

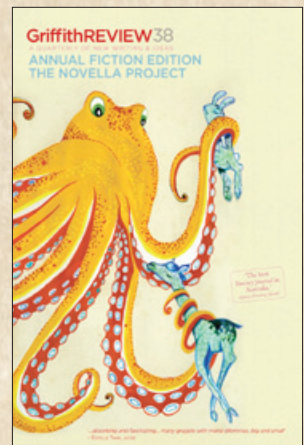
GriffithREVIEW

— S E L E C T I O N S —

An end to hope

Ed Wright

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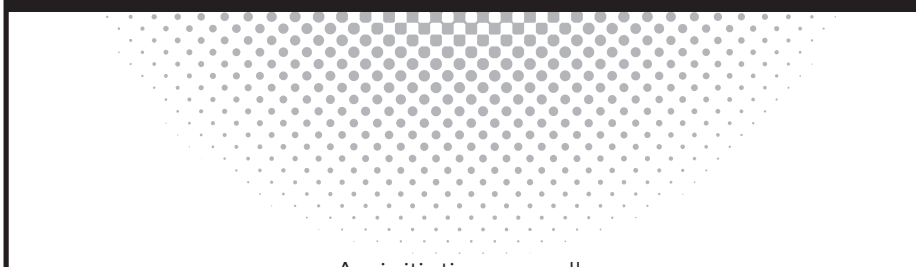


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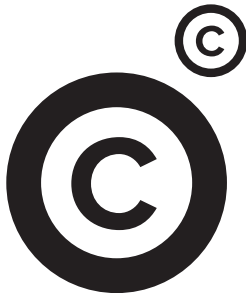


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FICTION

An end to hope

Ed Wright

1

A MOMENT'S HESITATION was all it took. She stood there trembling on the tree. Noose around her neck. Waiting for the final count that would take her to oblivion. Her arms were chicken skin, her face was as white as a geisha; only her eyes told the story – a terrific one – between loyalty and life. Watching her, all the hope flew right out of my heart.

I had been a long time in this village, in a valley in the mountains of western Honshu. Once upon a time, I was fifteen, mostly ignorant, mostly happy. I lived with my parents and two older brothers. Our lives were ruled by the seasons. In summer we harvested the rice. Autumn was for persimmons, pickling vegetables and hunting for mushrooms in the forest. Sometimes there was so much snow in winter we went in and out of the house from the second floor. In spring, the snow melted and the rivers were busy. Once the snow melted my father planted his rice. It was hard work, but a peaceful life. There was one road into our village. One school. Two shops. Three bars.

For a young girl there was plenty of time for dreaming. I dreamed when walking my dog through the forest during the daytime. I dreamed with my head down on my desk at school. I dreamed my way through cold winters with my family at the *kotatsu*, with my friends at their *kotatsus*, huddled under

my futon alone in the cold nights. My dreams contained mountains of possibility. I dreamed with a pure heart. The affairs of the world did not concern me. Until the war.

At first, it was so exciting. A great adventure. The men looked so handsome in their uniforms as they left the village. We were proud of them. Our nation was destined for greatness. School, which had taught us this, was cancelled. We helped our parents on the farm and sewed for the soldiers in the community hall. It wasn't long before the cup of glory began to tarnish. First, my eldest brother, Ichiro. Dead. His ship a mess of fire in the Pacific, a farmer lost at sea. Such a gentle man. Quiet, like a tree. Sinking. I don't know why he joined the navy. He could hardly swim. Who would have thought the Emperor's boats could be so vulnerable? If Ichiro had stayed like eldest sons are supposed to, he could have prevented my calamity. I imagine his body eaten by fish. Silver flashes of cold-eyed viciousness picking him to the bones. I wonder where he is now. Wrestling with giant squid in the lightlessness of the ocean's valleys? Who knows? Perhaps he made the warm forever. I can't feel his ghost at all. Then my second brother, Tetsuo. Dead. In the tropical jungle. An officer and an extremist. Always very angry. Always in the middle – squeezed for authority and affection. I wasn't so sad for him. He was a bully. But still my blood, a loss; he might have changed. Tetsuo was brave. He died charging an enemy machine gun nest screaming '*Banzai*' with furious determination on his face. It took more bullets to bring him down than is human; and he just managed to land his bayonet in the neck of the enemy before he stumbled forward to his death. Or perhaps it was mosquito fever. The bite of one tiny insect, a female. That would have enraged him. Or perhaps he cut himself open like an old samurai to avoid the dishonour of capture. Steaming guts spilling into the steaming jungle and carried away by ants. Who knows? We only knew that the government wrote to tell us he was dead. Unbelievable. I can almost feel Tetsuo's ghost at the fringes of my sense. His war never finishes. He roams the jungle, indulging his mad obsessions, spooking the monkeys, hunting the chance to escape. Then my sweetheart, Yukio. Dead. My heart felt like winter in spring. His plane was a great ball of exploding gasoline that touched the heavens. His spirit was distilled into a white light that continues to sharpen the big sky over Guam. One day, my darling, we will make a beautiful rainbow.

He was Tetsuo's friend, then Tetsuo fell in love with hatred. Then Yukio fell in love with me. And Tetsuo hated even more. Yukio was smart and gentle, the youngest son of rice farmers, destined to make his own way in the world. In the normal course of things we would have married. He was going to be a science teacher. We went for secret walks in the forest and he impressed me by naming all the trees and flowers. He already knew so much. I can only wonder what he might have known if he'd gone to university instead of the war and had the chance to become a man. When my brothers died, I dreamed that when we married Yukio would take my name and the burden of farming off the shoulders of my parents. But I never got to tell him. I cried two rainy seasons and a river when I heard the news. The war was more than three years old and I was the only person remaining to help my parents leave the world and look after the ancestors' graves.

Of all the village boys my age only the retard Gotaro remained. Potato-headed, shark-skinned and stupid. Even the army didn't want him. More likely to kill his comrades than the enemy through clumsiness, I suppose. All the boys in the village picked on him and he was mean because of it. But while most of the boys I knew spent the war dying, Gotaro got fat. The skin beneath his *yukata* wobbled like fresh-cut tofu on a plate. There were hairs on his chest too. Rumour was his mother had slept with a monkey.

Gotaro had the see-through slyness of nature's disadvantaged. He wasn't even the worst in school, but he looked the stupidest. And that was enough. He heard it so often he acted like he believed it himself. But some animal ambition remained. An instinct for weakness in others, girls and younger children mainly, in the hope of climbing another rung up the ladder. The war was working in his favour, too. Yukio once taught me all about evolution. Of how life was always trying to improve itself. Yet Gotaro was living and my brothers and Yukio were dead. Evolution cannot be trusted.

Gotaro had a thing for me. The way he looked at me, as if he hated me and desired me all at once. His leer peeled my clothes off. If there was no one around he tried to paw my breasts, pinch my hips, squeeze me up against a wall and rub his thing against me. More than once I had been trapped in a corner while he slobbered over my face. Disgusting. My brothers and Yukio defended me. Just looking at me could earn Gotaro a beating, especially if

Yukio saw. But now they were gone, I couldn't frighten him with talk of being kicked to the ground and pissed on when they got back. It was more from fear of Gotaro than of boars and bears that I took a big stick with me whenever I went walking in the forest. I'd heard his clumsy steps behind me, felt his beady fat sunken eyes stalking me from behind the tree trunks. I was the prettiest girl in the village. I wasn't going to become his prey.

In the last year of the war, the sky to the east was often smoke and orange from the fires in the cities caused by the enemy planes. Other people's relatives came from the city to seek refuge. They brought with them terrible stories of whole districts and their inhabitants disappearing as the flames leapt from house to house, gorging on the timber and *tatami*, sucking all the oxygen out of the air. No one who got caught in one of those infernos had a chance.

Our village wasn't big enough to qualify as an enemy target. The planes that passed over us were mostly on the way home from the terrible things already done somewhere else. With their empty loads, they were usually too high and our village too deep in the valley for us to even shoot at them. On some days, except for the lack of young men, it was possible to imagine that the war wasn't happening at all.

Our rice was commandeered by the army, but our village had a long history of having its rice commandeered. As far back as when the Emperor was in Nara, *daimyos* and other samurai lords have been taking our rice to feed their armies. But unlike many people in the cities we weren't starving. There was our private vegetable patch with its radishes, yams and cabbages; the fruit trees with their nashi pears, persimmons and watermelon; the forest with its bamboo shoots and mushrooms; the sweet tasting river fish we cooked on skewers over coals; wild birds, deer and pigs. Our three chickens gave us eggs. We were luckier than some of our neighbours as none of my father's sisters or their families returned to us during the war. Once father caught two of the Kurihara cousins trying to steal some of our radishes. They'd come back from Okayama. There were almost twenty of them on the farm where before there had been six. Although he felt sorry for them, he had to beat them fiercely, or else they would have come again. It was strange for a family of rice growers not to be eating rice everyday. But we were used to mixing it with barley in the bad years anyway. We accepted our duty towards the nation and endured.

When my darling Yukio died, though, I lost faith in the nation. What is a nation anyway – a dream with borders – a bad dream with borders and death beyond them? Who cares about the Emperor, I thought, shocking myself in the process, scared that my heresy might bring an earthquake down on all of us.

I was right, wasn't I? After the war, the emperor went public. And who was he? A god? No, a silly old man wearing glasses. We should have known. There are gods in everything, in the stones, the trees and streams, a thousand gods in every grain of rice. But they aren't so stupid as to invite such terrible destruction of the land. No, the Emperor had to be a man.

Being right, unfortunately, is not the beginning of fairness. The earthquake never happened; the snow never came rolling down the mountain to bury us. But my punishment was incomplete. If losing my love and my brothers in a stupid war wasn't cruel enough, things were about to get worse.

2

THE FIRST INKLING of my punishment was the strange behaviour of my parents. Conversations stopped when I entered the house. Trails of argument halted on my arrival. More than once I caught mother looking at me sideways as if she were weighing up things on her moral abacus.

'What is it?' I asked, but she tightened her mouth and shook her head. I knew that she was worried. I wondered if they were planning a new brother. But surely they were too old. Perhaps it was just her grief, I reasoned, a mother seeing her dead sons reflected in the features of her one remaining child and wanting to protect me from the futility she felt. How hard it must have been to have all the love and drudgery of raising children wasted by things that didn't belong to her world. Perhaps she even wished she'd begged them to run away, to hide in the mountains until the folly of Burma, Guam, New Guinea came to an end. No mother would have shamed her sons by doing that. But I couldn't help wondering what it was that mother was hiding from me behind those sideways glances.

This strange behaviour lasted several months. And it wasn't mother, but my classmate, Kazue Sato, who eventually spilled the beans. I was minding

my own business one morning, heading to the community hall to help with the sewing for the soldiers, when she ran up and bumped me with her fat clumsy hip. I turned around to tell her off, but she was already singing – in that nasty little squirrely voice of hers – a vile little taunt, ‘Tomoko and Gotaro, Tomoko and Gotaro, Tomoko and Gotaro...’ as if it was the chorus of some evil nursery rhyme.

I was so angry I put my foot out in front of her and pushed her over it. She fell and burst into tears. I bent down to help her up. She’d grazed her knees. ‘What are you talking about?’ I hissed.

‘Why should I tell you?’

‘Because if you don’t you are dead.’ I rested my knee in the small of her back. ‘Mother told me...’ I lifted my knee. She started to get up, ‘...that your parents and his parents have been talking about getting you married.’

‘That’s a lie, your mother is a gossiping busybody,’ I said, borrowing a phrase mother used to refer to Mrs Sato. ‘There’s no way they’d do that.’

But to be honest I wasn’t so sure. A sick feeling rushed into my stomach and I let Kazue go. She stood up, moved quickly out of my reach and stood there with her fat rough hands brushing the dirt from her *yukata*.

‘So I can tell mother that it’s true,’ she said and ran, singing again, ‘Tomoko and Gotaro, Tomoko and Gotaro, it’s true, it’s true, it’s true.’

Malicious glee glinted in her eyes where the tears had only just been and I wished I’d rubbed her face into the dirt some more.

I was dumbfounded by this taunting. Surely she was lying. Why would my parents inflict this upon their only remaining child? They loved me. Their hearts grew at the sight of me. The long nights at the *kotatsu* with the charcoal warming our legs, eating *oden*, were peaceful. Father could make animals with the shadow of his hands upon the wall. Mother told stories. Sometimes we even sang. Old folk songs or *enka* that father brought home from the bar. When my brothers died, we sang, drawing closer to stop the emptiness from stealing our souls.

Surely she was lying. But my bones were telling me another story. The oldest story, the one where duty proves stronger than love. A story I knew already from the way the nation had taken Yukio and my brothers away. Suddenly, I felt cold. As if a light had blown out inside me. I began to

shiver. Tears queued up in my eyes. I sensed others around me waiting for my reaction, for the gossip. There will always be those who enjoy seeing a pretty girl come unstuck. I drew the memory of Yukio around myself for protection and turned my face to stone.

There was no way I could spend the day sewing under the eyes of all the women in the village – my mother, Mrs Sato and Gotaro's mother included. Kazue had told everyone with her evil song. I walked off as gracefully as I could manage, towards a place where it was safe to go and cry. Safe to think of the ways in which I might be able to escape my fate.

Past the Oda farm was a hill where I would go to be alone. No one else bothered going there. I had discovered it when my dog Shoga raced up there one day in hot pursuit of a monkey. I remembered the trees and rocks as I went, so I wouldn't get lost coming back. I had learned from harsh experience that the forest can grow strange very quickly. Every tree, every rock is different, but only if you are paying attention. An oak with a cut in its trunk, a maple with a low branch broken off, two stones on top of each other, left at the bamboo stand, across the creek, more stones. 'Shoga, come here. Right now. Stupid dog.' As usual, he ignored me. A beech wearing grandfather's face, fir with a bird's nest, more bamboo. 'Shoga!' Halfway up the hill was a big flat rock. From it I could see through the trees down to the village. But no one could see me. In front of it was the canopy of a giant beech. It became my special place, a place where I could be with my dreams. Things are clearer when you are above the world, not in it. This I know too well.

In summer, I used to lie on the rock, catching the cool breeze under my *yukata*, and dream. Yukio was the only person I shared my secret place with, in the same way he was the only person I told my dreams to. Further up the hill, hidden behind several big rocks, was a cave. There were bats in there; black, furry, evil as far as I was concerned. Stinky. I never went in. Yukio once did. He said it was as big as a house in there. But I still didn't want to go in.

From the very top of the hill, you could see down into the next valley and up to the big mountains in the east. It was much narrower than our valley, the sun never stayed there long and there were no villages or farms.

A river ran through the middle and a small road beside it. Otherwise just forest. A blank of dark green until autumn when the oaks, maples and beeches changed their colours. If snow came early, before the leaves dropped off, the landscape looked like a rich woman's wedding kimono – red, gold and green on white. In winter, it was like the valley of the dead, snow and the skeletons of trees, the evergreens carrying the burden of the hope for spring.

Tears spilled as I climbed. I wished Shoga was with me now. But last summer he had chased one too many *mamushi* and become another dead boy. My head was hot with Kazue Sato's outrageous taunt. I wished Yukio was with me. If Yukio was here this wouldn't even be happening. Instead of calming down like I usually did when walking, I felt myself coiling, getting angrier and angrier. There was no way I would marry Gotaro. What kind of a life would that be? Cooking and cleaning for the oaf then lying there as he took his pleasure out on me in bed. I'd heard all about what happened from the women in the bathhouse and I would rather die. I sat hunched on my rock. The chilly air stung my face. It was spring. The cherry blossoms had come and gone but the year remained a cold one. There would be no warmth in the mountains until after the plum rains. If only I were allowed to join the war, I'd have volunteered as a kamikaze pilot.

When I got home it was just dark and my parents were in their usual positions, huddled over the *kotatsu*, their crop-picking backs leaning towards each other from either side of the table while a pot of *oden* simmered on the brazier in the middle. I kicked my shoes off at the *genkan* and tersely muttered my greeting while my parents abandoned whatever it was they were talking about to reply with theirs. The kerosene lantern hanging from the roof trembled with my hard-footed entry, casting evil shadows on the wall.

'Where have you been?' asked my mother. Her voice was a guilt-seeking maternal torpedo.

'Nowhere,' I said.

'You can't go nowhere,' my father said. He was a rice farmer and rice farmers believed in the practicalities.

'We were worried,' said my mother.

'In the forest.' I said, then all of a sudden my brain was dancing faster than I thought it knew how. 'I was running...running away from Gotaro...'

I hung my head in false contrition, but not so much that I couldn't see their shocked faces through my fringe.

'Why were you running from him?' asked my father.

'Because of the way he stares at me and because of what he says.'

'Like what?' asked my mother. I paused.

'He told me he was going to take my clothes off and put his thing down there,' I said, pointing towards my hips. 'And when I said never, he told me that no matter what I did, the day was coming soon.'

'That's just boys,' said my mother. 'They can't help it. It's in their nature.'

She looked at my father with affectionate contempt.

'Yukio never said it.' I remembered how I used to lean into him and he would put his arms around me and I would feel content, a warm liquid finding stable form in a strong container.

'Yukio is dead,' my mother said softly, wearily.

'They're all dead,' said my father. 'Your brothers. Yukio. The Oda's Daisuke and Koji. The Kurihara's Michiyo, all three Yamamotos. In the same stupid jungle as your brother. Over half of the boys in this village are dead. And if you ask me, no one from this village who went to the war will ever come back. Who knows?' he said bitterly. 'By the time this war is over, there'll be no young men left in Japan.'

'Which is why...' said my mother, and in that instant I saw their plan in all its horrid detail.

'No. I will not be married to that stupid ugly Gotaro.'

My parents looked alarmed. Perhaps this was not what mother was about to say. Still the cat was out of the bag.

'But...' she said.

'Believe me,' my father interrupted, 'I wish it were different too... We would have been very happy for you to marry Yukio. And I know to marry Gotaro is perhaps not what you would have hoped for. But now your brothers are dead, you have a duty. To your parents, your brothers and your ancestors. Even to yourself. And we have a duty to the ancestors to ensure you fulfil this. Our family has been farming rice in this village for over one thousand years. In that time some terrible things have happened and sacrifices have been made. We are too old now to replace your brothers and you are our

only child left. Without you, without you staying in the village, hundreds of ancestors will have no one to look after their graves. Our entire history will be dishonoured. And who'll be there after we are gone to help guide your poor brothers' spirits home?'

'But he's ugly and creepy,' I protested.

'That's only because of the way he has been treated,' said my father. 'His father promises me he is a more than competent farmer and will be able to provide for you and your children, especially now there will be two farms in the family.'

'You will be one of the wealthiest families in the village,' chimed in my mother, who'd never had the money for luxuries.

What did I care about the luxuries when I had already known love? The walls of my brain started shrinking and my body felt as though it was being crushed. I doubled over on the *tatami*, my heart beating madly, my lungs struggled in big heaves for air that already stank of kerosene. I thought I was going to die. I wanted to. My parents looked on helplessly. I began to cry. That night while my father snored on the other side of the house, I dreamed of Gotaro travelling up the skin of my inner thighs. Like a centipede.

3

IN THE COLD light of dawn, I imagined how their sordid plan might have come about. Father, Gotaro's father, both drunk in some bar after selling vegetables in the neighbouring town. Father on one of his rants about the death of everyone young. Letting out some of the grief jammed up inside him. Not only have I lost two sons but by the end of the war there'll be no one left to marry my daughter. Big sad swig of sake. Gotaro's father and the Mama-san nod in sympathy. They've heard it all before. Not so much of a conversation as a ritual. The mama-san refills their cups. Gotaro's father hopes father isn't about to launch into a diatribe against the war and the idiots running it. There's a well-dressed man flirting with the mama-san's pretty daughter at the other end of the bar and you can never be sure who's listening. Gotaro's father nods in sympathy, secretly willing my father to be quiet, then all of a sudden a lightbulb goes bing inside his brain. He can't understand what

my father is going through. Gotaro is his only child. Not the highest quality perhaps, but it was a difficult birth and it's probably just a generational blip. Besides it takes patience and solidity to be a successful rice farmer. Brilliance is over-rated. He likes father, he likes his land, but even more he likes the look of me.

When father pauses in his monologue to light a cigarette, Gotaro's father acts on his sudden inspiration. He begins with an observation of the need to rebuild the human stock of the village, slips in the admission that Gotaro might not be the greatest, then begins to make his case. His son is solid, a hard worker. He knows how to handle a hoe. Not the brightest perhaps, then again brains are likely to get you into trouble. The smart ones all want to head for the city. Crazy when you consider the deep satisfaction that comes from farming rice. Especially if your family has one of the best farms in the village.

And father, who has been selling vegetables on a slim margin, has a vision of the next generation in terms of the number of fields it owns. In a moment of drunken enthusiasm he falls into a trap he will later regret. When Gotaro's father suggests the marriage and my father drunkenly gives his assent, Gotaro's father orders top shelf sake to seal the deal and the two men spend all their market money, much to the mama-san's delight, celebrating the engagement of their children. Gotaro's father greets him the next day in the fields with a happy recapitulation of the event, and unless father wants to disgrace himself, there's little he can do but nod, concealing his regret in grimaces he attributes to his hangover.

That's how it happened. Or something like that. Who really knows what goes on in the minds of men?

The morning after my future arrived to taunt me, I woke up feeling tarnished, as if the deed was already done. My parents were in the fields. I had miso soup and pickled vegetables for breakfast then set off in search of the clear air of my mountain to think.

I left the village by the back route so I wouldn't see my parents and walked through the forest and up my hill, striding hard as if footsteps could transfer some of my burden back to the earth. The melting of the snow had been followed by constant rain and the paths that wound crookedly through

the forest in the hope of confounding its ghosts had turned to mud. I stomped through the slush with my angry feet and kept walking until I reached my rock. I saw myself in the dried persimmon I took out of my pocket to eat. A wrinkled spirit with the life about to be sucked out of me. How quickly things can change.

I sat there looking down at the village thinking about how I could avoid becoming married to Gotaro. My thoughts were like overcooked *udon* gone soggy in a soup of self-pity. I thought about climbing one of the trees and hanging myself with the *obi* of my *yukata*. It was probably the logical thing to do. Only it didn't solve the problem of my duty. If I died, there would be no one to look after the graves. In the wind through the trees, I thought I could hear them whispering, the ancestors pleading with me to make sure there would be someone to clean their graves, to collect their souls from the cemetery during *Obon* and bring them back home.

My uneasy thoughts made it impossible to sit still, so I walked towards the top of the hill. I wanted to look down into the next valley where no one lived. Perhaps I could become a female *yamabushi*, a wild woman hiding in the mountains, surviving on mushrooms, bamboo shoots and mountain potatoes. A couple of valleys away was a cave famous for housing hermit monks as they attempted to overcome their earthly concerns, and I wondered whether I might be able to do the same. Then when my parents died, I could sneak back to the farm, an undesirable old *obachan*, and tend their graves.

As I was walking, a strange feeling came over me. A sixth sense that I was not alone. Was I being watched? Gotaro, I thought. That fat ugly creep! He's stalking me again. In my private place. If I had to marry him, I would make him suffer for it. I readied my stick to give him a beating. I heard a moan. Once I caught him masturbating. He was making a similar sound. His face was red and squashed with effort. One hand was pressed high onto a tree trunk for support, the other trembled feverishly over his thing until a crumpling moment came. He took a few deep breaths, wiped the sap off his hand onto the tree, tied up his trousers and walked off.

I looked around but couldn't see him. Perhaps it was just a monkey. Not that you could tell the difference. I walked on. There was the moan again.

Must be a monkey, I told myself. I looked up into the trees to see if I could spot it.

Hanging in the branches of a beech tree was a parachute. It was torn and the silk hung from the branches like a giant ripped underskirt. I heard another moan. Pain, not pleasure. I hid behind a tree and listened. I heard it again. The sound was coming from my left. I snuck up tree by tree, freezing every time a leaf scrunched under my feet.

At first I thought he was a ghost. I had never seen a *gaijin* before. His face was as white as a peeled radish. His hair was the dirty blond colour of burdock root. His eyes were like the sky once the mist has lifted. His body big. Like a bear. He was wearing a brown leather jacket. There was almost enough room between its shoulders to fit two Yukios. He tried to stand up, he gasped in pain, he went back down, his hands around his ankle, and then I knew, not a ghost, a man. The enemy.

I readied myself with my stick to charge and stab at the heart of this man whose army had killed my darling, my brothers, and by doing so had given hope to the clumsy paws of Gotaro. But something stopped me. Fear. Fear and something else. I stayed back as he tried to stand again. His arms were muscular, his torso thick. His legs were like small trees, but he couldn't stand up. He was like an animal caught in a trap. It was something we shared. I could smell his fear. The effort, then the frustration, then the capitulation, then the willpower that made him try again. The idea of killing him to avenge my dead loves faded.

I stayed behind a tree watching as he moaned and groaned, stuck, preyed upon by fate. At times, he abandoned the struggle. His eyes closed and his head fell sideways onto his shoulder. But never for long. After a burst of five or six times trying to stand and failing he stopped. He shook his shoulders to slip off the straps of the bag on his back. He brought it round onto his lap and rummaged through it, pulled out a brown bar and ate. Then he reached inside and pulled out another small bag. In it was a bandage which he wrapped around his ankle. Clumsily. He ate the last of his food. With great effort, he stood successfully. At which point I ran. Down the mountain and back into the village, fear and excitement pulsing through my legs.

4

I SHOULD HAVE known to leave him there. Told father. He'd been looking for the enemy since the death of Ichiro, for the chance to avenge the extinction of his greatest hopes. But desperate hearts will look for hope in the most unusual faces. Even Lord Buddha, when he said goodbye to his family, knew that freedom began with a betrayal. That night I dreamed I was lying with Yukio in a cloud with lining softer than the futons of Kyoto's most expensive inns. The next morning was cold with leaden skies. Usually my parents expected me to help them in the fields. But they felt bad about my engagement, and because they didn't know how to soften the blow, they were leaving me alone. I ignored mother when she softly called my name through the sliding screen that separated my sleeping area from the living room. I listened to them as they went about their breakfast, hoping to hear something that would let me off the hook, and when I didn't, I waited until they left the house before I dragged myself from the futon. Mother had left me a special breakfast of *onigiri*, rice balls spiced with pickled plum, as well as mountain potatoes and bamboo shoots. The war had made rice like this a luxury. It was a sign of her guilt, an apology of sorts, but no encouragement of hope for a change of mind. I ate half of it, wrapped the other half up in a bandanna and headed up the hill, my curiosity the only thing strong enough to counter my despair, to see if the enemy was still there.

He was lying on the ground. Not dead. Sleeping. His chest was rising and falling. It was raining softly. I moved closer. I tied the food in the bandanna to the end of my anti-Gotaro stick. Poked him then flinched as he sat bolt upright. His eyes were unfocused. He looked so defenceless I might have killed him then and there. But I didn't. His blue eyes turned to meet mine. I had never seen anything like them. He said something. It was Chinese to me. I just stared. I pushed the bandanna along the ground toward him. His big fingers took a hold of it and fumbled as they untied it from the stick. I pulled the stick back as quickly as I could. Once he saw there was food inside, he looked at me warily then smiled, fear in search of an ally, by which time I had regained enough composure to run.

That night as silence descended on our evening meal, I considered reporting the enemy to my father, but didn't. For the next three days, I lied. I told my parents I was going to collect wild vegetables. Instead I stole food from our farm and took it to the enemy, then stared at him until my courage deserted me and I ran.

He became my hope, a living symbol of the chance to act outside the slim destiny that had been decided for me. Although he was the enemy, big, strange and capable only of speaking gibberish like a monkey, he was also a young man, a soldier like my brothers and Yukio, a pawn of the war. My brothers and lover might be gone, but there were other brave young men who needed to be saved. Even this enemy. As a victim of the schemes of greedy old men, he belonged to them, and to me, not to Gotaro, his father and the Emperor.

I began to know the enemy's eyes, to discern fear from pain, gratitude from helplessness. As our routine became more comfortable, I began to sense his will. I became more careless. I stopped pushing the food at him on a stick and began to unwrap the bandanna for him. It reminded me of the secret picnics I sometimes had with Yukio. I brought him some chopsticks, but he was clumsy, as if his hands really were an animal's paws. I was only a farm girl, close to the earth and far away from the refinements of the city. But starting with the chopsticks I began to teach him the basic skills of civilisation. The urge to look after him grew in me and made me feel stronger than I was. Feelings began to fuse.

5

AFTER FOUR DAYS in a row of running up the mountain, my visits came to a halt. Father needed me in the fields. I toiled with my parents from dawn to dusk, preparing the fields to sow the rice, like my brothers had before me. Father wasn't as strong as he once was. More than once, mother looked at me, then at him, his body bent over in the fields, as if to say this is why we need your sacrifice. One evening I told mother I could understand, and would be happy to do so, if it was anyone but Gotaro. There was sadness in her eyes. She had been happy with her parents' choice of husband. Her young woman's

dreams of running away to the city were just that. She was glad, she said, that she had only moved from village to neighbouring village. There were too many chances for things to go wrong if you went to the city. She couldn't say it, but she knew she had let me down.

With the rice planted, the following morning I returned up the mountain. The plum rains had come and the enemy was weak and shivering. It had been raining all night and I brought him food for several days. He had crawled under a big tree, but the air was cool and wet and it would remain like that for some weeks. I decided to move him to Yukio's cave. At first he was reluctant. He seemed annoyed at me. I tugged on his sleeve and pointed to the rain falling out of the sky and shivered with my shoulders. He nodded. With a stick, I drew a picture of a cave in the ground. I pointed up the hill. He pointed at his ankle, made the two-fingered gesture for walking then bent his wrist sideways to suggest falling over. Once Tetsuo fell while hunting boar in the forest and badly sprained his ankle. His friend Daisuke (dead in the frozen wastelands of Manchuria) found a flat stick and used a bandage to strap it along the length of his lower leg. It was like having a temporary outside bone. I thought the same thing might help the enemy walk. I found a flat stick long enough to reach his knee. And another he could use for a walking stick. I showed him using my leg what I was thinking of doing. He nodded and stretched his leg out along the ground. I squatted down, removed the bandage from his leg, wedged one end of the stick into his boot, and then began to wrap the bandage around them both. I touched his skin for the first time. It was cool and clammy and gave me an electric shock. I helped the enemy to stand and he put his arm around me for support. I tried to ignore the heavy, clumsy warmth of him as we hobbled step-by-step up the hill towards the cave. I tried to ignore the part of me that enjoyed being squashed.

The entrance to the cave was about as high as my hips and wide enough so that the enemy could easily crawl in. Bats squeaked in protest as we invaded their space and the air was foul with their stench. Once we were inside, the cave opened up considerably. Yukio had been right. There was easily room to stand. The enemy pulled out a cigarette lighter whose flame just found the cave's sides, but wasn't strong enough to show its depth. I left him there and went back down the hill to collect his pack. I pulled on the strings hanging

from the parachute, worried that someone might find them, but they were too tangled in the tree.

When I returned, I saw how weak the enemy was. His injuries had worsened after days lying in the rain and mud. He was leaning against the cave wall and his head drooped as if it was aiming for the pillow of his chest. He didn't even startle when I came close. His breathing was rapid and shallow. I touched his hand ready to leap back at any moment. It was clammy. I touched his forehead. It was hot. Fever. All of a sudden I was scared he was going to die. Like every other soldier I knew.

I needed to start a fire. This time, at least, I had the chance to make a difference. I went back out and gathered a pile of leaves, some twigs and a few bigger pieces of wood that were lying at the base of some trees and had been protected from the rain.

I built the fire the way my brothers had taught me, leaves in the centre, kindling on top, logs at the ready. All I needed was his lighter. I shook his shoulder gently, but he didn't wake. I waited then tried again. Still he didn't wake. I tried again. Nothing but heavy breaths punctuated by shallow breaths, as if he was reliving something in his dreams. My nurse's face grew bold. I reached into his jacket pockets. No. I patted the outside of his trouser pockets. Cigarettes, but nothing to light them with. I reached beneath his jacket for the pockets on the front of his shirt. As I did one of his arms came up around me and drew me towards him so that my breasts were pressing against his chest. I felt his breath on my face, his heartbeat, soft and rapid. Mine was thumping. I let myself go limp. Then he let go, mumbled something. He was still asleep. One of my breasts had pressed against the lighter in his front shirt pocket. I took out the lighter, opened the lid and flicked the wheel inside as hard as I could. After a few times I got a flame and lit the fire. The wood was damp, and things were a bit smoky to begin, but once there was enough heat in the fire, it burned quite nicely. The enemy continued to sleep. I made a pillow from his bag and pushed him over so his head was resting on it. His fire shadow flickered on the cave wall and I sat there thinking of all the old ghost stories my grandfather used to tell me, about the hungry ghosts whose greed left them doomed to wander the earth with the pain of an empty belly or desperate thirst. I half-wondered when the enemy would cast off his disguise

and reveal himself for the demon he was. Outside it began to get dark. If I didn't go soon I wouldn't be able to find my way back. I went and gathered some more wood and stacked it by the fire so it would dry, then set off home while I could still read my way through the trees.

IT WAS ALMOST a week before I could visit the enemy again. The first of the season's vegetables were ready to be picked and once again my parents needed me in the fields. The timing was crucial. The year had been cold and the crop wasn't the best, but when you thought of all the people starving in the cities, of girls selling their bodies for less than a bowl of rice, even a stunted radish was a sign of good fortune. All the time I was doing my duty digging radishes from the soil I worried if the enemy had enough food and wood, whether he might be dying, or even dead. When the vegetables had been harvested, I hid some in the bottom of a bamboo basket and told my parents I was going in search of bird eggs and more mountain vegetables. I left the village with the basket on my back and started to climb the hill. Each step up was taken in fear of what I would find. It had rained heavily overnight and the path was slushy and slippery, making it difficult to walk. I imagined the amount of wood it would take to keep the fire going until only his throat bone remained. By the end, despite the mud, I was almost running.

Smoke was coming from the cave. I was relieved. Inside, it was warm and the enemy was sitting up by the fire. He looked much better. The clamminess seemed to have gone from his skin and his cheeks had a faint pink tinge to them. I bowed to him and he nodded back. I went to replenish the wood. A large conifer had fallen not too far away and I dragged back as many bits as I could break off.

I took them back in to the cave and the enemy took control of the fire. He moved the wood around, putting some pieces on and propping up others so that the heat would dry them out. He tried to talk to me. I didn't understand a word and I told him so. He looked at me with incomprehension. We stayed like that for a while. He was thinking and so was I. Suddenly he turned his arms into aeroplane wings and I understood. Other planes, falling from the sky. Flying but not being able to steer. He was not alone in the plane. I shook my head. No I hadn't seen them. I felt him in the silence. He was sad. I

imagined he was worried about his friends. He had good reason. There were bears, snakes and wild boars in the forest, and the villages were full of the angry fathers of dead sons.

Later, we played shadow puppets on the wall. I taught him the words for rabbit, bird, pig and fish. He taught them back to me in his language, which was clumsy on my tongue. His eyes, I noticed, were beginning to see me as a woman. And I began to see myself as a woman in their reflection.

The next day he seemed even better. When I got there he was standing, leaning against the cave wall with his broken foot set gingerly onto the ground. A part of me wasn't thrilled with this new independence. Today he could stand. Soon he would be able to walk again. Then he would be gone. Like the others. That night I woke up blushing from a dream. Yukio was in it but he was lost in a thick fog and the features that met my passion were blurred.

My parents were being gentle with their disappointed daughter, but there was a limit. In farming life there is almost always something to be done. 'Your poor father is so tired,' said mother. Her face looked weary, too. Lined with the wrinkles of all her years in the fields and the loss of her two sons. Knowing nothing else. I noticed how her hair was greying like father's already had. I knew there was no malice in what they had decided for me. If they expected me to fulfil my duty, it was only because they had never questioned theirs.

Fortunately, my father was very fond of mountain vegetables. But it wasn't an excuse I could use everyday. Once mother asked where I was going and I tried a different answer. 'To visit Yukio.' I could sense her disapproval. 'The past is insoluble,' she said. I hoped she wasn't reading my mind. Father kept his eyes focused on his breakfast and his mind on the growing of rice. I remained silent until they began to talk between them of what would be at the market that week, of the day's work that lay ahead.

They were doing all they could not to upset me. I couldn't be sure, though, how long this would last. In our village marriages normally waited until autumn when the crops had been harvested, the sake had been made and there was enough food and drink to put on a decent feast. But against the backdrop of the war and with all the weddings that had never happened,

a big celebration might seem inconsiderate. Even if Gotaro's parents did feel like celebrating the unlikely marriage of their second-rate son to a bride who was not only pretty but came with her own land.

I had often fantasised about Yukio entering me on our wedding night, of him unwrapping my kimono and putting his hands all over me. It was something I feared and anticipated in equal measure. Sometimes just the thought of it made me tingle. Others, all I could think of was my insides protesting at the pain and blood. But Gotaro! I couldn't even let myself imagine it. Yukio and I had alternated between lust and purity without ever crossing the line. My role in this dance of ours that had thrilled me with anticipation had been to cool his ardour without turning his impatience into anger. If I wanted to be kissed, all I had to do was tease him. When it got too much for him, when he couldn't bear it any longer, I would sometimes relieve him, the way he taught me, with my hand. Two nights before he headed off to the war, I offered myself to him fully. I wanted to bind our souls so he would have some solace in the loneliness of foreign lands. We were going to marry anyway, so what was the point in waiting. Yukio didn't agree. 'What if something happens to me and you want to marry someone else?'

'Don't think like that,' I said, tears forming in the corners of my eyes. The moment passed. Two days later I bowed to him as he left the village, looking smart in his new uniform, to help the Emperor win the war. He bowed back, his eyes were cagey but glistening, with pride, fear and excitement. The sadness of our parting would visit him later. Or this is what I hoped.

When I heard that he had died, the fantasy I often carried with me into sleep, of our naked bodies wrapped around each other with his thing inside me, became an empty one, a mere nostalgia for something that never happened. This failure was in my head again that morning when I woke. I thought that if Yukio and I had done it then it could have been ammunition against Gotaro. Perhaps I could have fired up his pride against me by boasting about how we'd done it. What if I violated myself with a radish, I wondered. Would that make me damaged goods?

Resentment of my parents' decision bounced around inside me until, even though it was pouring, I had to leave the house. I packed the enemy some

lunch and some of my father's *sake* to warm him and set off towards the cave. As I climbed, steam rose off me and into the rain. My blood was boiling. My angry feet punished the piles of leaves waiting to be broken down into dirt.

It was a day of stupid thoughts in a time defined by them. After reaching the cave, I sat down by the fire and poured the enemy a cup of sake while I prepared the food. He looked at me quizzically, nodded at the cup, then at me, until I understood he wanted me to drink as well. Perhaps he wanted to be sure I wasn't trying to poison him. I'd never really drunk sake before, but I took the cup and drank. I felt a hot flush rise up in me from my stomach and it was all I could do not to cough. I passed the cup to him and he drank. He handed it back to me when it was empty. I poured him another. He pointed to me. I drank again, refilled then passed it back. My cheeks began to flush and I felt a pleasant buzzing in my brain. I poured again. He drank then I drank then he drank then I drank then he drank then I drank then he drank. My head was spinning. I felt hot. I felt as if something inside me was struggling to escape. My hand trembled as I poured the next cup and the air grew dense. Drops of sake spilled to the ground. The enemy's hand came up to help me steady the bottle and we touched. He looked at me. I was paralysed by fear. Lost in sake, the subtle webs between my inner self and the world were dissolving. The enemy took the bottle from me and set it down on the ground. Those blue eyes of his. I looked into them and lost myself again; in their sky, free and full of hope. Images flashed through me of birds and aeroplanes, Yukio. Elsewhere, a small earthquake was happening. My stomach churned. My hand trembled. The enemy took hold of it and drew me towards him until I over-balanced and collapsed into his chest. And that was that. He stroked my head and kissed my neck and I melted. He squeezed my breasts and sucked on my ears. He turned me on his lap to face him. Pushed my skirt up around my thighs.

I was miles away as he raised my hips and entered. Then brought back to earth by a sudden stab of pain. At first my skin resisted, then something gave way and I came down on him as if I was being slowly pierced by a spear. His hands were strong and lifted me up and down by my hips, slowly to begin with, then faster, the rhythm of his movement and the shifting pressure both creating and dulling the pain. I can't say I enjoyed it. But I didn't hate it. His

hands clenched my hips tightly, then I felt him tremor inside me. Warm juice spurted into me, then he drew me onto his chest and held me there, whispering bad smelling sweet nothings into my ears. His thing shrivelled inside me and he lifted me off. I lay down. He sat behind me by the fire and stroked my head while blood and seed leaked from between my legs as if my act had dissolved the flag I had been taught to honour.

Shame came knocking soon after. I was a traitor. *Abazure!*

You could say I was a woman ahead of my time. In the years following the war, Japan became full of women on the arms of its former enemy. Sleeping with them in exchange for food, money, stockings, warmth, numbness, comfort, perhaps even for love. In the post-war poverty, life could be as precarious as it had been during the war. Women made mercenary decisions to survive. Others had mercenary decisions made for them. So many of our best young men were dead. If I'd met the enemy then, I might even have married him. That little bit later and I would have been just another opportunist that our soldiers, with their wounded pride, wanted to spit on, but couldn't because they were ashamed: of their surrender; at having become lackeys in their own land; at their ancestors looking on gravely offended; at having been fooled by those they were taught to revere. They could call us sluts and whores but their women wouldn't be dancing with the Americans if they hadn't started, then lost, the war.

I rested my head in the enemy's lap and his stuff continued to trickle out of me, growing cold and sticky on my thighs. How strange to be invaded like that. And to feel, despite the discomfort, an instinctive rightness to the intrusion. I nuzzled into him while my mind followed the shadows the fire projected on the wall. I wandered in and out of sleep, dreaming peacefully, the tension of my predicament temporarily resolved. Two more times that day he entered me and shot into me the urgent seed of a man who has been spending time in the company of death. It became easier each time and every time my knowledge of him grew. It wasn't how I'd imagined it with Yukio. Yukio and I had purity. This was passion with a darker agenda. The call of the shadows. The lure of the forbidden. Futureless and open to abandon because of it. Sometimes I felt I was standing on the precipice of a dark hole and that the dark hole was myself. Sometimes I wanted to cry. Yet our skinship

seemed to resolve my fears at the same time as it created them. I was drawn to this new knowledge of touch from the inside out. I was stretching, growing, running away to places in my mind I never would have dared to, then returning to the solidity of his embrace. Yukio was the known world experienced as an ideal. The enemy was the unknown world made real.

When we had exhausted ourselves that day, the enemy and I fell asleep on our backs, angled around the fire. I used his stomach for a cushion and sometimes I could feel him running his fingers through my hair. When I woke up and left the cave to clean myself and pee, I realised it would soon be dark. I felt different but nothing had been solved. I pushed all my thoughts back into being the girl I was only hours before and left him sleeping in front of the fire as I made my way down the hill towards the thin pink band of light left behind by the sun.

6

THESE DAYS A Japanese girl will have a collection of lovers before she gets married but in my time we were expected to be virgins. Now I had become damaged goods, I thought of how I might use this to escape my marriage to Gotaro. I decided to tell my parents that I'd slept with Yukio. Then if they still wanted me to marry Gotaro, I would tease him with the details of my carnal knowledge until his pride was roused to the point where it gave him no option but to reject me. It wasn't ideal, it would bring undeserved shame on my family, but it was better to be known for loose morals than to be the wife of Gotaro. I wanted to be a dutiful daughter, but I couldn't imagine spending my life cooking, washing and pleasuring a man while hoping that my children wouldn't be anything like him.

As far as I could see, marrying Gotaro was worse than the end of the world. Of course, in hindsight, things might have worked out differently. With a little bit of patience, and a little bit of sacrifice, and perhaps a little bit of poison, things might even have worked out okay. But I was too young and the present was too powerful in me to allow the lottery of the future into my decisions. By that time I'd been visiting the enemy in his cave for two months. Except during my menses, and when my parents needed me, I visited

him whenever I could. As the days grew longer and the weather warmer, our cave bubble of passionate intensity grew. The thrill of conquering my fear and crossing the threshold into womanhood dissolved. Thicker more complicated feelings came to replace it. I began to like the thing itself. The surge and release. Our lovemaking acquired its habits and there was comfort in these repetitions. The sense of building something together. Excitement too. It's strange how much having a man's thing inside you can colour your imagination. I began to feel like a part of me had left and gone to join the enemy and that a part of him had come to stay with me. Even when I got caught up in the chores of being a farmer's daughter and didn't see him for days, I could still summon his presence, his energy, his smell. Some nights I woke up knowing I had been with him in my dreams because I was wet between my legs. Those days were perhaps the best. Waking up early stained by dreams and, without even thinking of breakfast, racing up the hill to the enemy, my heart fluttering with a shadowy desire that needed filling.

When we were together, time intensified. My life seemed strong and rich. We couldn't really talk to each other, but in the emotions carried by the timbre of our voices, in our hand gestures and charades, and in the broad palette of our touch, from the lightest tickle tracing of a fingertip across the face through to the slap and thrust, we shared a secret that was just for us, yet which stretched across whole oceans. Up there in our cave more than halfway up my hill, I felt free of the expectations waiting for me in the village.

The rainy season came and went and the weather grew warmer. The enemy got better. He began to hobble about more freely on his ankle and collect his own wood for the fire. As long as I could bring him food, he was safe there. It made for mixed emotions. Happiness at seeing him recover. Pride as a healer. Fear as a lover about to be abandoned since the better he could move about the more restless he became. I only knew the moments when I visited, but sometimes there were gaps of days. While I led my double life as a pretty farm girl in a crisis, he was an involuntary hermit with only the fire, its shadows and the cranky bats for company.

Of course, I was about to become an involuntary wife. I knew that if I was going to save myself from Gotaro, I was going to have to make my move and tell my parents soon. But once that happened, their eyes would be upon

me. It would become difficult to visit the enemy and our love would become too risky. The last thing I wanted was for my passion to get my loved one killed.

Our time was limited. As soon as that thought entered my head I wanted him even more. I tortured myself with all the sensations I would miss when the time came to say goodbye.

I stretched the window of my possible salvation until the wind came howling in.

As the enemy regained some independence and I felt myself letting the opportunity for salvation slip by, an edge appeared in our relationship, as if we were two pieces of overlaid paper that no longer fully matched up.

One day when I arrived, he was sitting by the fire, writing into a notebook. I sat at three o'clock to his twelve. Just out of reach. He leaned towards me with the book in his hands. The characters made no sense. I shook my head, told him *wakara nai*. There was calculation in his blue-sky eyes. He took hold of the book, ruffled through the pages and handed it back to me. He had drawn a comic of our story. It began with his plane flying over Japan, then a mountain appearing out of the fog. Shock on the faces of the pilot and co-pilot. The next frame showed a line of parachutes hanging in the sky as the plane exploded into the mountain. Then the enemy was alone, dangling from a tree, hacking at his parachute harness with a knife. In the following box, he was on the ground, grasping his ankle in pain. Then me. A scared girl pushing food at him with a stick. The enemy could draw. My eyes were a big shiny black with a single white streak of wonder through them. My breasts had been inflated. Several story boxes dealt with splinting his leg and getting him to the cave once the rain had arrived. The fire was there and we were playing shadow puppets. I flicked over to the next page and blushed. On a full page he had sketched the loss of my virginity. Straddled on top of him, my skirts up around my thighs. My head was huddled down into his chest. His hands were under my bottom. A bolt of lightning was near one of my ears. His eyeballs were popping out of his head. The side of my mouth was curled like a dreaming baby's.

I kept my head down to hide as much as possible my confusion. Shame and desire mingled in me. Anger too at being caught so completely off-guard.

I looked up to see him smirking. I threw the book at him and left the cave in a huff.

My anger didn't last long enough to get me down the mountain. The desire to be held again crept up on me and I collected firewood on the way back up to give the impression that had been my intention in leaving all along. Once I had gathered a bundle of sticks, I returned. As I squeezed myself through the cave mouth, my anger remembered me and I threw the sticks down at the enemy's feet. This time he didn't smirk. This time he held his arrogance back. I saw how vulnerable he was. How dependent on me he remained. Until he could walk properly he couldn't really go anywhere. And even if he could, there was nowhere for him to go. My anger left me. His hand gripped my calf and his eyes implored me. Apologising. I reached down to stroke his head and he drew me down to him. He ran his fingers gently through my hair and I started to relax. I felt the child in him, I looked around the cave and saw that it was all my creation and before long we were in the grip of that frenzied closeness where enemies become indistinguishable from friends.

7

ONE MORNING MOTHER told me to put my best clothes on because we were going into town.

'Why?'

'To find you a wedding kimono.' I pleaded the beginnings of a cold, but she wasn't having it. She hardly ever got to leave the village. A mere sniffle wasn't going to stop her. 'But what if there's an air raid?' She shook her head.

We got a lift in a truck to Chiwa then caught the train to Tsuyama.

On the train I decided it was now or never. 'There's no point shopping for a wedding kimono, Mother, I can't get married to Gotaro.'

She looked at me sharply. 'Why not?' I fumbled the words in my mouth, hesitant to reveal to her the shame I hoped would be my salvation. 'Because... because...because...because I'm not a virgin anymore.'

She gave me a measuring look. 'Did you lie with Yukio before he went to the war?' I was surprised by the matter of fact tone in her voice. She didn't

seem angry at all. I was disappointed. I nodded, taking on a mask of shame, even though it wasn't true. I wanted to tell her the truth. That might get me off the hook. But it might also get the enemy dead.

'I wondered whether you might have. Don't worry. You're not the first girl to do that. And you won't be the last. We'll set the wedding for a time when you're bleeding. Gotaro won't notice the difference. No one will ever know.'

There was a hint of mystery to what she said. And if I hadn't been so caught up in my own predicament, I might have fished about for a confession that she too had loved before her marriage. Instead I said, 'But I don't want to marry him.' She looked at me with pity, but also with disdain. 'Better you get it over and done with. The ceremony will take place one month from the date of your next period.' My life sentence was scheduled to begin in six weeks at best. I couldn't even enjoy the rare opportunity of shopping for new clothes and insisted on the ugliest, most expensive kimono we could find.

As we sat on the train back to Chiwa, mother leaned over and whispered to me. 'Hold that moment with Yukio close to your heart and cherish it. Some people never even get to love at all.' It was the second time she'd said something unexpected. But I was too disturbed by my own prospects to bite. I turned my head away from her and stared out the window at the fields of rice. I never got to know the secret that almost surfaced that day from the buried history of my mother's heart.

There were several days of farm work before I found another chance to visit the enemy. As I climbed the hill, my free self emerged and I was angry and confused. The enemy noticed my agitation and was gentle with me, which only made me dissolve into a flood of tears. I jabbered an explanation at him, not that he could understand. All he could do was hold me and stroke my hair, then lie down on his back and balance me while I sat on top of him with my hands on his strong smooth chest and tried to ride my way out of my unhappiness.

With the weather warming up and mother keeping a close eye on me, it became difficult to visit the enemy as often as I would have liked. It was a busy time in the fields. The forest was more dangerous now that the bears and snakes had emerged from hibernation. In six weeks time, I wasn't sure

I'd be able to visit the enemy at all. It was one thing to traipse off into the hills collecting mountain vegetables for my parents, but once I was married I'd be living under the roof of my mother-in-law, who was just as likely to fill my days with chores.

I became worried that the enemy would starve if I could no longer visit. I knew that father had a secret stash of rice. Even though it was illegal, almost all the farmers did. They might give up their sons to the war, but they were too mountain minded to give up all their rice. The government, father used to say, and his father before him, is a long, long way away. Our family had been squirreling away rice since before the Tokugawa made Tokyo the capital. Behind the chestnut tree where the land dropped down towards the stream that marked the edge of our land, father had dug a hole in the ground that was hidden from prying eyes. He had lined it with rough cloth and built a timber lid. Each year he added some sacks of rice then covered it over with soil, then planted daikon on top. It was for emergencies, but during the war, even in winter when there wasn't enough to eat, he was too scared to use it. People are looking. We must wait until we are starving, he told my mother.

If the army ever found out, he could easily be taken away and shot. What I did that night could have had our family wiped out. While my parents were sleeping, I left the house in the rain with a shovel and an oil lamp and went to the daikon patch. I carefully dug through the soil until I hit the cellar's wooden roof. I cleared the soil from the hatch, lifted it open, climbed down and helped myself to two of the ten sacks of rice. It was as much as I could carry. I spread the soil back over the top of the hatch. I lugged the two sacks to the beginning of the hill and left them hidden under some leaves, to be carried the next time I visited the enemy.

It was a big risk. A stupid thing to do. But what other choice did I have? All the other young men I cared about were dead and I had nothing but a life of odious duty to look forward to. At least if I was unable to visit the enemy, he'd have enough rice to help him survive. I didn't sleep at all that night and as soon as dawn broke I bolted down my breakfast, avoided the suspicious eye of mother as I left the house, keen to deliver my stolen sacks of rice before anyone else was out. It was hard going. They were too heavy to carry for long and I spent most of the time dragging them through the mud.

When I reached my rock a prickle ran up my back – the feeling of not being alone. I looked around, but heard nothing. I called out. No answer. I told myself it was the rice that was making me imagine things and continued hauling them towards the cave.

The feeling, however, stayed. I was sure I heard movements, the sounds of crunching branches, the sink of feet into the mulch of leaves. My skin became like a plucked chicken's and horrible possibilities filled my head. There were bears and wild boars up here. But the sound, I thought, wasn't the heavy crash of a boar running in the forest. Nor did it have the ambling quality of a bear. The movements were light and seemed to have purpose, but whenever I stopped to listen properly they stopped. A couple of monkeys? Or maybe a couple of hunters looking to add some protein to their bowls. But what if they saw the smoke from the cave...? Perhaps they would assume it was one of those crazy old mountain women.

Perhaps not. I knew I had to warn the enemy. If they found him, chances were they would kill him. Me too and even if they didn't, the shame would be too much. I stashed the rice behind a tree and started to run. It was hard against the soggy ground and my feet were much louder than I would have liked. The air threatened to burst my lungs. I kept running, stopping at random moments to listen. Was I imagining noises or not? When I got close, I stopped running. Tip-toeing from tree to tree, I crept up towards the cave. I saw footprints in the mud, heading up and down. Two sets, not mine. Nor the enemy's. I waited for what seemed like an eternity, listening for the slightest noise. The silence allowed me to convince myself they had probably gone back down. Hunters, I told myself and kept climbing. But when I reached the cave, my optimism was dashed. Someone had rolled a large stone across the entrance. The footsteps had come and buried the enemy alive. A frenzied anger overcame me and I pushed at the stone with all my strength. I succeeded only in making a small hole. Smoke came through it. The fire was still burning. I was relieved. I whispered out to the enemy. No response. I found a big stick and tried to use it as a lever against the stone. I managed to move it a couple of inches. For a moment there was hope. Then someone grabbed me from behind.

It was Gotaro. I could smell him. His breath was like rancid pork. 'Get

your hands off me you stupid moron.' I elbowed him in the ribs, one of those things a village girl needs to know. 'You slut,' he said. He freed one hand and slapped my face. I twisted out of his grip and started to run. Another set of stronger arms prevented me. I turned my head to see Gotaro's father wearing a look of disgust. There was no point resisting. Gotaro pushed down on my shoulders until I crumpled into the dirt. His father watched as Gotaro pulled up my skirts. I felt the contrast of his hot foul breath on my face and the cool mud on my bare limbs. I heard him say, 'You dirty traitor.' I curled my soul into a small ball in the innermost reaches of my being and my mind switched off while he raped me.

When he had finished, I waited for them to kill me. They each put one of my limp arms around their shoulders and started dragging me down the mountain. I didn't resist. I had become a very small speck of dirt hidden inside a body that had lost its bones. As they dragged me, they discussed my fate between them. Gotaro was all for handing me over to the police. In all likelihood, they would shave my head, parade me through the village, the whore who slept with the enemy, then hang me. My parents would spend the rest of their lives in shame.

His father had other ideas. 'She's yours now,' he told his son. 'Only we know and if she wants to keep her shame a secret, if she wants to keep her family name intact she'll have to do exactly what you tell her. Marry her, and this little bitch who thinks she's too good to join our family, who'd rather sleep with an enemy soldier than the son of a Japanese farmer will be your slave for life.' His logic was compelling, and the horror spiralling from these words into the future was the first thing I registered in the aftermath of my rape. It grew in me like a bamboo grows in summer. My body, I sensed, with its feet dragging through the undergrowth, was both my being and my cage.

We were halfway down the mountain when I began to hear their voices. My brothers and Yukio. Calling me. When we reached my rock I squeezed the arms of Gotaro and his father who released their grip, thinking perhaps that I had agreed to the conditions of my marriage and was going to make things easier for them by walking down the mountain myself. For a moment I stood there, awkwardly, like a faun walking for the first time, then a divine wind blew through me and I ran. Gotaro and his father stood there dumbstruck. I

mumbled an apology to my parents and ran. When I reached the edge of my rock, I wavered. I gathered the remaining specks of joy in my muscles and leaped. The shame sheared off as I plummeted through the sky. I saw Yukio reaching for me with his arms. I felt the touch of the enemy's hand upon my skin as time slowed down. The air roared around me. The forest came to meet me, a deadly wall of green. I heard a bird scream out in alarm. I closed my eyes. My body broke through branches. I lost awareness of it when my head smashed into a tree stump twenty metres down.

Death didn't hurt nearly as much as I had thought. Still, it was a shock to discover that the marriage mightn't have even happened. My bleeding would have been a long time in coming since when the spirit departed from my body, there were two.

8

AS THE SPERM of my rapist oozed out of me, and the child of my enemy lover split cells inside me, anger and adrenaline blitzed my fear. I wished for Gotaro to be punished in the cruellest possible way. I imagined his father being forced to rape him. I imagined the bayonets of the entire imperial army in him. As I died, I killed him cruelly one way, then killed him all over again.

My parents waited for me to come home. They thought I'd rebelled against the marriage and run away. Father apologised to Gotaro's father and plied him with compensatory sake. Mother worried in the house. She folded things that didn't need to be folded, and swept the dirt-free kitchen floor. When the idea came to her that the worst had happened, she fought it. It didn't make sense. It was more than she could think. First her two sons, and then her only daughter. Life as a childless old crone.

I tried to visit them in their dreams to tell them what had happened, so they could grieve and rest. I was lonely for them, but their hope was much too strong and they refused to imagine me dead. Father imagined with hot shame that I had become a prostitute in a hot spring resort, bathing and servicing men his own age. He blamed himself. If only I hadn't got so drunk with the boy's father that day after the market.

Mother hoped I was working in one of the wartime factories in Okayama

or Hiroshima. In her better dreams, she refused to blame me. They each separately wished they hadn't forced the marriage on me. Ichiro and Tetsuo had been beyond their control. But this they could have changed. Hindsight after a life of unquestioned habit is a cruel thing.

Nobody but me knew my poor baby had ever existed. There was no one to place a *mizuko* doll in the cemetery for him, no one to ask Jizo to help him across the river to the afterlife. My water baby didn't even have a mother to express her sorrow and regret.

Gotaro and his father said nothing. They were too frightened. As far as they were concerned nothing had happened until the evidence proved otherwise. The war was over by the time Kazue Sato's little brother, Seichi, found me violated by foxes at the bottom of the hill. That afternoon father came and carried me home wrapped in a sheet, weeping, with a handkerchief around his nose and mouth to block the stench. Mother collapsed in the *genkan* when she saw him. She'd been told to expect the worst, but it took the sight of me for that final glimmer of hope to be extinguished.

I was bathed and dressed, and put into my coffin. Over the next few days my friends came to visit me and were served with the best food my parents could make. With the war over, mother prepared dishes using our emergency rice. Gotaro and his family were given a position of honour at the mourning. I sent a bolt of anger into Gotaro's head while he was receiving a bowl of *nabe*. He dropped it in his lap and it scalded him where he'd done me damage.

Although pleasurable, the action weakened my spirit's incandescence, and left me feeling jaded. At that early stage I had no idea of a ghost's energy cycle, of the ways we are held to the earth by our unextinguished hopes, of the fading and fading and fading without relief, a process only countered by our place in the thoughts of the living and the fear of passers-by. But I soon knew that acts of revenge, no matter how enjoyable, were not going to help me escape from this fate. Still I smiled when he ruptured one of the blisters while masturbating in the fields and it became infected. The nurse had no time for young men who hadn't gone to the war. Told him to keep his hands off it or they'd have to chop it off. No one saw me do it, but I smiled. At my funeral, I saw my body burn, then the cooked bones pulverised to ashes. I grieved as you would for the loss of a close companion. Autumn took over

from summer. My parents' hopes dissolved and were never held again. I heard them weeping on the wind as it tousled the heads of the trees. I tried to talk to them. I wanted to tell them. I wanted them to know they were forgiven. But they were too locked into the groove of their own regrets to listen. The effort of their lives had been made a mockery. They had tried to do the right thing and had still been punished. Life can be beautiful but it lacks justice. Two sons dead in the war and a suicide. It was a horrible price to pay for duty.

They lived on stoically, subsisting on the small moments of oblivion afforded by the empty-headed hours of agriculture. My mother outlived me by five years. Then one morning she dropped dead in the kitchen while pouring the miso soup. The doctor said it was a heart attack. Her friends said it was a broken heart. Alone and almost helpless, my father sought refuge in his rice, then in his rice wine. He formed a relationship with a bar girl who spent nearly all his money then deserted him. And it was all downhill from there. He died largely unlamented, a good man reduced to a piss-stained angry old fool.

I imagine their ghosts hunched in a cold silence over the dead coals of the *kotatsu* in the living room of our abandoned house, condemned to examine again and again the fine line between error and tragedy as their pale fires fade. I would like to talk to them, but ghosts don't see ghosts. We imagine each other but we exist only in relation to the living.

Everyone in the village assumed my death was suicide, the tale of a young heart tangled in grief and impossible love. Although the truth of my rape and blackmail remained hidden, Gotaro was tainted by my story. As the young men from the village who had survived the war began to drift back home, and the old rhythms of growing rice began to re-assert themselves, Gotaro became known as the boy so ugly a girl preferred to commit suicide than marry him. His father tried to find him a substitute bride, but no one in our village, not even the poorest, husk-eating, ugliest girl would take him. Parents who lacked the courage to even dream of their daughters marrying a landowner balked at the bad fortune attached to Gotaro.

Several years after my death, they did find a bride for him. She came from a village on the other side of the mountains. Rumour was she was one of the untouchable people. But the village often said that about outsiders. They

said her skin was dark. That she smelled of leather. They said you could tell from the inflections of her speech. She looked like she was made of dough and her eyes had the low and darting look of someone who was always waiting to be hit.

They were married three years, no children, when one day Gotaro went for a walk and never came back. They found him half way up my hill, slumped against a tree. Nature had compensated for its assembly line error by blanking his sperm and planting a timebomb in his brain. Life and death. What a terrible lottery. If only I had seen the footprints earlier. If only I had known Gotaro wasn't going to last. If only, if only, if only...things could have been very different. Given the lifespan of the average Japanese woman, I may well have been alive today, an *obachan* wobbling through the village with her back perpendicular to her legs as if time had turned the entire world into mountain. Then when I died, my body worn out by age, and any thoughts of the future swallowed and chewed to cud by reminiscence, I might have gone out like a light. My ghost life might have lasted as long as the time it takes to reduce a throat bone to ashes on the pyre. You see the lucky ones die and that is that. Like my child whose life was finished before he even had a thought. Their souls go straight across the river and into the dreamless sleep that comes with the end of all striving. The Pure Land. Oblivion. What a beautiful word!

The unlucky ones are the restless ones like me. Souls whose deaths are tainted with unfinished business, desires they can't let go. Hopes deprived of possibility. Condemned to experience eternity with awareness. To grow dimmer and dimmer without ever disappearing. The world is thick with us, gliding around with our laments, a dismal misty underclass, the true untouchables.

Sometimes in the beginning, I couldn't be sure if I was there or not. What does it mean to dream when you are dead and what does it mean to be awake? Without a body anywhere is possible. Perhaps dream is all there is. There was no point trying to pinch myself to see if it was true.

I sometimes longed for the urgency of the enemy's hands upon my skin. The rough nuzzle of his stubbled cheeks. His mouth around my ears. The waves building inside me. The ecstasy of a pounding heart. If I could smell

the meat musk of his enemy armpits, taste the tobacco tang of his mouth, feel his hard body pin me against the ground... My desires survived me, but whenever I tried to touch something my ghost hands slid straight through. I slid through things and things slid through me. Which was how I was sure I was dead. A ghost.

The enemy too was dead. Trapped by Gotaro and his father in the cave. Had he lived, he would be an old man now. His chiselled jaw would have grown more chins. His firm belly would have gone soft. The skin on his chest would have sagged. His hair would be thin and grey.

9

THE EARLY DAYS of my afterlife were consumed with the turmoil and confusion caused by the manner of my death. I was angry and frustrated as I learned the limits of my new condition. I frightened children walking in the forest. I teased the monkeys. I thought there might be some way to speak with those I had left behind, if only I could find it. I tried and tried and tried, but the effect was always the same. Either I caused a sixth sense apprehension, or else I was ignored.

When I died, my head had been full of hopes and dreams and my body was only just learning its desires. But in death my problem was that I had died while I still had hope. Hope is only useful to the living, to those with the privilege of a future. Once you are dead, hope can only work backwards. It becomes a burden, fixed upon the past, holding you to the unwanted, the impossible, the immutable. I died with so much hope unrealised, for myself, for my love, for my child. And because of this I was pinned to a world I wanted to leave behind.

I grieved for the lost opportunity of motherhood and wondered what my child would have been like. Perhaps it was lucky that she didn't get to live. To feel the ache of loss. Did I do her a favour when I leaped? Or would my punishment last forever because I had unwittingly murdered my child? Was her briefest of existences a blessing? Did she find the Pure Land without her innocence being disrupted? Or was she out there still, mewling for my non-existent milk? Some ghosts might prefer this shadow of a life

to oblivion. The restless wandering, the endless replay of stories that can't be changed. At least it's something. And something's better than nothing, no? Really?

No.

If anything I would have liked to live again. I would have liked to have seen my parents tearfully to their graves. I would have liked to feel the compromise of marriage grow my spirit. I would have liked to gamble my hopes on the successful raising of my children. I would have liked to walk through the forest by myself, my mind a tree grown thick with living concern for those I loved.

Death is such a dull and pale condition that even marrying Gotaro might have been better. Yes, raped and despised and married to that shit-minded monkey. You can't even begin to know envy until you've become a ghost. Death is a realm of second-hand sensations. We hear what the living hear, see what they see. Everything must pass through the filters of their consciousness before we can perceive it. Nothing is our own. We can't even see or hear each other. Ghosts moan when people pass by just so we can hear the second-hand sound of our voices. Community is a chilling of the air. Ghosts are puddles of loneliness. Ghosts are patches of dirty snow hidden from the sun. Ghosts will be in the shadows growing dimmer until the sun swallows the earth. Ghosts are parasites who hunger for the small light of being remembered. Each time someone living thinks of someone dead, it gifts us a little luminescence. This is why the ancestors need the living, why my parents were determined for me to carry on the family line.

If you think of a dead person and the thought produces a smile, it probably means they have already crossed the river and found their way to purity. It was a bad time to be dead. The odds have always been against ghosts. What chance does a ghost have against the deluge of the present? Once upon a time, though, people thought so much about ghosts that they built crooked paths in their gardens so that we wouldn't be able to enter their houses unbidden. Every year at *Obon*, they went to the graveyard and brought our spirits back home. They believed it was crucial to their chances of a happy life to curry favour with the dead. But the modern Japanese prefers technology to the supernatural and so we are fading.

The proportion of ghosts to the living grows ever larger. So many ghosts in such a short time were created by the war. Yet those who survived, their children and grandchildren, have seen us less. As Japan grew richer, movies and television came to vie for their attention. The heads of the living became filled with stars and idols, spectres of a kind, who have stolen much of the luminescence that was once invested in us, luminescence we desperately need if we are to find the energy to repair things sufficiently to escape from this world into the next.

The living are also lazy in the management of our memories. They butcher our histories time and again. Crucial details are forgotten, colour is added for spice, biases are admitted. Every ghost's story is a series of dots that need to be joined up and in forming the connections people will cover for their ignorance by making things up. When it comes down to the nitty gritty of knowing someone, ignorance will trump knowledge every time. Chinese whispers pass down through the generations. Villains and heroes are inverted. There is nothing you can do. But no matter how appallingly they twist your story, it is better to be remembered badly than to not be remembered at all. But how is a person remembered when all of their family are dead?

In the first years of my death, I lived on in the laments of my parents, whose hopes I had extinguished and in the dirty consciences of Gotaro and his father. I lived on in the gossip of the village. In the whispers of Kazue Sato, who had her suspicions but said nothing. Yet when my parents died, my light began to dwindle. Gotaro died, and his father not long after. His mother lived for some years, but without knowing what had happened that day on the mountain. My friends married and had their own children, Kazue Sato included. In the post-war boom, many of them left the village for the high apartments of the cities. Their children had children and their minds became thick with families of their own. I was remembered dimly, mainly by old women wearing thick spectacles, looking through their old school photographs on rainy afternoons while their grandchildren were at school. By women who nobody listened to when they talked about the past.

Occasionally events would cause people to remember me and grant me respite from my fading. Fifteen years after my death, a fourteen year-old boy from the village went missing in the winter. As the comparisons were made

between our cases, I felt the surge, the growing luminosity of my spectre. It was a dirty light, a reflection of the fear and desperation of his parents. The strength it gave me only made me desire oblivion even more. Search parties were sent into the forest. They combed the area where I had made the leap, but found nothing. The boy wasn't dead. He had gone to Osaka and begun to run errands for the yakuza. He slept with young whores on their nights off and got his first tattoo. His uncle who owned an *izakaya* in the drinking district found him and brought him home. When his father, whose mind was filled with the horrors of the war, saw the tattoo, he was too frightened to beat him, though he eventually changed his mind. Not long after, the boy went back to the city. Who knows what happened then?

Once the village knew he was alive, the boy stopped being a tragedy like me and became a cautionary tale of a young fool who ran away from the village only to find ruin in the city. Or this was what the old people said. The young ones found it romantic. Either way people stopped thinking of me and my light began to dwindle all over again. The fading was slow and vague. It was hard to distinguish between the daily play of shadows and the lessening of my light. Hope without light is an endless tunnel that imprisons us in our expectations. As time went by, the chances of my story striking a chord in the heart of someone grew smaller and smaller. I was approaching the point of a dank forever as a cold and moaning forest ghost. Yet twenty years after the boy ran away to Osaka, my star began to shine again.

At this time, Japan was swept by a rash of teenage girls forming pacts and committing suicide. The newspapers and televisions were full of weeping parents and friends. Psychologists debated about the causes with concerned television hosts, while older opinionists lamented the softness of the new generation. Parents began to look at their children more closely; mothers smothered their children with love while their husbands did the bidding of their companies. Children sought freedom, but didn't always use it well. The first suicide in our village was a girl who had returned from Osaka to stay with her grandparents while her father was on business in Oman. It was spring and the snows were melting. They found her in a backwater of the river that raged along the southern end of our village. At first they thought she might have gone for a walk and fallen in. She was, after all, a city girl and that

was the sort of thing city girls were prone to do. But in her sodden pocket, in a plastic bag, there was a note. It didn't say much, only that she was sorry for the trouble she had caused and requesting that her grandmother take care of her cat, who she thought was much happier in an Okayama farmhouse than an Osaka apartment.

Three times over the next two years, teenagers were found in the in the vicinity of the village, dead by their own hand. Two girls and a boy, the last of them heartbroken over the suicide of one of the girls. People began to whisper. They talked of a suicide virus. They talked of the cruelty of youth. The second of the two girls had been badly bullied. For three months, her 'friends' had refused to speak to her. They had referred to her only as the pig. Her parents had paid no attention. Her brother was about to get married, a love match, and they were unhappy with the bride.

One girl had written her story in a letter and mailed it to her parents. It was intercepted by our village's nosy postmaster, who leaked it to the press. Because the letter offered some explanation for the national craze of teenage suicide it was published in newspapers across the nation. For a while, the villages in our valley were very busy. Reporters came, some from as far away as Tokyo. They wandered through my village, asking questions. People weren't so sure whether to answer or run away. The postmaster concealed his hand in this. Our shy village was more famous than ever before.

Some of this light rubbed off on me. The spot from where I leaped, the place below it where my fox-nibbled corpse was found became part of the official tour. 'The prettiest girl of her generation. She was a few years senior to me in class. A great tragedy. She could have been on TV. Rumour was she did it to escape an arranged marriage,' village headman, Hiroyuki Yamane, told the journalists. More lascivious thoughts were in his head. It's weird seeing a man undress you in his memory more than thirty years after you're dead.

Strangely enough, I was prettier than ever.

I also had an idea of how to free myself from the ties that held me to this earth. If I could hand over my redundant hope to a living person who could use it, then maybe I'd be able to reach oblivion. Yet while the theory was sound, it was much harder to get the living to listen. When the suicide craze abated, I tried farmers hoping for rain. I tried lovers hoping for their secret

passions to be reciprocated. I tried housewives who were drinking in their kitchens puzzled by how dull their lives had become. I tried mothers with sick children. I went in search of cancer patients staring at the grave. And I failed. With each failure, I grew a little dimmer, a little less capable of handing my hope on to anyone.

10

FIVE YEARS LATER as mist cleared from the mountains one morning I saw two girls coming up the hill. One was very pretty. She reminded me of myself. Her hair was in a ponytail and was neatly tucked behind ears that were large but delicate enough to let through some of the light. Her blouse was freshly pressed. Her legs were perfect smooth cylinders where they extended from the short pleated navy skirt of her uniform to her knee. They finished in long white socks bunched at their tops and freshly shined black shoes. She was almost perfect. Even the bag on her back looked like it had been made especially for her. But her face wore a scowl. A mask of tragic determination at odds with the youthful electricity of her body. My spirit quivered as if the hands of the enemy were upon it.

‘You know it’s the right thing to do. It’s like we’re in a dark tunnel that doesn’t have an end,’ she said to the other girl, who I recognised as the granddaughter of Kazue Sato. A classic pairing. The pretty girl and her plain companion. The legs of Kazue’s descendent emerged from a longer skirt and had the puffy look of radishes. Her blouse was boxy and her hair was scrunched into pigtails. There were pimples on her face. Her spectacles had steamed up with the effort of climbing the hill.

‘I can never forgive Toru for what he did to you, Tomo-chan.’ She reached for the delicate hand of her friend, which had none of the roughness of a farm girl’s. I might have been a pretty girl but my hands knew what it was like to hold a hoe, to plant things in the soil, to turn again and again the wooden handle that drove the mill stone for our private rice. The village had grown since I died. There was a supermarket, a business that sold cars and tractors, a hardware store, a post office and a bank. Someone even opened

a *kissaten*, a small café where people came to drink coffee, gossip and flirt behind the heavy curtains, mostly locals, but also tourists who came for the fresh air and the hiking tracks that connected us to some of the neighbouring valleys. When the wind blew a certain way I could smell the ham and spring onion omelettes, which made me the hungriest ghost that ever died. In the autumn, busloads sometimes came from the city to hunt for *matsutake* mushrooms in the hills.

Several kilometres away was a big plant that used our river to make the electricity that now lit the streets at night and powered the blue glow of the televisions that had drawn the living away from their ghosts. This pretty girl was probably the daughter of someone who worked there or in one of the shops. Or perhaps in the council where men, according to my father, had long been paid too much to do too little except work on their self-importance. Tomo-chan took her plain friend's hand and said. 'Don't worry, Sa-chan. Soon it will not matter.' Sa-chan's grandmother might have been a nosy gossip, but I liked her. Her plain surfaces shrouded a warm glow. She had a kindness her friend with the wounded ego lacked. Tomo-chan's aura was a rich thick purple, an idea of grandeur that had soaked all the way through. If it were my story to tell, she would be a comic figure, a small town glamour whose self-importance got her into trouble. I would have let her live for long enough to learn from her mistakes and enjoy a happy ending. But being a ghost means that such stories are no longer yours to tell.

'Are you sure about this?' Sa-chan asked.

'Of course. I have never been more sure about anything. It's the only thing I can do.' They kept climbing until they came to the giant beech tree that concealed from the village the rock from where I had escaped the clutches of Gotaro and his father. Tomo-chan stopped and Sa-chan stopped with her. Miss Pretty turned to her friend and said, 'You don't have to come with me. I'm grateful that you promised to be my friend through thick and thin, but I can't make you do this.' Sa-chan's feelings flickered across her face. Duty in conflict with instincts. 'I know it takes a lot of courage.'

Tomo-chan pulled the canvas bag off her back and set it down on the ground with care. She unbuckled its two front fasteners, flipped open the

cover and removed two lengths of cloth. 'The world is cruel enough. I can't let you do this alone,' said Sa-chan in a quavering voice. Tomo-chan reached over and patted her friend's cheek with her hand. 'Thank you. It means so much to me.' She took one of the two lengths of cloth and began to loop it at one end into a noose. When she had tied it she put it around her neck and tested the slip of her knot by pulling it tight. Satisfied, she removed it from her neck and handed it to her friend. 'I've been practising. I don't want there to be any mistakes.'

Sato-chan took the finished rope from her friend and coiled it while Tomo-chan repeated the noose with the other length then coiled it to. When she had done this, she reached into the bag and pulled out a fresh pair of plain white knickers, which she exchanged for the pair she was wearing without removing her shoes. 'It was sweaty work climbing this hill. I want to smell clean when I die,' she explained. 'Did you bring some for yourself?'

The thought obviously hadn't crossed Sa-chan's mind and she seemed worried people would be saying that she had died in dirty knickers. I could have told her that Tomo-chan was being ridiculous, that her fresh white pants would be soiled as soon as her sphincter muscles ceased to work. I could have told her how she would come to miss the smell of her own manure. If only I could talk, I thought, I could get inside their heads with the reality of what awaited them and turn them round.

Watching these preparations of girls no older than myself when I had leaped from the same place, my pale spirit was strangely agitated. I felt like a violent rainbow. It was one thing to be remembered via the stories of other people's suicides, another to see the act yourself. I tried to tell them all this, but they showed no awareness of my presence.

'Don't worry. I brought a spare pair for you. Hopefully they'll fit.'

'Thank you.' Sa-chan took the underpants. She turned with her back to Tomo-chan and exchanged them for her own. Tomo-chan offered an open plastic bag to Sa-chan. 'You can put them in here.' Sa-chan put her old ones in then Tomo-chan added hers. She put the plastic bag in her backpack and rebuckled it. Then she took a piece of paper from her tunic, folded it and stashed it carefully in the front pocket of the bag. 'Have you written a note?'

‘No. What does yours say?’ She picked it out, unfolded it and read: *I’m sorry. I really am. It’s just that I am broken.* ‘I wrote a poem, too.’ *Death is the snow drunk/ Shards of the cup gather up/ morning’s final dew.* ‘It’s beautiful,’ said Sa-chan. ‘Do you want to add something?’ Tomo-chan passed the sheet of paper to her friend and rummaged in the bag’s front pocket. A teardrop spilled from Sa-chan’s eye. ‘Careful, if you cry on it you might blur the ink.’ Sa-chan snuffled back her tears. ‘Do you want me to write something for you?’ Sa-chan shook her head. She took the pen from Tomo-chan and wrote, ‘I am sorry, very sorry. This life is blind and the world is cruel.’

Sa-chan returned the paper to her friend who folded it perfectly, and slid it into an envelope that she placed in the front pocket of the bag. Tomo-chan lowered the bag gently to the ground. She reached into her tunic and pulled out a red balloon, which she inflated then tied to the bag. ‘It will help them to find us when we are done. The snow will be coming soon and I don’t want to stay here all winter like your grandmother’s friend.’

The two girls hugged each other fiercely, chests heaving, legs shaking, tears spilling. They picked up the nooses from the ground, coiled them over their shoulders and began to climb the tree in the direction of their deaths without fully understanding that death was an irretrievable end. As they climbed I felt myself getting itchier. I felt a voice growing in me, the echo of a scream intensifying rather than fading, a process like so many reversed in death. I felt the presence of Ichiro, Tetsuo, Yukio, my father and mother. I felt the divine wind that had sucked me with dubious mercy to my own death stirring up the air. Tomo-chan climbed daintily like a gymnast, careful not to break her nails. Sa-chan scabbled behind her, her cheeks red with puff, her nails already bitten to the quick, her short legs clumsily seeking purchase on the trunk. The wind I’d felt was real and the tree tremored with it. The short skirts of the two girls fluttered like flags and their white-clothed bottoms reminded me of the busy bobbing of rabbits under a full moon.

Tomo-chan tested the branches with her feet as she climbed. She was determined to do it properly. ‘Hurry up Sa-chan. School will be starting soon and they’ll be wondering where we are.’

‘Can’t we just use one of the lower branches?’

‘I don’t want anyone to come and rescue us.’

‘I just need a short rest.’

‘Are you having second thoughts?’

‘No.’

‘Hurry up then.’

No hurry, I thought. I somehow knew Sa-chan was thinking the same thing, but that didn’t stop her from scrabbling harder until she reached her friend, puffing like an old pair of bellows. ‘Here we are,’ said Tomo-chan. ‘This is the one.’ She held on to a higher branch with her two hands and walked out onto the one below it. She bounced up and down. There must have been rot inside it because on the fourth bounce, by which time she had assumed the branch was safe, it cracked and she was only saved by the fact she was still holding on with her hands to the branch above. I hoped that she might take it as a sign.

‘Careful!’ cried Sa-chan, as her friend dangled in the air. Tomo-chan had the agility and presence of mind to climb back, hand-over-hand to the trunk. ‘Maybe the next one up,’ she said, without pausing for breath.

They climbed the extra metre up to the branch that had just saved Tomo-chan’s life. She bounced on it again with her feet, and when she was satisfied she straddled the branch some ten feet out from the trunk and begun to tie the free end of her cloth. Sa-chan inched along the branch on her bottom until she was four or five feet away from her friend. ‘Come and tie it here,’ said Tomo-chan. ‘We can hold hands then when we jump.’ Sa-chan shuffled up to where her friend was pointing. She too began to tie her rope. When the girls had each finished tying their ropes to the tree, they put the nooses around their necks. Energy itched inside me. I felt like I had become a small electric storm.

After the nooses were tight around their necks there was an awkward silence as if neither girl knew how to proceed. Without words they held their hands out to each other, Tomo-chan with her left, Sa-chan with her right. They gripped each other as if the pressure would stop the tremors that had overcome them. Their other hands pressed tightly down onto the tree. I was coiled like a tiny tornado generating energy with my spin.

Eventually Tomo-chan broke the silence. ‘Are you ready?’ Sa-chan

looked at her friend. Their eyes met and she seemed to nod. ‘One,’ began Tomo-chan. ‘One...one, two...one, two and...’ Sa-chan’s hand suddenly moved to cover her nose as if it had been possessed by an irresistible itch. ‘Three,’ chanted Tomo-chan and pushed herself off the branch. At that same moment, Sa-chan sneezed. And that was the last thing I knew.

Ed Wright is the author of six non-fiction books including *Lost Explorers* (Pier 9) and *Ghost Colonies* (Pier 9). His first full-length collection of poetry, *When Sky Becomes the Space Inside Your Head*, will be published by Punter and Wattman in 2012. He currently writes the New Australian Fiction review column for the *Australian* and teaches Creative Writing at the University of Newcastle. He lives in Newcastle with his wife and two children. The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of an Australia Council Emerging Writers’ grant as well as Varuna and Bathurst Regional Arts Council Hill End residencies.

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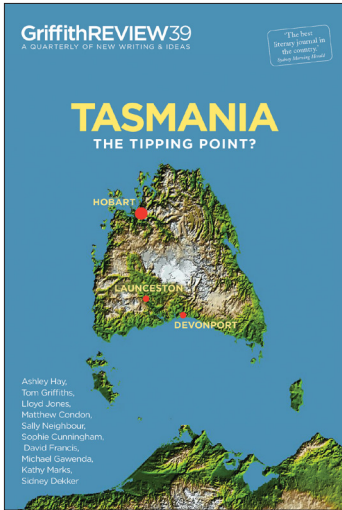
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