their carp was bigger than that monster carp. Squinting and furrowing his brows, he looked toward the opposite bank. The morning sun glittered on the surface of the water. In a black shadow in a corner of the river was the house-boat. Clearly traced by the outlines of warehouses, houses, and telephone poles, the shadow rocked, bearing the boat.

Sadako shrewdly discerned the direction of his gaze.

"A strange boat has showed up..."

Sitting beside the window, removing the boards, Shimpei said,

"Yeah, but ain't it an elegant restaurant-boat?"

"What do they do for electricity and water, I wonder."

"I wonder...."

Near noon, when the restaurant became busy, without letting his parents know, Nobuo got up and, quietly sneaking out the back door, walked to the house-boat.

Signboards scattered about, and the blinding sunlight that clingingly enveloped the back of his neck, told of the aftermath of the typhoon. A snapped electric power line hung from the middle of the superstructure of Shōwa Bridge. Around it, a number of workers were sweating and trying to string it up again.

From one end of Minato Bridge, a narrow path went downward. This was something that had not been there before, and must have been made by the family of the boy who lived on the boat. The clamor of streetcars and automobiles,

knots of sound that seemed to be human voices, and the far-off sound of the putt-putt boats undulated far beyond the house-boat. Clumps of filth, washed up on the bank and then wetted and dried by every ebb and flow of the tide, lay there rotting.

Nobuo peered intently at the house-boat. It appeared to be a once-abandoned boat that had been refurbished and provided with a roof. There were two entrances to the boat, with a long plank reaching across to each. There was no sign of anyone. Or rather, Nobuo sensed, even in his childish heart, a loneliness drifting there that kept people at a distance. Hesitating to go inside, Nobuo stood motionless at the foot of the bridge.

Presently sunlight fell onto a corner of the roof and began to bake the moldering wood. Nobuo shifted his gaze to the river. For some reason, the ochre-colored river, that had continuously flowed near him ever since he was born, today looked terribly dirty. And then the asphalt roads strewn with horse manure, and the cluster of bent, gray bridges, and the sooty luster of the houses along the river all began to seem like dirty things.

Suddenly Nobuo wanted very much to go home. He stared at the roof of his own house, visible on the opposite bank. He could see the reed shade on the upstairs window swaying slightly. At that moment, someone struck him on the shoulder from behind. Looking around, he saw the boy standing there holding a big bucket.

"Didja come to play?" said the boy, peering distrustfully into Nobuo's face. Looking off somewhere else, Nobuo nodded. He was ashamed that he had come to visit like this, though uninvited. Shame made him suddenly tell a lie.

"That carp from yesterday's floatin' over there again."

"You serious?" No sooner had he said this than

the boy took off running. Nobuo ran, too. As he ran, Nobuo began to think the monster carp might in fact have appeared.

“Where was it? Hey, whereabouts didja see it?”

Nobuo pointed to the river’s face.

“Hmm... He’s already gone an’ dove,” sighed the boy regretfully.

The twin brothers were paddling back and forth in their boat below Nobuo’s house.

“You don’t think they saw it, do you?”

“No way, it’s impossible.”

“How can you say ‘impossible’?”

Nobuo was a bit flustered.

“Cause... that carp dove right away.”

“In that case, why didn’cha tell me sooner? I didn’t need to run so fast.” One of the boy’s cheeks, bathed in sunlight, was flushed. Watching his somehow mature, smiling face, it occurred to Nobuo that the boy must have already realized he was lying. And at that moment, Nobuo realized that the boy was wearing a pair of women’s red canvas shoes. The toe of one shoe was ripped, and a big toe was visible.

“Come to my house, okay? Okay?” said the boy, gazing into Nobuo’s face and then taking his hand. The two ran back to Minato Bridge.

They went back down the narrow path. When he tried to step onto the plank, Nobuo slipped into the mud on the bank.

“Whoa, there’s even mud inside your shoes.” Pulling out one of Nobuo’s legs, which had sunk to the knee in the mud, the boy yelled,

“Ginko! Ginko!” A pale-complexioned girl two or three years older than Nobuo stuck her head

out of the house-boat and looked at Nobuo, parting her bangs to both sides with her hands. She looked like her brother around the eyes.

“He lives in that udon restaurant.” The boy indicated to his sister Nobuo’s house, visible on the opposite bank.

The girl came out of the boat, and, guiding Nobuo wordlessly to the prow, had him sit and put his feet in the river. Then she brought a ladleful of water from inside the boat.

“What’s your name?” asked the girl, pouring water onto Nobuo’s feet.

“... Itakura Nobuo.”

“What grade you in?”

“Second grade.”

“Then you’re in the same grade as Kit-chan.”

So Kit-chan was the boy’s nickname. Bashfully, Nobuo asked the names of the sister and brother. He thought that was something only adults did, so he blushed as he asked.

“I’m Matsumoto Kiichi.”

The older sister said her name was Ginko.

“What school d’you go to?”

The boy thought for a moment, and then answered,

“We... don’t go to school,” and looked at his sister.

“Oh...?”

The bicycle cart of a seller of green bamboo poles came across Minato Bridge. The crew-cut heads of the twin brothers gleamed blue in the distance as they paddled their boat to the right, and then to the left, still fishing for flotsam.

The girl thoroughly washed Nobuo's feet. When the water was gone, she would go into the boat and fetch more. The boy scooped up water from the river and washed Nobuo's canvas shoes for him. Absently watching a watermelon rind float by, Nobuo, with his legs thrown out, let himself be washed. Sitting in the sun, he suddenly began to sweat, but he felt a chill deep in his body. He thought he might run a fever again tonight.

Gently separating Nobuo's toes, the girl dribbled water over them. It felt good. Saying, It tickles, It tickles, Nobuo exaggeratedly twisted his body. And over and over again he peeped out of the corner of his eye at the face of the girl, who smiled back at him each time he did this.

"Okay, all clean," said the girl, drying Nobuo's feet on the hem of her shabby dress.

"Your eyelashes are really long, Nobuo..."

Blushing, Nobuo mumbled,

"Call me Nobu-chan."

"Come inside, Nobu-chan. It's cool inside," invited the boy, placing the wet canvas shoes on the roof of the boat.

Inside the boat was a tatami-floored room about four and a half mats in size, and in it were a blackened chest of drawers and a small, round, low table. The so very unstable sensation of a house floating on the water drifted around his feet. There were two rooms; they were divided by a sheet of plywood. To go to the next room, it was necessary to get off the boat and enter from the other plank.

An old-fashioned lamp hung from the ceiling. Nobuo pictured the yellow light he had seen last night.

"Didja get water?" The voice of a woman who seemed to be their mother came from the next

room. It was a low-pitched, hushed voice.

"The tap at the park's shut off 'til evening, they say," answered the girl. A big water-jar was standing at the entrance.

"I'm so thirsty. Still a little left, ain't there?"

"... Yeah." The girl tipped the water-jar and scooped with the ladle, but there was only enough water left to fill a cup half-full. Realizing she had washed his feet with the family's drinking water, Nobuo shrank and hung his head.

"Is someone there?"

"It's the boy from the udon restaurant across the river," said the boy in an inexplicably angry tone.

"Don't bring other kids here too much."

"He's my friend!"

"Oh, really? When didja make friends?"

"Yesterday."

"Yesterday...?" Then the mother spoke to Nobuo:

"From the udon restaurant across the river - does that mean the Darumaya?"

"No. The Yanagi Diner."

"You play with my kids, your folks'll get mad at you."

Not knowing how to answer, Nobuo remained silent, fidgeting.

"Kiichi, we had some Barbados sugar, right? Why don'cha give 'im some?" said the mother. The boy took down from a shelf a big glass jar like those in candy stores, and got out some chunks of Barbados sugar. For a while he repeatedly compared sizes, but presently chose

three chunks of very similar shape and gave one each to Nobuo and his sister.

Then their voices fell silent. The dim interior of the boat was close with a mysterious silence. The three munched on their Barbados sugar without speaking. A putt-putt boat passed by, and presently its waves rocked the house-boat strongly.

Even after he returned home, Nobuo's body continued to rock. Rolling up the rush shade, he put his chin on his hand at the window and stared at the house-boat. The sun was shining on what would be the mother's room. A river breeze laden with heat was ringing Nobuo's wind-bell. The girl's words, The tap at the park's shut off 'til evening, they say, and the dry sound of the ladle scraping the bottom of the water-jar remained in Nobuo's ears.

From midway down the stairs, Nobuo looked to see what was going on in the restaurant. His mother was not there, perhaps having gone on a delivery. Shimpei, seated on a couch near the entrance, was reading a shōgi book. Nobuo crept to the refrigerator and silently removed a bottle of ramune soda pop. Then he headed for the house-boat again.

Cradling the cold ramune bottle against his chest, he was about to descend the path from the end of Minato Bridge, when suddenly the gentle movements of the girl's fingers at Nobuo's toes, and the ticklish sensation that had crawled up his spine, came back to him as something sad, and lonely.

Nobuo ran back the way he had come. When he reached the middle of Shōwa Bridge, he threw the ramune bottle into the river. He didn't know why he did it.

Stopping, and stopping again, Nobuo took a long time crossing the bridge.

There was a single-seat boat called the S.S. Yamashita. It flew a flag with the boat's name

woven in black on a red ground. A taciturn old man, probably well over 70 years old, used this boat to gather ragworms.

He would scoop up a lump of mud from the riverbed, put it in a strainer, and wash it with river water, and presently many ragworms would appear. When a fisherman would wave from one of the bridges, the old man would ply his sculling oar with sluggish movements to bring the boat near. The fisherman would put a few coins in an empty can or bait box, and lower it on a string to dangle in front of the old man's face. The old man would put in a quantity of ragworms corresponding to the amount of money.

To Nobuo it was strange and mysterious that beneath the dirty mud lived the fat, red ragworms. Long before, he had had a dream in which he sliced open his own chest to reveal a thick membrane of mud, out of which crawled countless ragworms. Once, the body of a newborn baby came floating down the river, its long umbilical cord waving behind it. That time, too, Nobuo had been troubled by a dream of innumerable, wriggling ragworms. He didn't like the ragworms, nor the old man who brought them up from the riverbed.

That day, Nobuo awoke early. It had been three days since he had met Kiichi and Ginko.

The morning sun had not yet shown itself, but saffron-yellow ripples already glittered on the face of the river.

Nobuo looked down at the Tosabori River absently. The old man, in the S.S. Yamashita, was gathering ragworms in the middle of the river as usual. He probably wanted to get his work out of the way in the cool of dawn.

For a while Nobuo watched the customary motions of the old man's hands. In the dawn light, the house-boat was sunk in darkness. Nobuo shifted his gaze to Shimpei, who had rolled over in his sleep, and then looked back

absently at the river.

The old man was not there. Only the S.S. Yamashita was rocking rapidly. Large ripples bowed gradually toward the riverbanks.

His chin on his hand, Nobuo thought about what he was seeing. Then he thought, Something serious has happened.

“Dad, Dad!” Nobuo shook Shimpei awake and said,

“The old man of the Yamashita’s gone.”

“Huh?” Shimpei opened one eye and peered irritably at the face of the river.

“What? What’s gone?”

“The old man is gone.”

When he saw the empty boat, Shimpei jumped up.

“Gone...? He’s fallen overboard. This is a terrible thing. The old man’s fallen overboard!”

On Shimpei’s notification, police car after police car came. Soon a large-scale dragging of the river was begun, but the old man could not be found.

No one else had seen the old man, so in the evening, Nobuo, along with Shimpei, was called to the police box.

“Now listen. Jus’ relax an’ try to remember. You sure you seen the old man in the boat getting’ ragworms?” asked the policeman after putting a piece of Kompeito rock candy into Nobuo’s mouth.

“Yeah....” Each time Nobuo answered a question, the policeman would put another piece of rock candy in his mouth.

Nobuo diligently told the policeman that the first streetcar had passed, that the sun was not

yet up, that he had wanted to pee, and so forth.

“Got it, got it. Now this here’s the important part. Did the old man fall in? Or did he jump in?”

“...I dunno.”

The policeman immediately became irritated and struck the desk with the end of his pencil.

“How c’n you not know? That puts me in a spot. Think back, now.”

The one in a spot was Nobuo. Staring up at the policeman from under lowered brows, he mumbled,

“I wasn’t lookin’, so I dunno.”

“You wasn’t lookin’...? You seen him getting’ ragworms, right? And later it was you who waked up your dad, saying the old man was gone. Why wasn’t you lookin’ just when he fell overboard?”

“Why wasn’t he lookin’? It’s only natural that he just happened to be lookin’ at somethin’ else right at that moment!” interrupted Shimpei from the side with a dark look on his face.

“I’m talkin’ to your son here. ...We still don’t know where that old man lives. It’s possible the boat come floatin’ down here by itself, by mistake, you know.”

“It’s the police’s job to check up on stuff like that, ain’t it? My kid says he didn’t see, so I think that’s about enough.”

Listening to this exchange between his father and the policeman, Nobuo suddenly said,

“That old man got ate up.”

“What!?”

“He got ate up by a huge carp like a monster.”

At this point the policeman finally gave up and released the father and son.

Holding hands with his father on the way home, Nobuo repeated the same words over and over, as if possessed.

“The old man got ate by the carp. It’s true! I seen it!”

“You’re right, you’re right. He took too many ragworms, and in the end he got ate up by the fish, too.”

His mother Sadako hugged him in bed that night. She felt immeasurable compassion for her son, who talked, as if he had gone crazy, of the existence of an enormous carp.

In the end, the old man’s body was never found.

“What a nervous boy! When you’re eatin’ supper, eat without lookin’ off somewhere else.” Nobuo had been glancing at the opposite bank repeatedly, when Sadako suddenly struck his hand.

Rust-red fragments of the sunset, gradually darkening to black, were swimming up the river’s face. Around the time the smell of supper wafted from here and there along the riverbanks, the sister and brother would come out of the boat and begin to play. Their shapes could be glimpsed from Nobuo’s house on the opposite bank. The shapes of Kiichi and Ginko, squatting by the side of the road in the gathering dusk, apparently playing something, could still be glimpsed later, in the depths of the darkness, after the sun had completely set. Late at night, the lamp in the mother’s room, sometimes lit, sometimes extinguished, emanated something still more ephemeral than the blue of tiny ripples. The house-boat and the far-off shapes of the sister and brother drew Nobuo’s heart with some unknown, mysterious power, a power that was the diametric opposite of the brightness of his own home.

“Can I invite Kit-chan here sometime?”

“Who’s Kit-chan?”

“The kid who lives on that boat.”

“Oh, so you already friends with a kid from there?”

“Yeah, Kit-chan’s mom gave me Barbados sugar.”

Sadako turned on the light in the now-dark room.

“So that’s why you been payin’ so much attention to the other side of the river lately.”

“He’s got a big sister called Ginko-chan.” Nobuo told how he had fallen in the mud, and how Ginko had washed his feet for him.

“Whadda they do for a livin’?”

Nobuo was unable to answer. Come to think of it, what did that family do for a living?

“I dunno anything ‘bout that. ...Anyway, if they come, give ‘em some shave ice, okay?”

“Yessir. If they’re your friends, I’ll bring out the best china.” Sadako hurried downstairs to relieve Shimpei in the restaurant. There were almost no customers at night, but they customarily stayed open until eight o’clock. Shimpei, who wanted to hurry and have a drink with his supper, would often rush Sadako from downstairs.

“Workin’ on your homework, Nobu-chan?” asked Shimpei as soon as he came upstairs, sandwiching Nobuo’s face between his hands.

“Got half of it done.”

“Want me to do the other half?”

“Teacher said we gotta do our homework ourselves.”

Laughing, Shimpei filled a cup with sake from a ceramic bottle and drained it in one gulp.

“She’s pretty strict, huh?”

“Yeah, said she’ll know even if someone else does it for us.”

“Summer vacation’s for playin’, you know? Ain’t gonna be a decent adult ‘less you grow up playing. Tell her I said not to turn my boy into too much of a scholar, all right?”

Nobuo told about the sister and brother on the boat all over again for his father.

“I heard their dad died of wounds he got in the war.”

Nobuo had not expected that his father knew about the family on the boat.

“I overheard the river guys talkin’. He was sick with somethin’ called ‘osteomyelitis’ – the bones rot. ... The war still ain’t over, you know, Nobu-chan.” When drunk, Shimpei always stripped to the waist. On his body was the mark of a gunshot wound that he had received in the war. It was a large scar caused by a bullet that had entered his back and come out under his arm.

“You don’t go to that boat at night, okay?”

“... Why not?”

Shimpei waved the ceramic sake bottle wordlessly. It was an entreaty for Nobuo to warm up some more sake. According to Shimpei, Nobuo was an expert at warming sake. Shimpei always praised him, saying he warmed it just to the temperature of human skin (the gauge for the perfect warmth of sake) – seemingly not quite warm enough, but at the same time perhaps a little too warm.

“You’re good at some strange things.”

“Why can’t I go to Kit-chan’s at night?”

Not answering, Shimpei thought for a time, and then, putting his chin on his hand, said,

“Nobu-chan, how’d you like to live somewhere it snows a lot?”

“Where do you mean?”

“Niigata.” Nobuo had absolutely no idea where Niigata was.

“I’d like to try my hand at somethin’ besides udon... Somethin’ more challenging, you know?”

“.....”

“I also died once, you know? The day the guy with the horse ‘n’ wagon died, all that day I felt like my body was bein’ squeezed. ‘I died once’ – that’s what he said, an’ then went an’ died for real. I got the feelin’ both him and me’s died over and over agin up to now. I know it sounds weird, but that’s the feelin’ I got. That ain’t the first time I seen someone die, I seen people fallin’ one after ‘nother right around me. ...But the other day was the first time I ever felt like that.”

Nobuo was leaning on the low table, gazing mesmerized into his father’s face.

“A person dies in an instant, you know, someone who was just talkin’ to you the minute before. In our unit, there was only two of us survived. When I set foot on Japanese soil again, I thought, I’m happy now, even if I got nothin’, I’m happy just to be alive, that’s what I thought, from the bottom of my heart. When I saw your mom’s face for the first time in several years, I thought, was my wife always this beautiful? I had to pinch myself.”

There was something different about Shimpei tonight. Sadako’s voice could be heard from downstairs, saying, Welcome. Nobuo leaned forward and poured sake into his father’s cup.

“When I’m grillin’ kintsuba in the afternoon

sun, I somehow remember summer in Manchuria. ... I wonder why I didn't die in that war? ... How come I survived? Sometimes find myself thinkin' about such things... The other survivor from my unit was a guy called Muraoka. He was a farmer from Wakayama, had two kids. He was a guy came through rain an' hail of bullets without a scratch. But 'bout three months after he was demobilized, he fell down a bank an' died. Bank no more'n five foot high, an' he falls off it an' dies. Snatched from the jaws of death time an' time agin, at long last comes home to Japan, an' then he goes an' dies a half-ass death like that..."

Among the fathers of Nobuo's playmates were many who told them heroic tales of the war. They were always gorgeous and soul-stirring, like watching a movie. But the deafening roar of machine gun and fighter plane never appeared in the words that came out of Shimpei's mouth.

"'Bout two years after the war ended, I once saw a young guy, former kamikaze pilot fallen on hard times, runnin' wild in the black market in Tennōji with a Japanese sword. 'You idiots, Japan lost! Japan lost! Lament! Don't be hoodwinked by talk of a Divine Wind! If there's such a thing as a Divine Wind, let it blow right here and now!' He was cryin' and yellin' some such nonsense. But he was the idiot. For guys ripped from the arms of their wives an' kids by a single draft notice an' turned into soldiers, there ain't no winnin' or losin', it's only whether you lived or died. I come this close to tellin' him, too, when I remembered Muraoka. Soon's I thought of him, the tears came an' wouldn't stop..."

Shimpei drew Nobuo close to sit on his lap.

"Listen, Nobu-chan, People struggle with all their might to survive, but when death comes, they die the most random deaths. ...The guy with the horse 'n' wagon who died the other day, he was one of the few survivors from Burma."

A streetcar went by. Its vibrations were conveyed through Nobuo's body, too. Curled on his father's lap, Nobuo followed the gradually dying vibrations. The somehow insecure feeling of the rocking of the house-boat had been revived in his heart.

"In Niigata... There's a guy invited me to go into business with him in Niigata. I wanna try for once to do somethin' with all my might, you know?"

He reeked of alcohol, but Nobuo knew Shimpei was not drunk. He could tell from the way it felt sitting on the familiar lap. When drunk, his father's lap sagged weakly.

"When we goin' ...to Niigata?"

"It ain't been decided yet that we will go, you know? Your mom'll prob'ly say she don't wanna go."

"... I wanna go to Niigata. I wanna live where it snows a lot." Saying the opposite of what he truly felt, Nobuo thumped his head on Shimpei's chest. The place called Niigata, and the drifting snow, had for Nobuo an unknown and yet strangely lonely mood.

The vibrant purple of the irises on the rush mat that had covered the dead man with the horse and wagon; the old man of the S.S. Yamashita, who had suddenly disappeared; and the words of his father telling him not to go to the house-boat at night.... These lay like tangled threads in Nobuo's still-smooth heart.

The next day, Kiichi and Ginko came to play on Nobuo's invitation. Nobuo was happy that his mother remembered her promise to him and gave them a warm welcome. When a new friend of Nobuo's would come, it was usual for Sadako to grill the child about his family members and family business, but she asked the sister and brother nothing.

Since his mother was always saying she had

wanted a second child, a girl, Nobuo thought that she had taken a fancy to the quiet and well-behaved Ginko, but he sensed that there was something out of the ordinary in the way she did little things like comb Ginko's hair.

"Ginko says she always makes supper an' cleans up afterward. She's still only fourth grade, you know? I wanna tell Tomoko an' Kaoru." Sadako praised Ginko, mentioning the names of Nobuo's cousins. Kiichi, not to be outdone, said:

"I can sing a lot of songs, you know."

"Is that so? You're really somethin'. How 'bout singin' one for me?"

Kiichi stood like a statue, and, glaring at the ceiling, began to sing.

Here in far-off Manchuria
 Hundreds of leagues from home
 Lit by the red setting sun
 My comrade - beneath the stones
 in a field.

Shimpei stopped in his work closing up the restaurant and bent an ear to Kiichi's song. Nobuo looked at the hair of Shimpei's head, which seemed to have become slightly thinner lately. Directly above his head, a strip of flypaper fluttered in the breeze from the electric fan. The lighthearted feeling of a moment ago disappeared from Nobuo's breast, and a strangely uneasy feeling grew, something like the homesick feeling he got when he stayed the night at relatives'.

"You got that song by heart 'til the end?"

"Yeah, I can sing it all."

"That's really somethin'. ...OK, let's hear the

whole thing from the beginnin'."

Kiichi sang the long song with his whole heart. His mature intonation augmented the song's lonesomeness. Nobuo shifted his gaze to Ginko, who was following with her eyes the slow back-and-forth motion of the electric fan. Beneath the yellow light-bulb, her lusterless hair looked sooty. Her skinny shin was swollen with a mosquito bite.

After the battle, at end of day

I returned to search for him

In my heart I hoped he still lived

I wished he'd speak a word.

"That's good, that's really good..."

At Shimpei's words, Kiichi's blushing face broke into a grin, and he looked down shyly but happily. This reaction was so endearing that thereafter, Shimpei and Sadako often exaggeratedly praised Kiichi for the smallest things. Kiichi always responded by blushing and squirming with an indescribable grin on his face.

"Dad, that dress we bought for Kaoru was too small for her, and it's been put away in the chest of drawers ever since. I wonder how it'd fit Ginko?" Sadako took Ginko's hand and went almost too merrily up the stairs.

"Where'd you learn that song?"

"A disabled vet'ran in the neighborhood taught me."

"You used to be up at Nakanoshima Park, right?"

"Yeah, but up there the river's part of the park, too, so they said we couldn't live there."

Shimpei wiped grime from Kiichi's face with a wet towel.

“I heard your dad was quite a captain.”

Kiichi remained silent. It seemed he did not remember his father.

Just then three or four customers entered. They were all familiar faces, men who went up and down the river in putt-putt boats. The restaurant was immediately filled with the smell of sweat.

“Sorry, but I was just gonna close up.” Shimpei tried to turn them away, but the men said,

“Don’t be so heartless,” laughing and putting their hands together in supplication.

“We still got one more job left... Gotta go up to Sakuranomiya after this. Let us fortify ourselves, willya?”

Nobuo and Kiichi moved to a corner of the restaurant and opened some comic books. One of the men smiled at Nobuo.

“Hey Nobu-chan, they really gave you a hard time, didn’t they?” The river men already knew that Nobuo had been called to the police box.

“Wanna know anything happened on the river, just ask Nobu-chan, ‘cause he sits beside the window keeping watch over the river ever’ day.”

“But I wonder where that old guy’s got to? Washed down to the bay and sucked down under the mud, like as not.”

“After all, they say there’s five or six meters of soft mud piled up on the bottom of the bay.” For a while, the missing old man was the subject of animated conversation, but then someone noticed Kiichi and said,

“Hey, ain’t this the boy f’m the red-light boat?” The men all looked at Kiichi. Kiichi ignored them, not looking up from his book.

“Red-light boat? You mean that run-down boat

under the bridge?”

“Yeah. Nice name, ain’t it? Konishi named it. He’s a devoted customer, y’know?”

From the kitchen, Shimpei broke in upon the men’s voices:

“Hey, don’t talk about that kinda thing in front of the kids.”

“Whaddya talkin’ about? They say this kid sometimes goes out instead of his mom as a tout for customers.” There was a burst of laughter. Feeling as if he were seeing something terrifying, Nobuo watched Kiichi’s face blanch to a deathly pallor.

“They say she’s pretty good, for a pan-pan girl.”

“What’s ‘good’? Her face, or down below?”

“Dunno, didn’t hear all the details.”

The men laughed again. Nobuo hated the men with a burning hate. He did not understand the deeper meaning, but he felt a limitless scorn was being heaped upon the mother and children of the house-boat. Neither did Nobuo understand “pan-pan girl,” but the bleak mood of this word was somehow linked to the weak voice of the children’s mother that he had heard from beyond the plywood partition.

Kiichi was looking at the comic book without moving a muscle, but his round eyes were fixed in one spot. Anyone could tell that his attenuated nerves were gathered in his shoulders, his body hunched in readiness.

“Knock it off, Yasu-san!” Confronted with Shimpei’s unwontedly stern expression, the men finally changed the subject.

After the men had left, Nobuo wheedled his father to show them some magic tricks. He wanted to disperse the film that still shone dully in Kiichi’s eyes like mist.

“Okay, a one-time-only special offer.”

Shimpei came out of the kitchen holding an egg. It was the “Disappearing Egg,” one of Shimpei’s favorite tricks. He closed his right palm around the egg. When, with a spirited cry, his left hand flickered in front of the right, the egg that he should have been holding had suddenly disappeared. For Nobuo, this was a very mysterious trick, that he never tired of watching.

“Whaa...” whispered Kiichi and opened his eyes wide, to the delight of Nobuo. When Shimpei made the same motions again, there was the missing egg, in the palm of his right hand.

“Whoa...” Kiichi was mesmerized by the motions of Shimpei’s hands.

Sadako and Ginko came downstairs. Ginko was wearing a new, flowered dress, and even had a red barrette in her hair.

“Dad’s specialty. ‘He who knows little, often repeats it’ - this is all Dad can do,” teased Sadako.

“Hey, among magic tricks, this one’s the hardest. If you can do this one, you’re a first-rank magician. Don’t give away the secret from behind, now.” Nobuo wondered if one could figure out how the trick was done if one looked from behind, but he felt it might be much more fun not to know.

“Mom’s made you her dress-up doll, I see,” laughed Shimpei, touching the barrette in Ginko’s hair.

“She’s fair-complexioned and pretty, so she makes it worthwhile. Nothin’ like Kit-chan.” Everyone laughed, but only Ginko did not change her expression. Quickly changing her clothes, she folded the dress neatly and returned it to Sadako. The swaying shadow of the flypaper fell on Ginko’s thin body when she was stripped to only a pair of underpants.

“Why? I want to give you this, Ginko.” Ginko remained silent. She did not look at the dress, her body held rigid. Sadako could not force it on her any further.

“Okay, then, at least take the barrette. That’d be okay, wouldn’t it?”

Ginko made no move to take the barrette, either.

A faint smell of mosquito coil smoke, mingling with the cool river breeze, magnified the late-night silence of the riverbank, like a sinking ever deeper.

“... We better go home. It’s late,” said Kiichi, looking into the faces of Shimpei and Sadako.

Nobuo and his parents accompanied the sister and brother as far as the foot of Hatategura Bridge.

“Ginko really don’t say much,” mumbled Sadako to herself. At that moment, a fan of light came from a corner of the Aji River. It must be the men from before. Shredding the silence of the riverbank, several putt-putt boats went up the river. Nobuo, Shimpei and Sadako all stared at the lamp of the house-boat, whose outline was faintly visible, seeming to breathe quietly, deep in the darkness. The light cast over the river’s face by the searchlights of the putt-putt boats clearly picked out the house-boat, and then moved off.

It was a day when it seemed it might start raining at any moment.

Hopping on one foot, Nobuo crossed Hatategura Bridge. His feet naturally headed for the house-boat.

When he found a small celluloid bobber discarded by a fisherman, he put it in his pocket. This was a strange habit of Nobuo’s. Any shiny thing lying by the side of the road, or any other thing that took his fancy, he would

diligently shove into his pocket. And then he would immediately forget what he had picked up. Sometimes among glass marbles and fragments of metal, Sadako would be shocked to find a dead crayfish or a lizard's tail, still twitching.

Nobuo ran lightly across the plank and, from the narrow entrance, peered into the boat. The sister and brother were not there.

"Kit-chan," he called in a low voice. From beyond the plywood partition came the mother's voice.

"They gone to fetch water."

"... Oh?" At a loss, Nobuo stood by the entrance.

"Nobu-chan, come round to this side," called the mother. Nobuo had only ever talked to the mother through the plywood partition, and had never yet seen her. As Nobuo hesitated, the mother called to him again.

"What's the matter? Shy?"

Nobuo stepped off the plank and, choosing places where the mud of the bank was driest, went around to the stern of the boat. There was a small hinged door that looked barely large enough to allow even Nobuo to pass. He gently pushed it open.

Immediately beyond the hinged door was a tatami-floored room.

"Leave your shoes outside."

Nobuo sat correctly, with his legs folded under him, in the entrance, and looked at the siblings' mother. A woman much younger than Sadako, with neatly combed, lustrous hair pulled tightly back into a bun, was leaning on a folded set of futon and gazing at Nobuo.

"First time I seen your face, Nobu-chan, ain't it?" said the mother. Nodding, Nobuo glanced

furtively around the room. It was a bare room with only the set of futon and a cheap vanity, but in the air floated a sweet, damp, but in no way pleasant fragrance, the likes of which Nobuo had never smelled before.

"Don't sit 'way over there. Come closer."

Moving to a window looking over the water near the mother, Nobuo fidgeted. Gazing on Nobuo with narrow eyes with smooth, creaseless upper eyelids, that looked nothing like Kiichi's or Ginko's, the mother, laughing softly, said,

"Thanks for always playin' with my kids. Give my regards to your mom and dad."

"Please come visit my house one time, ma'am," said Nobuo, heart pounding.

Whispering, Thank you..., the mother tittered.

"You know how to be polite... Has your family always run an udon place there?"

"Yeah."

"I wanted to have some kinda shop like yours, too... But at some point, it got to be too much trouble to work hard for a livin'."

"....."

"Wonder when it was... Anyhow, those babies have gone and got that big."

Nobuo's heart was seized by the sight of a drop of sweat trickling from the stray hairs clinging to the mother's temple. To Nobuo, the pale face, free of makeup, was something beautiful.

On the long neck and upper chest was a thin film of sweat. It was a bit cooler that day, with a river breeze blowing ceaselessly. The leaden, cloudy sky was moving in stripes. The river was again a somber brown.

This mysterious smell floating nebulously in the

room must be a mist of sweat and the tired yet alluring smell of woman that stole from within the mother's body. And without even noticing it himself, Nobuo was drowning, choking on some tingling something lurking in that smell. Nobuo felt antsy. And at the same time, he wanted to go on sitting next to the mother indefinitely.

Suddenly the hinged door opened with a bang. A suntanned, middle-aged man stuck his head in, leering.

"Is it okay?"

The mother stood and wiped away the sweat on her neck with the back of her hand. Then, without a word, she sat down in front of the vanity. The man who had come in, looking at Nobuo, said,

"Oh, a previous customer, huh?" He leered again, one cheek twisted. Then he reached out an arm to pat Nobuo's head. Nobuo slipped past the man and went outside. It seemed to take too long even to put on his shoes. Grabbing one canvas shoe in each hand, he ran through the mud and dashed up the path.

Sitting motionlessly on the railing of the Minato Bridge, he waited for the sister and brother to return. Turning to look from time to time at the weathered wood of the house-boat swaying behind him, he waited on and on.

When he espied the figure of Kiichi, resting for a moment at the streetcar stop next to a heavy bucket filled with water, Nobuo dashed to him.

"Where's Ginko-chan?"

"Went to buy rice."

"Let's play at my house."

"Willya lemme have some shaved ice?"

"... Okay, I'll ask Dad."

Carrying the bucket between them, the two

went into the boat. Kiichi cocked an ear toward the room beyond the plywood. Perhaps because he sensed there was someone other than his mother there, he hurriedly took the lid off the water-jar and, purposely making a violent noise, poured in the water from the bucket. It was evident even to Nobuo's childlike understanding that Kiichi was trying to keep him from noticing anything.

Crossing Shōwa Bridge, Kiichi found a baby pigeon, covered with mud and struggling. Pigeons often made nests in the arches of the bridge's superstructure. It must have fallen from its nest and been dashed onto the bridge. The chick was already dying. But the two thought that it would recover if only they could return it to its mother. Looking up, they saw there was an adult pigeon just at the peak of the arch.

"If we don't hurry, it's gonna die," said Kiichi, but the peak was high, and the two did not have the courage to climb the arch.

At that moment, they saw the Toyoda brothers riding bicycles from downriver, coming this way. Nobuo hid the chick with his body, but the brothers quickly spotted it. Then they pressed near, demanding the chick. A pigeon they had kept had escaped and built a nest here, they said. That pigeon had laid the egg, so the chick was theirs.

Kiichi hugged the chick to his chest and tried to escape, but he was caught immediately. Cuffing Kiichi on the head, the brothers said,

"Your ma's a pan-pan girl, ain't she? It's sick havin' trash like you round the neighborhood."

Kiichi's eyes narrowed weirdly.

"Huh? The two of you got the same ugly mug, you the sick ones!"

The faces of the brothers swelled darkly. The brothers hit Kiichi with their fists. Even when

he fell, Kiichi hugged the baby pigeon firmly. One of them pulled Kiichi to a sitting position and yelled,

“You all get outta here! -- Filth!” and then kicked him in the stomach. He was an opponent Kiichi could not defeat with strength.

Kiichi, who had fallen back two or three steps, face twisted and nose bleeding, flung out his arm in front of the brothers. Then he crushed the chick in his hand. With a faint cry, the chick died.

“Here!” The brothers standing dumbfounded, Kiichi threw the chick at their crew-cut heads. The body of the chick hitting him squarely in the head, the older brother let out a yelp and ran off down-river, and a heartbeat later, the younger brother ran off in the opposite direction.

Nobuo picked up the body of the chick and cradled it in his palm. He leaned against the railing, intending to throw it in the river. At that moment, he saw the house-boat, shadowed by the houses on the bank so that only the mother’s room could be seen, ringed with heavy, oppressive foam and pushed into a corner of the river. The thin body of the mother in the moment she sat down wordlessly in front of the vanity, along with that mysterious smell, rose up in Nobuo’s mind.

Nobuo cried. Gazing fixedly into Kiichi’s bloody face, he cried and cried.

“Don’t cry. Okay, Nobu-chan? Don’t cry. Next time I’ll get ‘em for you, so don’t cry.”

The one who had been punched and kicked was Kiichi, so Nobuo did not know why he was crying. It was not that he was sad that Kiichi had been beaten and maligned, nor that Kiichi had killed the chick. An indefinable and yet inescapable, deep sadness ran through Nobuo.

Nobuo put the body of the chick in his pocket,

and, sensing Kiichi’s piercing gaze on his back, went home alone.

That night, when Nobuo had changed into nightclothes and had begun to read a comic leaning on the windowsill, Sadako’s scream was heard from downstairs.

“What’s the matter?”

“Ain’t nothin’ the matter with me!” Sadako came running up the stairs and held Nobuo’s trousers and the body of the chick in front of Nobuo’s face.

“What’re you thinkin’ of puttin’ this disgusting thing in your pants pocket? Thought I’d have a heart attack!”

Shimpei also grimaced and peered at the yellowish blob of meat that was beginning to smell.

“What is that?”

“A baby pigeon,” answered Nobuo in a low voice.

“A baby pigeon...?”

Disgustedly, Sadako picked up the body of the chick between finger and thumb and threw it into the river from the window.

“You ever do that again, you’re gonna get it. Dad, you give him a talkin’-to, too.” He brings home any and everything in his pockets, just like a beggar... mumbled Sadako as she went back down to the restaurant.

“Nobuo, if you put a chick or somethin’ in your pocket, it’ll die. You’re eight years old now, you understand that, don’t you?”

“I didn’t put a live chick in my pocket. It was dead, so I put it in my pocket.”

Shimpei peered into his son’s face.

“...Hmm, in your pocket, huh?”

Nobuo wondered what Kit-chan was doing. Among the many changes of Kiichi’s eyes – sometimes widening innocently, sometimes narrowed – Nobuo knew there were times when they were momentarily lit by a cold flame. As if his body were not under his own control, Nobuo twisted his head and searched for the house-boat.

The house-boat, enclosing beneath its yellow lamp Kiichi’s eyes, and the white profile of the reticent Ginko, and that smell of the mother that had feverishly enfolded the core of Nobuo’s heart, was washed up next to the shore of the black river.

The Tenjin Festival had come.

Nobuo was lying in the house-boat, watching the festival boats come down the Tosabori River.

He visited the house-boat almost every day now, but this was not in order to play with Kiichi or Ginko, but rather because he wanted to be near the mother with her pale, thin body sheened with sweat. Nobuo neither understood the true nature of the mysterious smell that tempted him with an invisible force, nor even noticed its effect on him. But the mother of the sister and brother had never called to Nobuo again.

Men with summer kimonos open to the waist, and women of the pleasure quarters, riding in one wooden boat after another, floated down the river and then went back up.

The wheeled shrine floats that sallied forth into the neighborhoods moved down the road along the riverbank, keeping pace with the boats’ movements.

“Yōi-ya-sa!” In unison with the chants from the wheeled floats, shouts went up from the boats and from the houses on the riverbanks. Mixed

with the coquettish cries of the women, vulgar shouts of drunken men echoed across the river’s face. The boats floated by one after the other, endlessly, beneath the skies of midsummer.

Lying on his stomach in the dim tatami room in the house-boat, viewing the dazzling scene outside, the wheeled floats and the groups of boats seemed like the sparkle of a distant dream.

“I wanna live in a regular house like you, Nobu-chan.” Since his head stuck over the gunwale, only Kiichi’s face and head shone whitely, making him look like a different person.

It had been less than a month since the family had moved here, but they had already received from the authorities an order to move. Nobuo could not know that Kiichi’s family had drifted up and down the river for years, never able to stay in the same place for two months at a time.

For some time, Kiichi had been ceaselessly playing with a marble on his palm. He was trying his best to imitate Shimpei’s magic trick. The marble rolled out of Kiichi’s hand and sank into the river.

“Nobu-chan, your dad’s callin’ you to come home,” called Ginko from the entrance of the boat.

Sadako doted on Ginko. The once-reticent Ginko had come to tell Sadako everything, and that day, too, she had gone alone to Nobuo’s house to play. Though she had never been asked to, she conscientiously helped to clean and straighten up the restaurant, and even helped with the laundry. Even late at night, Ginko often made no move to go home. Each time, Sadako went as far as the side of the Minato Bridge to see her off.

“Your mom was coughing a lot, and the doctor came.”

Sadako had had an asthma attack. She often took to her bed when the seasons changed, but this was the first time she had had an attack in the middle of summer.

“What happened?” called the mother from the next room. Nobuo started and pricked up his ears.

“She started coughing, and couldn’t breathe.”

“That can’t be good. Nobu-chan, you better go an’ check on her.”

“...Okay.”

“Has she had that before?”

“My mom has asthma.”

“That’s a terrible affliction.”

On his way out of the boat, Nobuo stopped, and called in a loud voice,

“Ma’am!” He did not really have anything to say to her.

“What?”

Nobuo had not thought what he would say next. He suddenly remembered how he had called to the man with the horse and wagon in the same way.

“Bye!”

“...Bye,” answered the mother in a low voice.

Kiichi went with Nobuo as far as the side of the bridge, and yelled,

“Let’s go to the festival! Let’s go to the festival!”

Many stalls would be set up in the shrine precincts. Shimpei was to take them to the Tenjin Shrine in Temma that night.

When Nobuo arrived home, Sadako was lying in

bed, still slightly coughing, but the attack appeared to have passed.

“This one was pretty bad.” For the first time, the family doctor recommended a change of climate.

“The air round here’s gonna get dirtier and dirtier, it’ll be worse and worse for your health.”

“But Dad can’t run the restaurant by himself. And the kid’s still small, you know.”

“Air quality makes all the difference for this illness. So my advice is to try movin’ to a place with cleaner air. You’ll wanna talk it over with your husband.”

Festival days were the busiest times for the restaurant, too. Young men in happi jackets filled the restaurant to overflowing, and stood in the street outside drinking ramune soda pop.

“Why don’t you have some shaved ice before you leave?” Shimpei invited the doctor as he was about to leave. The doctor spoke to Shimpei, too.

“She has more attacks every year, and each one’s worse than the last. There’s a good drug to stop an attack, but as it weakens the body... The best remedy’s to let her live where the air’s clean.”

Moving busily, Shimpei glanced at the doctor.

“...We’ll think it over.”

That day, the restaurant was closed shortly after noon.

Shimpei and Sadako talked together for a long time. From the window upstairs, the festival boats could be seen coming down the river, turning in the middle of the Aji River, and starting back upstream.

“We finally made somethin’ of this place, how

can we move?"

"But I been thinkin', this might be a good chance." For Shimpei, this was indeed a good opportunity to make the decision to go to Niigata.

"Land there is cheap, you know. If me and the other guy put our money together, we should have enough. You know that Chinese restaurant the Rising Flowers Pavilion over in Kawaguchi? The owner there's told me to let him know if I ever want to sell this place, told me he'd buy it right away."

"I told you many times, I'm against it. Rather than goin' through the sufferin's of startin' a business you never tried before, we're doin' all right doin' what we been doin', even if we can't be too extravagant. And how do you know the other guy ain't just after your money?"

Nobuo then learned for the first time that his father planned to start a company for repairing autos and rolling sheet metal.

"It's 'cause I thought the air in Niigata would be clean, not 'cause I wanna be extravagant. It just ain't possible to send you somewhere by yourself for a change of climate. So I just thought we - "

"You're lyin'! You're just usin' that as ammunition for your argument. You wanna go to Niigata, so you're usin' my illness as an excuse to go there." Sadako choked up on the last words. Turning her back on Shimpei, she began to cry. Her sobs mixed with the festival music that came floating on the river breeze.

"Idiot, I ain't tryin' to make a sick person cry."

There was a knock on the door of the restaurant, so Nobuo went downstairs. It was Ginko.

"Mom told me to come an' help..."

Shimpei called from upstairs.

"Thanks, you came to help, huh? I closed up for today, but come on up anyway."

Nobuo went out into the sunshine. Not only in the Tosabori River, but also in the adjacent Dōjima River, boats enjoying the festival followed one after another. On every boat, the deck was littered with the aftermath of a banquet. Once in a while the breeze would die down, and a wrinkle of light would race across the face of the water.

An especially gaudily decorated boat was about to pass under the Funatsu Bridge, so Nobuo ran out onto the bridge above it and waved. One of the passengers threw him a small watermelon. The watermelon skillfully arced over the railing, dropped once into Nobuo's hands, and rolled out of them. As he chased the watermelon rolling down the slope of Funatsu Bridge, he heard a voice.

"Hey, didja get it?"

Nobu ran to the other railing of the bridge, and, holding the watermelon up in both hands, yelled,

"Thanks! Thanks!"

"It ain't cracked?"

"Just a little."

"The ones that're cracked just a little are the most delicious. Just like this gal here." The man put his arm around a woman in a Japanese hairdo sitting next to him. The woman's coquettish laughter went on and on. In her powdered face, only her lips burned.

A shout went up. A boat flying the banner of a senior citizens' club was weaving first to the right, then to the left.

"The captain's three sheets t' th' wind!" The eyes of the passers-by were all on the boat.

"Sink it! Sink it!" yelled one of the old men.

“Sink it, sink it, sink the old bucket!”

With the watermelon under one arm, Nobuo ran home. The clinging voice of the old man dogged him even into the quiet interior of the restaurant.

Ginko, squatting in the recesses of the kitchen, raised her face in surprise.

“Whacha doin’?”

Ginko smiled in embarrassment. She then beckoned to Nobuo. The lid of the rice bin was open.

“Rice is warm,” she whispered, burying both hands in the rice.

“Even when it’s cold in the winter, rice is warm. Put your hands in too, Nobu-chan.”

Doing as he was told, Nobuo put his hands into the rice bin. They sank in up to the elbows. He did not think it was at all warm. His sweaty hands were in fact cooled by the rice grains.

“It’s cool...” Nobuo pulled out his hands. Both hands were white.

“It’s warm to me.” Ginko was motionless, both hands still buried in the rice.

“When you’re warmin’ your hands in a full rice bin – that’s the happiest time. ...That’s what my mom said.”

“...Oh?” Looking into the round eyes with creased eyelids, completely unlike her mother’s, Nobuo thought that Ginko was more beautiful than any of the girls living in the neighborhood. Nobuo sidled closer to Ginko. It seemed that a smell much like that of her mother might come wafting from Ginko’s body, too.

“... My feet are dirty again.”

The festival music of the wheeled floats echoed

in the distance.

I had intended to take you, but since Sadako’s not feeling well... said Shimpei. Nobuo and Kiichi had no choice but to go by themselves to the nearby Tenjin Shrine at Jōshō Bridge.

“Don’t stay out too late.” Shimpei put a few coins in the hands of Nobuo and Kiichi. Nobuo called up the stairs,

“Ginko-chan, ain’t you comin’?”

“No, I ain’t goin’,” came Ginko’s reply after a moment.

The two dashed down the twilight road.

Though it was “nearby,” from Nobuo’s house to Jōshō Bridge was almost 30 minutes’ walk. They walked upstream along the bank of the Dōjima River, and then crossed the Great Dōjima Bridge. As they walked north, the sound of the festival music grew louder.

They turned from the wide road into a street lined with houses like closed-up shops. Children unable to wait for sundown squatted in the street lighting fireworks. A happi-clad man reeking of alcohol swayed toward the shrine with a young child in the same happi on his shoulders. As he walked beside Kiichi after the man, listening to the suddenly undulating festival music, Nobuo suddenly felt forlorn.

“This is the first time I ever went out somewhere with money.”

Stopping from time to time, Kiichi opened his hand and counted the coins he had received from Shimpei. Nobuo put all of his money into Kiichi’s hand.

“If you put it together with mine, we can buy anything.”

“Yeah, maybe we can even buy one of them.” Both Nobuo and Kiichi wanted a toy rocket that you filled with gunpowder to launch. They had

been selling them at the fair at the Ebisu Shrine, so they would probably be for sale tonight, too.

It was not a huge festival like that of the Tenjin Shrine in Temma, but even so, roadside stalls jostled for space from the end of the shopping street to the road into the shrine. There were more and more people, and the smell of grilling dried squid and the stench of the carbide lamps that cast a white light over the rush mats of the stalls filled the street as it began to grow dark, gradually drawing Nobuo and Kiichi into the festival mood.

Kiichi put the coins in his pocket and grabbed Nobuo's hand.

"We can't get separated."

Threading their way through the crowds, the two walked around looking at each stall. In front of a flavored syrup stall, Kiichi asked,

"Wanna buy just one an' share it?" He moved on reluctantly at Nobuo's suggestion to wait until they had bought the rocket, but then, in front of a barbecued squid stall, wheedled in the same way. Every time they came to a stall selling food or drink, Kiichi pulled Nobuo's elbow and tried to entice him.

"Kit-chan, don'cha want that rocket?"

"I do want the rocket, but I wanna try all these different foods." Pouting, Kiichi scratched violently at a mosquito bite on his shin.

Before they knew it, the sky was completely dark, and lights had come on, both the paper lanterns strung along the shopping street, and the bare electric bulbs, beneath which the suddenly more numerous crowds swarmed and pushed.

Leaving behind Kiichi, who pretended to sulk and made no move to go on, Nobuo began walking toward the shrine precincts by himself.

Once he had started walking, the crowd pushed him along so that he could not stop. Kiichi's face receded and then disappeared from sight.

Nobuo hurriedly tried to reverse course. Cotton kimonos and fans of many colors, and the smells of sweat and makeup united into a great flow that pushed him back. After much trouble, he was able to push his way back to his original location, but there was no sign of Kiichi.

Nobuo jumped up and looked around. Evidently they had passed each other at some point: he caught glimpses of Kiichi's face, pushed by the crowd, at the entrance to the shrine.

"Kit-chan! Kit-chan!" Nobuo's voice was drowned out by the shouts of children and the festival music. Kiichi hurried forward, ever forward. He appeared to be looking for Nobuo in some consternation.

Elbowing his way through the legs of the adults, Nobuo ran desperately. He stepped on several people's feet, and was sometimes shouted at and shoved. He finally caught up with Kiichi in front of a wind-bell stall just outside the shrine precincts. The red and blue paper tails of the wind-bells began to shiver in unison, and they were enveloped in the cold sound of the wind-bells, that somehow seemed to pierce one's breast.

Nobuo grabbed Kiichi's shoulder. Kiichi was crying. As he cried, he howled something.

"Huh? What? What's the matter?" Nobuo could not hear well, so he put his ear to Kiichi's mouth.

"The money's gone. I dropped the money."

Innumerable shadows of the tails of wind-bells spilling from the wind-bell stall fell on Kiichi's twisted face.

Nobuo and Kiichi went again to the end of the shopping street and zig-zagged back and forth,

glowering at the ground. They returned to the front of the wind-bell stall, but had not found even one of the lost coins. There were holes in both pockets of Kiich's trousers.

No matter what Nobuo said, Kiichi stayed clammed up. Riding on the wave of people, the two were swept into the shrine precincts.

A shrine float was parked there, and inside of it several men were playing the festival accompaniment. The men, mesmerized by the persistent repetition of the same melody, squeezed out a sticky sweat on their bare torsos. The bare electric bulbs strung like beads on a string quivered around the shrine float.

Nobuo sat down on some stone steps and stared at a girl hesitating in front of him in a cotton summer kimono, apparently waiting for someone. Inside the revolving lantern the girl carried, the black silhouette of a roofed pleasure boat went round and round.

A dull concussion was heard, and at the same moment a smell of gunpowder smoke arose. A small plastic rocket fell in front of Nobuo and Kiichi. Farther into the shrine precincts, at a stall where children were especially numerous, toy rockets were lined up on a rush mat. Kiichi quickly picked up the rocket at their feet, and, pulling Nobuo by the hand, ran to the stall.

A man in a headband accepted the rocket from Kiichi's hands without rising from the rush mat, and said in a husky voice,

"San-kyū, san-kyū, thanks for your trouble."

Nobuo and Kiichi looked at each other and grinned.

"How much is it?"

"Just eighty yen."

They looked at each other again. They would have been able to buy two, and still had enough

left to eat grilled squid.

"Step right up, I'll demonstrate it one more time, so ev'ryone buy one!"

Shouting, Watch out! This is a rocket to the moon! the man lit the short fuse. Nobuo and Kiichi hurriedly jumped back two or three steps, and, gulping, stared at the fuse. With a great concussion, the rocket flew up diagonally, hit a gingko tree, and fell into the shrine's offertory box. The figure of the man chasing after it in alarm was greeted by the laughter of the crowd. Nobuo laughed, too. Laughing, he looked at Kiichi's face. Kiichi's eyes, looking for some reason in another direction, were narrowed.

"Damn! How'm I suppose to get it out of a place like that?" The man came running back, sat down cross-legged on the rush mat, and, as if to take it out on everyone else, shouted,

"C'mon, good-for-nothings! Can't even afford one or two of these little toys? If you just come to gawk, get the hell outta here!"

"Nobu-chan, let's go." Kiichi poked Nobuo in the shoulder and quickly slipped past the shrine float.

"Hurry, hurry!" yelled Kiichi, grinning. The waves of people, ever more numerous, formed a whirlpool at the entrance to the shrine.

When they had run down an alley to avoid the crowds, Kiichi lifted up his shirt. A toy rocket was stuck between his trousers and his body.

"Where'd you get that?"

"I took it when that guy went after the rocket. I'll give it to you."

Shocked, Nobuo stepped back. Nobuo found himself shouting at the triumphantly nodding Kiichi,

"You stole it? I don't want it! Only a thief would

do that!"

Kiichi looked wonderingly into Nobuo's face.

"You don't want it?"

"No."

To have effortlessly stolen the rocket from the offensively shouting man was in fact somewhat gratifying for Nobuo, too. But he was rebuking Kiichi with words that were the opposite of what he felt. Nobuo snatched the rocket from Kiichi's hands and flung it at his feet. Then he hurried back and pushed his way through the crowd. Kiichi picked up the rocket and chased after Nobuo, asking again,

"You really don't want it?"

Words strong enough to startle even himself were on Nobuo's lips.

"Thief! Thief! Thief!" Shouldering his way through the crowds, Nobuo walked in a temper. He heard Kiichi's grief-stricken voice behind him.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry! I won't steal no more. Nobu-chan, I'll never steal anything again. So don't say that. Don't say that."

Though Nobuo tried many times to shake him off, Kiichi, crying, clung to him and would not let go. Entangled together, the two gradually left the excitement of the festival behind.

The night was growing late.

On the bank of the Dōjima River, where there were only a few passers-by, only the branches of the willows swayed in the river breeze. The two plodded homeward along the bank. When the direction of the wind suddenly brought the sound of the festival music to them clearly, the two, as if by previous arrangement, would stop and silently peer into each other's faces.

When they had finally reached Minato Bridge,

fireworks rose in the night sky to the east. First several large rings blossomed, and then, when they thought that was all, red and blue weeping willows showered down with a shrieking sound.

Both Nobuo and Kiichi straddled the railing of Minato Bridge, gazing on and on at the fireworks. The river breeze was pleasant. The rising tide had passed its peak, and the swollen face of the river was shrinking at a rate too slow to be seen. Nobuo looked back and forth between the fireworks and the house-boat.

"I got a nest of crabs. It's my treasure. I'll show it just to you," whispered Kiichi in a hushed voice.

"A nest of crabs?"

"Yeah, I made it."

You don't go to that boat at night - Shimpei's words echoed in his mind, but they were drowned out by the temptation of wanting to see the crabs.

Nobuo and Kiichi descended the path, and, taking care that the plank did not creak, crept into the house-boat.

A white glow spread from the opposite bank, but it was mostly reflected and dispersed on the face of the water, so that inside the boat, there was only the occasional flicker of a splinter of light.

As his eyes grew used to the darkness, Nobuo noticed Ginko asleep in a corner of the room. In the depths of the darkness, for some reason only her hair dimly shone.

Both Nobuo and Kiichi were thirsty. They opened the water jar and drank from the ladle. The sound of their drinking was loud inside the boat. The sound of fireworks could also be heard faintly.

Next Kiichi opened the window facing the riverbank, leaned out over the gunwale, and

pulled up a pole that had been thrust into the shallows. Nobuo saw that it was an old bamboo broom with worn-down bristles.

“Watch this.” Kiichi shook the broom. Along with drops of water, several river crabs fell out.

“There’s still a lot more in here.” Something wet and hard stepped across the back of Nobuo’s hand and into the boat.

“Are these all crabs?”

“Yeah. I’ll give them all to you.”

Crawling across Nobuo’s feet, the crabs scattered across the tatami mats. The crabs could not be seen. Only the sound of their crawling across the tatami could be heard.

From the gunwale, Nobuo gazed again at the fireworks. Sweat seeped out on his chest and back. Kiichi’s eyes, glowing with light absorbed from across the river, were staring piercingly at Nobuo’s profile.

Countless crabs crawled out of the bamboo broom set on the gunwale, and soon they were crawling around the tatami-floored room. The sound of crabs crawling could be heard from everywhere in the boat. It came from beyond the plywood, too. It resembled the whistling of fireworks shooting up into the night sky, and also reminded one of the sound of someone weeping.

Nobuo crouched in the boat, listening intently to that mysterious sound. The sound of a putt-putt boat heading upriver roused Nobuo from his reverie.

“...I’m gonna go home,” he said, but Kiichi said,

“Don’t go, I’ll show you somethin’ cool.” Pressing Nobuo’s shoulder down, Kiichi rose.

“...Somethin’ cool? What?”

Pouring lamp oil into a large bowl, Kiichi put in

several crabs.

“These guys’ll drink ‘til they’re full of oil.”

“What’re you gonna do?”

“They can’t stand the pain, so they start blowin’ bubbles of oil,” said Kiichi in a hushed voice. He lined the crabs up on the gunwale, and lit them on fire. Several blobs of blue flame scattered across the gunwale.

Some of the crabs burned up without moving, while others crawled around shooting out flames. With an uncanny sound, the crabs’ bodies gave off tiny blue flames that emanated a horrible smell. When they were consumed, tiny sparks burst from within the crabs’ bodies. This resembled the tip of a sparkler fallen to the ground.

“Pretty, ain’t it?”

“...Yeah.”

Nobuo’s knees began to shake. Fear welled up from inside him.

Even with his childlike understanding, Nobuo was aware of Kiichi’s abnormality. In his eyes were the burning crabs. Shaking the bamboo broom, Kiichi picked up several more crabs and put them in the oil. Then, as if possessed, he set fire to them, one after another.

“Kit-chan, that’s enough! Hey, that’s enough.”

The flames scattered. Most fell into the river, but several climbed down into the room.

“Watch out! Kit-chan, you’re gonna set the whole place on fire!”

Burning crabs were crawling here and there in the small room, shedding tiny balls of fire behind them. Hands hanging limply at his sides, Kiichi was staring at the flames inside the room.

When Nobuo, trying to put out the flames, got down on hands and knees on the tatami, Ginko, who had been asleep, slowly sat up. Then, in no particular hurry, holding a leg of a burning crab between forefinger and thumb, she threw them into the river one by one.

A streak of flame ran down the gunwale. Nobuo reached out a hand and tried to brush it into the water. But the flame quickly crawled toward the hawser.

On all fours on the gunwale, Nobuo followed it. The moment he caught up to it, the crab fell off into the water. In the same position, he inadvertently looked in the window of the mother's room.

In the depths of the darkness was the mother's face. A human back covered in a pattern of mottled blue flames heaved above the mother. The vacant light from the opposite bank painted the entire room in stripes of light and shadow. Screwing up his eyes, Nobuo stared at the mother's face. The narrow eyes like threads were staring back at Nobuo without blinking. The mottled blue flames, letting out a faint groan, heaved more violently.

Goosebumps rose all over Nobuo's body. Backing down the gunwale, he returned. As soon as he stepped down into the sister's and brother's room, he burst loudly into tears. Looking for the figures of Ginko and Kiichi, he cried in a voice that reverberated up and down the riverbanks.

When he noticed the black outlines of the sister and brother standing stock-still in a corner of the room, gazing fixedly down on him, Nobuo, crying, felt for his shoes and put them on, tottered over the plank, and scabbled up the path. The fireworks still continued.

It was about 10 days after the Tenjin Festival that Shimpei decided that they would go to Niigata. A buyer had suddenly appeared who offered to buy the restaurant at a price twenty

percent above market price.

Sadako had continued to oppose the move until the end, but her frequent attacks of asthma and Shimpei's enthusiasm had eventually pushed her into agreement. The buyer's conditions were to vacate the restaurant and land no later than the middle of August.

"After all, he's a businessman, too. Got all sorts of plans, probably. It's just right for us, too. A new term will be starting, so it's a good time for Nobuo to transfer to a different school."

Amid the hurried preparations for the move, Shimpei, laughing cheerfully, would tell them of his plans for the new business, or of the scenery of the city of Niigata, or of the look of the drifted snow. Eventually, even Sadako, apparently having accepted her fate, began to respond to Shimpei's words.

"The air's clean there, not like round here. Just the thing for my asthma."

"That's right. A dusty place like this ain't fit for humans to live. When we get to Niigata, I'm really gonna work hard."

Nobuo had not seen Kiichi since the night of the Tenjin Festival. The sister and brother had not come to play, and neither had Nobuo gone to visit them. He spent his days playing alone in the precincts of the Ebisu Shrine, or looking vacantly at the riverbanks out the upstairs window. And he found himself waiting eagerly for the day when Kiichi would cross the bridge and head for his house.

On the day he was told they would be moving to Niigata, Nobuo approached the house-boat. The image of the mother's narrow eyes and the blue flames clustering above them was immediately reawakened within him, and he was unable to descend the path. Nobuo threw several pebbles at the roof of the boat. If Kiichi stuck his head out, Nobuo intended to ignore him, leaning on the railing of the bridge

nonchalantly. If he did so, maybe Kiichi would forgive him for having cried loudly that night.

But there was no reaction from within the house-boat. Nobuo shuffled across the bridge and returned home. To the eight-year-old Nobuo, strong emotions occasioned by things like parting from someone, or leaving the place one had been born and raised, were still something vague.

It was the day before they were finally to close the restaurant.

Shimpei and Sadako presented themselves properly to each regular customer who came in, and politely took their leave.

The men of the putt-putt boats were especially awkward at responding to such polite farewells. Instead, they bantered,

“No, no. We won’t let you go to Niigata.”

“Where we supposed to eat lunch startin’ tomorrow?”

“Whew! We won’t have to eat your bad-tasting udon anymore.”

They shyly finished slurping their noodles, and slunk sheepishly away.

One of them approached the strangely despondent Nobuo, patted him on the head, and said,

“Hey, squirt! Grow up big an’ strong, you hear?”

After the busy time at lunch, not a single customer was left in the restaurant.

“I remember when we built that shack on the riverbank right after the end of the war and opened this restaurant,” said Shimpei, lighting a cigarette cut in half.

“Time to say bye to this ol’ river, too.”

Sadako, who had been wiping a table and looking vacantly at the Tosabori River, stopped wiping and went to the window. Staring intently at the opposite bank, she said,

“Hey, Kit-chan’s boat’s goin’ off somewhere.”

“Huh?” Shimpei, too, came out of the kitchen and stood at the window. Nobuo pushed between his parents and looked at the river.

The sun of midsummer made the face of the river glisten. In its midst, a putt-putt boat slowly towed the house-boat away from the riverbank.

“Wonder where they’re goin’?” said Sadako with tears in her voice. Shimpei, with the cigarette still in his mouth, wordlessly directed his gaze toward the house-boat.

The house-boat, that had suddenly appeared one day before Nobuo, was now about to disappear from this riverbank again without telling whither it was bound.

“Nobu-chan, don’t you wanna go? Don’t you wanna say goodbye?” Sadako’s eyes were red. She nudged Nobuo’s back.

“You gonna part from him still mad? You’ll never see him again.”

“...I’m not mad at him.”

“Hurry an’ go. If you don’t hurry, you’ll miss the chance.”

Nobuo ran outside. Running, he suddenly began to feel pitiful and sad.

The house-boat was just crossing under Minato Bridge and starting upriver. Nobuo ran to the middle of Minato Bridge and called down to the boat directly below.

“Kit-chan!”

The small windows of the boat were tightly

closed.

“Kit-chan! Kit-chan!”

Hurrying up the road that ran along the bank, keeping pace with the boat, Nobuo called in a loud voice.

On the roof of the boat some discarded watermelon rinds reflected the sunlight. The hoarse sound of the putt-putt boat in front echoed from the riverbanks. The house-boat, its stern weaving helplessly to the left and to the right, coughed up the middle of the Tosabori River.

“Kit-chan! Kit-chan!”

Nobuo ran on and on, keeping pace with the boat. When there was a bridge, he ran ahead and waited. And then he yelled toward the boat as it passed beneath him.

“Kit-chan! Kit-chan! Kit-chan!”

No matter how loudly he called, the mother and children of the boat did not respond.

It was as the boat reached one of the bridges. He saw in the waves behind the boat something rounded and shining. Nobuo did not at first understand what it was. The shining thing slowly wheeled before Nobuo’s eyes.

“...It’s the monster.”

Rolling to and fro, the giant carp of that time swam up the river, as if in pursuit of the house-boat.

“The monster! Kit-chan, it’s the monster carp!” Nobuo yelled frantically. His canvas shoes sank in the soft asphalt, and he almost fell many times.

“The monster! The monster’s right behind you!”

Nobuo no longer cared about telling Kiichi that

they were moving to Niigata, nor about saying goodbye. Now there was just one thing that he had to tell Kiichi: that the monster carp was behind the boat.

“Kit-chan, Kit-chan, the monster’s there. Really!”

He was out of breath, and sweat ran into his eyes. Nobuo continued to run through the hot sunlight, half crying. He wanted more than anything to tell Kiichi of the appearance of the monster carp. For that purpose alone, Nobuo ran up the road along the riverbank, keeping pace with the house-boat. But the house-boat, its windows tightly closed, a silence as if it were abandoned drifting about it, headed up the middle of the dazzling river.

Before he knew it, the riverbanks were lined with concrete and brick buildings. It was, for Nobuo, a strange neighborhood that he had never set foot in.

“Kit-chan, the monster! The monster is really behind you!”

Nobuo yelled at the top of his lungs one last time, and at long last, gave up the chase.

Resting his hands on a hot railing, he watched as the house-boat was towed away, the monster carp staying immediately in its wake, swimming lazily up the muddy river.

Andrew Murakami-Smith

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Notes

¹ Kitao Ryōnosuke (1932/1989) *Kindai Osaka: Kinki keikan daisan-hen*, Sōgensha, p. 77.

² *Ibid.*, p. 81.