

Chapter 1

"It's pretty far. Where do we start the climb?" asked one man, stopping to wipe his brow with a handkerchief.

"I'm not sure where. I was wondering that, too, because I can see the mountain over there," casually answered the man with a square face and body.

While thick eyebrows moved under the brown brim of his tilted fedora, above his head as he looked up, Eizan [Mt. Hiei] soared into the deep indigo from the bottom of the light blue summer sky and towered into a place so supple he wondered whether it would move if blown on.

"That mountain is unyielding," he said, sticking out his square chest and leaning on his cherrywood walking staff.

"There's no reason because we can see so much."

This time he spoke with slight contempt for Eizan.

"You say we can see it, but I could see it when we left the inn this morning. It would be awful if Eizan disappeared while on the way to Kyōto."

"It's good that we can see it, right? If you walk without making irrelevant comments, naturally, you'll reach the top of the mountain."

The tall, slender man didn't answer. He took off his hat and fanned his chest. Only his broad forehead was noticeably pale. The brim of his hat usually blocked the intense rays of the summer sun that dye the canola flowers.

"Well, it'll be a problem if we rest now. Let's go faster," said the square man.

His companion seemed to resent his black hair sticking to his sweaty forehead and not flying back as he wished when exposed to the summer breeze. Gripping his handkerchief in one hand, he roughly wiped his forehead, face, and around to the nape of his neck. He gave no sign of being upset by the suggestion.

"You said that mountain is unyielding, right?" he asked.

"Yes, wouldn't it look like this if it moved?" asked the square man, further squaring his square shoulders. As his free hand created a relative of a *turbo sazae* sea snail, he demonstrated the position if it moved slightly.

"Saying if it moved is like saying it doesn't move but it could," he said, looking down at his companion from the corners of his narrowed eyes.

"That's right."

"Can that mountain move?"

"Ah, ha, ha, ha. You're doing it again. You were born a man who makes irrelevant comments. Okay, let's go."

He walked out as soon as he raised his thick walking staff to his shoulder, nearly making it whistle. The slender man stored his handkerchief in his sleeve and followed.

"It would have been nice to have enjoyed the day at Heihachi Teahouse in Yamabana. We just started the climb but are only halfway there. About how far are we from the natural summit?"

"It's about two and a half miles to the summit."

"From where?"

"Who knows from where? It's a Kyōto mountain with a known height."

The slender man said nothing and only grinned. The square man continued speaking with authority.

"When taking a trip with a man like you who only plans and does not execute, I miss seeing things everywhere. A companion is a pleasant nuisance."

"A companion who recklessly rushes out like you will be a nuisance. First of all, if you went out with a companion and left him, would he know where to start climbing, where to look, or where to descend?"

"What did the plan say about trivial matters? Is that mountain tall?"

"That mountain's fine, but do you know how many thousand feet high that mountain rises?"

"Do I know? That's trivia. Do you know?"

"I have no idea."

"It's a marvelous sight."

"You shouldn't act so superior because you don't know. Neither of us knows the mountain's height. If you don't know how long it takes to reach the summit or what to look at once we're there, the schedule will not progress as planned."

"If we don't progress, we will only adjust. While considering extraneous matters as you do, we can adapt any number of times," said the square man and quickened his pace. The slender man trailed behind without a word.

In the springtime, every object easily became a poem in Kyōto from Shichi-jō Street to Ichi-jō Street. Between the smoky willows, white cloths splashed with warm water were wrung out countless times at the dry riverbed of the Takanogawa River. Most people naturally approach the mountain from the right and left on long, winding roads stretching north for more than five miles. Gentle echoes flowed to the feet from all around, from over here, from over there, bending to the point of breaking.

If you enter the mountain in late spring and reach the summit, spring will still be chilly with lingering snow. On a strip of road stitching a skirt to the towering peak and running into dark shadows, an Oharame, a peddler maiden from Ohara, rose into view in the distance. Cows appeared, too. A Kyōto spring lingers and is serene like the endless urine stream from a cow.

"Heeey!"

The man falling behind stopped and called to his friend in the lead. As his shouting voice, carried by the spring wind, traveled down the road glowing white and slowly faded away, he collided with the mountain at a dead end of only silvergrass. The square shadow walking one block ahead stopped.

The lean man stretched his long hand above his shoulder and gestured twice for his companion to come back. Before the cherrywood walking staff was warmed by the sun, he walked back with it twinkling in front of his shoulder.

"What is it?"

"Not what is it. The climb will start here."

"Starting the climb at a place like this is a little strange. Crossing this log bridge is odd."

"When thoughtlessly walking like you, we'll walk right into Wakasa Province."

"It doesn't matter if we enter Wakasa. Do you know any geography?"

"I just asked the Oharame. It seems if we cross this bridge, head down that narrow path, we'll go up two-and-a-half miles and come out."

"Come out where?"

"At the top of Eizan."

"We should come out somewhere on Eizan's peak."

"I don't know where. I won't know unless I climb up."

"Ha, ha, ha, ha. It looks like even you, who loves planning, didn't ask that much. Too wise to make a mistake? I'll cross by following your instructions. You'll finally climb. How about it? Can you walk?"

"Can I walk? I have no choice."

"Of course, you're a philosopher. With a little more clarity, you may develop to your full potential."

"Either way is fine. You go ahead."

"Will you follow me?"

"It's all right, please go."

"If you're inclined to follow, I'm off."

The two shadows crossed the bridge dangerously spanning a mountain stream. Their figures were hidden in a path that came out with little effort at the summit overgrown with grass on the grassy mountain. The grasses were dry stalks still holding last year's frost. Sunshine beaming directly above passed through clouds melted into wisps and returned to steam. Only their cheeks flushed from their warmth.

The man in the lead turned and called, "Hey, Kingo."

Kingo's slender frame, well-suited to the narrow mountain path, stood erect and looked down.

"Huh?" he answered.

"You're about to give up. A weak man. Don't look down," he said, swinging his walking staff from left to right as usual.

The Takanogawa River shining as a silver thread in his eyes glimmered far away and ended at the tip of the swinging walking staff. On both sides, dense growths of blooming canola flowers rubbed together until they burned and crumbled. Before this backdrop, a far-off, light purple mountain was drawn in the distant haze.

"Of course, the scenery is magnificent," said Kingo. He twisted around his tall frame, slipped down, and stood still on a perilous sixty-degree incline.

"We climbed this high in no time. That was fast," said Hajime, the square man.

"That may be the same as descending into corruption or becoming enlightened without realizing it."

"Day becomes night. Spring becomes summer. The young become the old. They're all the same. In that case, I'll swiftly understand, too."

"Ha, ha, ha, ha. So how old are you?"

"You're older than me."

"I know."

"I know that."

"Ha, ha, ha, ha. Of course, it seems to be a secret."

"A secret? No, I know."

"So how old are you?"

"You say it first," said Hajime, not moving at all.

"I'm twenty-seven," said Kingo with ease and undaunted.

"Really? Well, I'm twenty-eight."

"You're the old guy."

"Stop joking. It's only a year difference."

"So it's both of us. They'll say we're both old."

"If it's both of us, I'll overlook it, but only I'm—"

"You'll overlook it? You're still young if that's worrying you."

"What do you mean? Do people become idiots during a climb?"

"During a climb, they get in the way. Move aside a little."

A carefree-looking woman ambled down the road of a hundred or a thousand turns without a straight stretch for thirty feet and excused herself as she passed by—a large bundle of twigs taller than her pressed on her dark hair with raven-black highlights. While carrying the overgrown dry grass thatching on her head, untouched by her hands, she slipped past Hajime.

The eyes watching her figure from behind as she carried the rustling, thickly overgrown, withered silvergrass were captured by a red *tasuki* cord holding back her kimono sleeves slipping off diagonally in the blackness of dark streaks. Even when more than two miles away, the straw-thatching that appeared to stick to the tip of a pointing finger was probably the woman's home. Much the same as long ago at the fall of Emperor Tenmu, lingering haze sealed off the mountain hamlet of Yase forever, and serenity prevailed.

Hajime said, "All the women around here are pretty. I'm impressed. It's like a picture."

"They're probably Oharame."

"What? These women are Yaseme, peddlers from Yase."

"I've never heard of Yaseme."

"Nonetheless, I'm sure they're from Yase. If you think I'm lying, I'll ask the next one we meet."

"Nobody said you're lying. But aren't those women usually called Oharame?"

"Are you sure? Will you vouch for it?"

"Doing it that way is poetic. Somehow, that would be elegant."

"For now, I'll use an alias."

"An alias is a good idea because many aliases exist in the world: constitutional government, pantheism, loyalty, honesty, filial piety, respect for one's elders. There are all kinds."

"Of course, a lot of soba shops are named Yabu. All butcher shops have Iroha in their names."

"Yes, it's the same when scholars introduce themselves to each other."

"That's dull. If it comes to that situation, it would be better to drop the alias."

"From here on, you will assume the alias of a diplomat."

"Ha, ha, ha, ha. I can't take that alias. The fault is there are no examiners possessing elegance and grace."

"How many times have you failed? Three?"

"You know that's ridiculous."

"Two times?"

"What? You know exactly how many times. I only failed once out of fear."

"Because you took it once, but in the future ..."

"When I don't know how many times I'll do something, I get a little discouraged, too. Ha, ha, ha, ha. Sometimes, my alias is good, but what are you going to do?"

"Me? I will climb Eizan. Hey, stop rolling down those stones with your back leg. It's dangerous to whoever's behind you. Aaah, I'm exhausted and will rest here," said Kingo. Rustling sounds rose as he collapsed onto his side in the pampas grass.

"Hey, have we already failed? Various aliases are chanted only in words. Mountain climbing is no good from here," said Hajime. He gently tapped the top of sleeping Kingo's head with his walking staff. With each tap, the tip of the walking staff mowed down pampas grass with a rustle.

"All right. Get up. The summit is just ahead. If you rest, do it after you succeed. Come on. Get up."

"Aah."

"Aah, what? Let's go."

"I think I'm going to throw up?"

"Throw up and fail? Come on. You have one option. I'll take a break, too."

Kingo pushed his black hair into the yellow grass. Although his hat and umbrella had rolled down the hilly road, he lay on his back, gazing at the sky. Nothing blocked the view between his face shaven to a pale shadow and the vast heaven of feathery clouds floating out to infinity and serenely vanishing. Vomit spewed over the ground. The world

separated, the ground separated, and the ancient and modern worlds separated in his eyes facing the immense sky. There was only the vast sky.

Hajime took off his formal *haori* coat with its Yonezawa splash pattern, folded it into a rectangle using the *sode-tatami* technique, and placed it over his shoulder. He recalled a memory and thrust out both hands with full force from his chest. He swiftly stripped to the waist and exposed a padded haori vest beneath. Shaggy fox fur stuck out of the back of the vest. This treasured vest was a gift from a friend who went to China. The friend said, "The skins of one thousand sheep are not worth the armpit of one fox. You wear this vest all the time. When I see the splotches and random bald spots on the fox skin worn on your back, you're no different than a wild fox with a mean temper."

"Are you climbing the mountain? Do you need directions? Ha, ha, ha. This is an odd place to sleep."

The woman with black-streaked hair was on her way down the mountain.

"Hey, Kingo. You're sleeping in an odd place. Even the women are making fun of you. Why don't you behave and get up?"

"Women make fun of everyone," said Kingo, still gazing at the sky.

"Calmly sitting on your butt there is a problem. Are you going to throw up again?"

"If I move, I'll puke."

"Well, that's a problem."

"All the throwing up happens when I move. Gallons of vomit are spewed into the world with one word, *move*."

"What? You don't actually intend to vomit? How dull. If there's more, will I have to descend to the foot of the mountain with you on my back? Deep down, I'm a little tired of this."

"It's not your concern. And nobody is asking you to—"

"You're a man devoid of charm."

"Do you know the definition of charm?"

"What are you saying? The thing to do is to try not to move any more than needed for a minute. You are a ludicrous man."

"Charm is ... a soft weapon that knocks down a stronger opponent."

"Then brusqueness is a sharp weapon that pushes around an opponent weaker than oneself."

"Is that logical? If you try to move, charm becomes necessary. Is there charm in a man who knows he'll vomit if he moves?"

"It's awful to use fallacious arguments. In that case, excuse me while I go ahead. All right?"

"Do as you wish," said Kingo, of course, gazing at the sky.

Hajime wrapped both empty sleeves around his waist, yanked and tucked in the hem of the striped fabric coiled around his hairy shins, and similarly folded around and tucked in the white crepe.

He quickly hung the haori folded a short time ago over the end of the walking staff. In a carefree voice, he said, "With one sword, I'll face the world alone." Then he disappeared on the steep mountain road that ran out in ten steps at an abrupt left turn.

After that came silence. Within the quiet, when we recognize the lives entrusted to us in our veins after all trivial matters are peacefully resolved, our spirited young blood transcends the vastness of Heaven and Earth.

Our blood moves in deep contemplation having lost the pulsing sounds of flowing blood. The body in silence is unadorned, is ignored in the state of mind of spiritual enlightenment without forgetfulness, and assumes a boundless, lively spirit.

When aware it is alive, the spirit discards the shadowy troubles of the transitory world and leaves a mountain cave in the clouds, similar to the change from morning to evening in the empty skies. The spirit transcends all concerns.

The past and present are empty. One foot steps into a world apart from the world that expands to the east and west. If this were not so, I would want to become a fossil. All reds and blues and yellows and purples are absorbed. I want to become a pitch-black fossil that knows nothing about returning to the original five colors. If not, I'd like to die.

Death is the end of everything and the beginning of everything. Hours accumulate to become a day. Days accumulate to become a month. Months accumulate to become a year. In other words, everything piles up and ends in a grave.

All the rowdiness around the grave pours the unneeded oil of humanity on a withered skeleton. Fate is separated by a single layer of meat and is a comedy of dancing all night long by an unwanted corpse. The one with a faraway spirit admires the far-off country.

Kingo unthinkingly conjured these thoughts and finally got up. He had to walk again and looked at Eizan, the thing he didn't want to see. Among countless useless beans, the useless traces of mountain climbing must remain for a few days as a painful memorial. If this memorial is required, the counting never ends until the hair turns gray. A fissure reaches the marrow and never disappears.

Ten or twenty beans swelled up on the soles of his feet for no reason. The moment he looked down at the heel of his boot laced halfway on the sharp edge of the cutting stone, the stone's surface changed to a hard surface, and the leg he was about to raise slid down nearly two feet.

Kingo quietly chanted, "I don't see a road thousands of miles long." He put force on the umbrella and scrambled up the abrupt turn in the steep mountain road. The sharp turn in the incline had a charm that invited the people coming from below to the sky. He neared the summit and stood.

Kingo waved the visor and looked up at the peak where the hill ran in a straight line from the bottom. From the top where the hill ended, he looked up at the endless sky swollen with the unlimited colors of spring in faint light.

He chanted, "I see simply thousands of miles of sky."

He sang the second line in the same soft voice.

When he reached the top of the grassy mountain and climbed up four or five steps into a cluster of assorted trees, he thought darkness instantly cloaked his shoulders and dampened the soles of his climbing boots. The road crossed from west to east behind the mountain. In a flash, he left the grass and found himself in the forest.

Forest richly colored the skies over Ōmi. Unless it moved, the tree trunks and the branches above stacked layer upon layer, extending for many miles. The greenery from long ago seemed to fold into blackness each year and buried two hundred valleys, three hundred portable shrines, and three thousand depraved warrior monks. Buddhists who had achieved supreme and perfect enlightenment were completely buried beneath the many leaves.

The lush forest soaring halfway into the sky was cedar, there since the days of the great Buddhist missionary Denkyō Daishi. Kingo passed alone under the cedars. Like two hands thrust out from the right and left, the roots of cedar trees thwarted the passage of people, pierced the ground, split apart rocks, dug deep into the ground, and bit into the soil, or with extra power, leaped back and crossed the dark road, gradually rising to an inch.

Natural railroad ties rested on a ladder of rocks. While short of breath, Kingo climbed the comfortable steps, a gift from the mountain spirit.

Hikage vines crawled toward the cedar trees lining the road as if leaking out of the darkness. If the growth wrapped around one's legs, the full length of the pulled vine would be revealed. Out-of-reach decaying fern swayed erratically on the windless day.

"Over here. Over here," said Hajime, his voice, sounding like a *tengu* goblin, quickly rose above his head. When Kingo stepped on the ground of layers of decayed grass, the ground did not spring back to hide his deep boot prints. He finally thought of pushing on his Western-style umbrella to climb to the *tengu*'s seat.

"Well done! Fantastic! I've been waiting quite some time for you. What took you so long?"

"Yeah" was all Kingo said. Suddenly, he let go of his umbrella and dropped his butt onto it with a thud.

"Are you going to throw up again? Before you do, please take in this view for a moment. It would be terrible to throw up while you're looking," he said, pointing his walking staff between the cedars. The sparkling lake at Ōmi glimmered through the gaps neatly standing between the old trunks framing the sky.

"Of course," said Kingo, straining to see.

There was no satisfaction in simply opening a mirror. The tengu goblins on Eizan avoided the brightness of the famous Biwa mirror and drank themselves into a stupor on sacred sake stolen in the early evening. Like cloudy breaths blown over a surface, hazy hot air spread throughout the fields and valleys. The spring scenery brimming with colors collected on the paint palette of a giant and effortlessly smeared with a brush faded over a radius greater than twenty miles.

"Of course," said Kingo again.

"All you can say is of course? No matter what you're shown, you are never pleased."

"Show me? You didn't make this."

"That sort of ingratitude marks a philosopher. You study the lack of filial piety and are out of touch with day-to-day people."

"I'm truly sorry.

"So I'm a scholar of the lack of filial piety? Ha, ha, ha, ha. You can see white sails. Over there, nothing is moving before the background of the blue mountain on that island. No matter how long I watch nothing moves."

"Sails are boring. The nondescript parts resemble you. But it's beautiful. Hey, I'm here, too."

"And there are more far off by the purple shore."

"Oh, yes. There they are. All of it is boring and featureless."

"It's all like a dream."

"What is?"

"What is? The scene before your eyes."

"Really? I thought you were remembering something. You are better at handling objects. If it's a dream, it's no good to stand there with your hands in your pockets."

"What are you talking about?"

"Of course, what I'm saying is only a dream. Ah, ha, ha, ha, ha. Where did Taira no Masakado exhale fire in the old days?"

"That's on the other side because we're looking down on Kyōto. It's not this way.
He was a fool, too."

"Masakado? Well, rather than merely breathing out fire, a philosopher will vomit."

"What sort of things does a philosopher vomit?"

"To become a true philosopher, you become cerebral. You simply think. A full
daruma."

"What is that smoky-looking island?"

"That island? It's shrouded by a murky haze. That's probably the huge Chikubu
Island."

"Are you sure?"

"What? Behave. I adhere to the doctrine that an alias doesn't matter if it's the truth."

"Does that truth exist in this world? Thus, an alias is necessary."

"Is everything human like a dream? Goodness."

"Only the thing called death is the truth."

"That's awful."

"If you bump into death, the fickleness of human beings never ends."

"Because it's fine that it never ends, there's no chance of that encounter."

"Never is coming now. When it comes, then they'll think, Oh, I see."

"Who?"

"People who like intricate carving with small knives."

If you descend the mountain and step onto the Ōmi plains, you will be in Hajime's world. Gazing at a distance from a high, dark, sunless place and never approaching the bright world of spring is Kingo's world.

Chapter 2

A woman resembles a rich purple dot extracted from springtime at the height of a day in March wrapped around crimson, and the dot vividly trickles down in sleeping Heaven and Earth.

Fine gold legs hammered with crystalline slivers of iridescent shells are set to tame folded-back side locks of black hair, a dream world more fascinating to gaze at than a dream. On the quiet day, the observer's heart carried off to some distant world is jolted back to reality by the twitching of her dark eyes.

During the spread of half of a drop, her intense eyes steal the moment, create the power of a swift wind, and exist in, yet dominate the spring. When her eyes swim against the current and reach the border of magical powers, bones whiten in paradise and never return to this mortal world. This is not a simple dream. While the fuzzy dream grows, a brilliant point of a star portending disaster draws closer to the purple eyebrows, it says, "Look at me until I die." The woman is wearing a purple kimono.

On this serene day, the woman gently pulled out a bookmark and read the heavy volume adorned with gold leaf on her lap.

... she said [kneeling before his grave]: "Dear Antony, I buried thee but lately with hands still free; now, however, I pour libations for thee as a captive, and so carefully guarded that I cannot either with blows or tears disfigure this body of mine, which is a slave's body, and closely watched that it may grace the triumph over thee. Do not expect other honors or libations; these are the last from Cleopatra the captive. For though in life nothing could part us from each other, in death we are likely to change places; thou, the Roman, lying buried here, while I, the hapless

woman, lie in Italy, and get only so much of thy country as my portion. But if indeed there is any might or power in the gods of that country (for the gods of this country have betrayed us), do not abandon thine own wife while she lives, nor permit a triumph to be celebrated over myself in my person, but hide and bury me here with thyself, since out of all my innumerable ills not one is so great and dreadful as this short time that I have lived apart from thee."

The woman raised her head. Her sheer make-up floated slightly when she stiffened her pale cheeks as if excess matter were stored in the bottom layer. The man keen to discern what was stored in that layer became her prisoner. Spellbound, his mouth shifted slightly. When the shape of his mouth crumbled, this man's will had already fallen prey to his rival. Her lower lip was deliberately colored. The instant she started to speak but did not, the one under attack always failed to deflect.

The woman only moved her eyes to glance, like a falcon strike from the sky. The man grinned. The contest was already over. A crab flicking its tongue to the front of its jaw and foaming at the mouth is a clumsy strategy in a fight against crows and herons. Pounding drums push an army to victory in battle.

A reluctant pledge to surrender is the most ordinary strategy. A strategy that blows needles containing honey and forces sake drinking to deliver poison still has not reached its full potential.

The exchange of even one word is not allowed in the supreme battle. A flower picked as a greeting over a long distance away is silent and unspoken. In a moment of hesitation, as expected, evil spirits that strike the emptiness write *indecisive*, write *delusional*, and write *a lost child*, and abruptly withdraw.

In the will-o'-wisp of life's successes in this world, characters written indiscriminately with blue phosphorous blown onto the tip of a writing brush are not

easily erased by sweeping them away with a brush of gray hairs. He smiled, but in the end, had no reason to retract his smile.

"Seizō," called the woman.

"Huh?" the man promptly answered with no time to fix his collapsed mouth.

A smile appeared half unconsciously over his lips until the wave of his heart was written in cursive characters when he had nothing to do.

When on the verge of running out of characters, he worried the second wave that should be written would not come. The exclamation "Oh?" of a timely offer easily slipped from his throat.

From the beginning, the woman was a schemer. Having elicited the "Oh?" she said nothing for a moment.

"What is it?"

The man managed to speak. If he couldn't continue, they would get along very well. If they can't get along, they'll feel uncomfortable. Taking notice of the other person always evokes this emotion, even among royalty. Not to mention, in addition to the purple woman, from the beginning, speechlessness was foolish in the man's eyes that reflected nothing.

The woman remained quiet. A sword-bearer wearing a boy's *chigomage* topknot mingling with the young pine in a Yōsai painting hanging in the alcove possessed the tranquility of long ago. The fawn-colored horse's owner, dressed in a *kariginu* kimono, could not see the moving scenery in the routine of a courtier accustomed to peaceful days.

Only the man was anxious. A first arrow missed the mark. Where the second arrow struck was uncertain. If it missed, she must keep trying. The man held his breath and stared at the woman's face. The emotion of expectation filled his slender face, lacking in flesh. While wondering about the odds, he wished for a hopeful sign from the ample lips.

"Are you still here?" the woman calmly asked. This was a surprising response.

The bow pulled and aimed at the sky seemed to return the gourd-shaped feather perilously above his head. She forgot about the man's ego and returned to watching her companion.

From the beginning, the woman seemed to forget about the man seated before her and was lost in the book opened on her lap. As was her habit, when the woman discovered the beauty of the gold leaf on the book, she yanked it from the hands of the man carrying it and began reading.

The man only said, "Oh."

"Does she intend to go to Rome?"

The woman looked at the man's face with an unconvinced expression that made no sense. Seizō had to take responsibility for Cleopatra's behavior.

"She's not going. She's not going," he said as if pleading with an unrelated queen.

"She didn't go? I wouldn't go," she finally said in agreement.

Seizō barely slipped out of the dark tunnel.

"If you look at works written by Shakespeare, women with that personality appear often."

Seizō exited the tunnel, jumped on a bicycle, and flew off. *A fish dances in deep waters / A kite spreads its wings and soars in the sky.* Seizō was a man who lived in a land of poems.

A place where the pyramid's sky burns, a place that embraces the sands of the Sphinx, a place where the long river harbors crocodiles, and a place where the enchanting Cleopatra embraced Antony two thousand years ago while her beautiful skin was gently cooled by an ostrich-feather fan are excellent subjects for paintings or themes for fine poetry, which was Seizō's specialty.

"When I look at the Cleopatra depicted by Shakespeare, I get a peculiar sensation."

"What sort of sensation?"

"While pulled into an ancient hole, unable to get out, and in a daze, the purple Cleopatra is vividly projected before my eyes. From among peeling colorful woodblock prints, only one person suddenly blazed in purple came floating out."

"Purple? You often mentioned purple. Why purple?"

"Why? That is how it feels."

"Well, is this the color?" she asked while deftly waving her long sleeve half spread out on the blue tatami mat before the tip of Seizō's nose. Cleopatra's scent struck the depth between his eyebrows.

"What?" He abruptly returned to his senses. Like a little cuckoo that skims the sky and pierces through the bottom of falling rain faster than a carriage pulled by a team of four horses, strange colors briefly flickered and quickly faded away. She placed her beautiful hands, resting so quietly they seemed to lack a pulse, on her knees.

The scent of Cleopatra gradually escaped his nose. He longingly pursued the receding figure of the shadow that unexpectedly called out from two thousand years ago. Seizō's heart was lured to a far-off boundary and pulled back to a moment two thousand years ago.

He said, "This is not the love of a gentle breeze, the love of tears, or the love of grief. This love of a torrential rainstorm and the love of deluges, not recorded on calendars, are the loves of a dagger."

"Is that love of a dagger purple?"

"The love of a dagger is not purple. The love of purple is the dagger."

"When the love is cut, does purple blood spill out?"

"When love angers, the dagger is said to flash purple."

"Did Shakespeare write that?"

"I evaluated the writings of Shakespeare. When Antony married Octavia in Rome, and when a messenger brings news of the marriage to Cleopatra, then Cleopatra's ..."

"Purple is dyed darker with jealousy."

"When purple is scorched by the Egyptian sun, a cold short dagger shines."

"Is this darkness all right?"

Soon after she asked, a long sleeve flashed again.

Seizō was interrupted. Even if he sought something from his companion, she was a woman who wouldn't consent unless shown deference. Looking pleased, the woman who removed the malice confidently gazed at his face.

"Then what did Cleopatra do?"

She held him down but loosened the reins again. Seizō had to dash away.

"She thoroughly questioned the messenger about Octavia. The questioner is interesting because the interrogation brings out Cleopatra's personality. Is Octavia tall like me? What color is her hair? Is her face oval? Is her voice soft? How old is she? She questioned the messenger about every little thing."

"How old was the person asking all the questions?"

"Cleopatra was just thirty."

"So she's a little old like me?"

The woman cocked her head and giggled. The man was captured by her mysterious dimples and a bit confused. If he agrees, it becomes a lie. A simple denial is customary. The man was unable to answer until the point where a sparkling line of gold mingled with her shiny white teeth and disappeared again. The woman was twenty-four. For a long time, Seizō knew there was a three-year difference in their ages.

A beautiful woman older than twenty and without a husband counts one, two, three in vain. It's a mystery why to this day at the age of twenty-four she had not yet become a bride. Amid the futile aging of a spring residence, watching the shadows of flowers in full bloom on long days soon to be gone, and playing a koto with a bitter expression are the habits of women in the world of the late to marry. Echoes resembling the sounds from a biwa are heard on the koto's bridge in the occasional non-existent sounds swept away by a priest's *hossu* brush. More mysterious was their interest and enjoyment in its unnatural tones. The details are not understood any more than at the beginning. Sometimes, the shadows of the words exchanged between this man and this woman are peered into, and unneeded speculation secretly predicts the signs of divination of a nebulous love.

"As I age, will the jealousy worsen?" she asked Seizō again.

Once more, Seizō was unnerved. A poet must understand people. He was duty-bound to answer her question. However, he had no reason to answer about things he knew nothing of. The man who has never seen the jealousy of the middle-aged woman could not help despite being a poet and a literary man. Seizō was a literary man proficient in letters.

"Well, let me see. It depends on the person."

Instead of being direct, his response was muddy. She was not a woman who would let the matter rest.

"When I become that woman of a certain age, no, now I am that woman. Ha, ha, ha. What should I do, if I reach that age?"

"You will ... Now, you ... are jealous."

"I am."

The woman's voice coldly slashed the quiet spring breeze. The man who happily lived in a poetic land quickly lost his footing and fell into the mundane world. If he falls, he is an ordinary person. The other person looks down on him from a high, inaccessible cliff. He had no time to think about who kicked him down to this place.

"How old was Kiyohime when she transformed into a serpent after her love was rejected?"

"Of course, if she weren't in her teens, there never would have been a play. She was perhaps eighteen or nineteen."

"And her obsession Anchin?"

"Wasn't he around twenty-five?"

"Seizō."

"Yes."

"How old are you?"

"Me? ... Well, I'm ..."

"Don't you know without thinking?"

"No, what? I'm the same age as Kingo."

"Oh, yes, you're the same age as my brother. However, he looks much older."

"What? That's not true."

"Yes, it is."

"Shall I indulge you?"

"Yes, please do. Although your face is not youthful, you are young at heart."

"Can you see that?"

"You look like a pampered rich boy."

"How sad."

"It's actually cute."

Twenty-four years old for a woman is thirty years old for a man. The reason is not known. The fallacy is not known, too. Why the Earth rotates and why it settles down, of course, are unknown. While the great stage of all ages develops with no bounds, you don't know from the beginning what position you'll occupy and what role you'll play. The clever person is only glib.

A woman cannot make the world her rival, turn around to face the people of a nation, and handle matters before the eyes of the masses. A woman understands the trick of having only one rival. In a one-on-one fight, the woman always wins. The man always loses. The woman is raised inside a metaphorical cage, pecking at feed grains and happily fluttering her wings. In her small heaven in the cage, any competitor to the woman in singing bird calls will always be defeated. Seizō is a poet. Because of that, only half of his head is poking inside this cage. Seizō entirely failed to chirp.

"That's adorable. Exactly like Anchin."

"Anchin is horrible."

His apology was unspoken, but he understood this time.

"You're dissatisfied," said the woman, smiling with her eyes.

"But ..."

"But what is horrible?"

"I'm not running away like Anchin."

This is called being put on the defense by failing to escape. The rich boy did not know about seeing a chance and cleanly withdrawing.

"Ha, ha, ha. I'll chase after you like Kiyohime."

The man was quiet.

"Am I a few years too old to become a snake?"

An untimely springtime flash of lightning emerged from the woman and pierced the man's chest. The color was purple.

"Fujio."

"What is it?"

The man who called and the woman who was called sat facing each other. The six-tatami-mat sitting room was isolated by dense green shrubbery, even the echoes of vehicles passing back and forth were faint. In the lonely transient world, they were the only two people alive. In the tatami area with a brown border, when their faces were just two feet apart staring at each other, society receded far from them.

The Salvation Army is striking large drums and parading through the city. Hospitalized patients afflicted with peritonitis are taking faint breaths. Nihilists in Russia are throwing bombs. At the railway station, pickpockets are being arrested. Fires are burning. Babies are born. At the parade grounds, new soldiers are being upbraided. People are jumping to their deaths. Others are being killed. Fujio's older brother and Hajime are climbing Eizan.

The figures of a man and a woman calling each other's name deep in the pleasure quarters weighed down by the fragrance of flowers brightly dance on the shadow of spring sinking into the depths of death. The universe is the universe of this couple.

The door of the heart crisscrossed by the blood vessels of three thousand veins and arteries and surging with young circulating blood opens with love and closes with love, and vividly draws the motionless man and woman in the depths of the vast sky.

Their fates are determined in this dangerous moment. If a body is moved slightly to the east or west, it ends.

Calling is not a simple matter, nor is being called. Obstacles greater than life and death await them.

Will explosives covering everything be detonated or detonate? The bodies of the two motionless people are two fiery masses.

"Welcome home."

A voice echoed in the entryway. Wheels grinding down the gravel came to a stop. The opening of the sliding screen door was heard. The sounds of lightly trotting footsteps traveled down the hallway. The tense postures of the two people collapsed.

"My mother has returned," casually said the woman, remaining seated.

"Oh," the man answered, sounding relaxed.

As long as your heart is not exposed to the outside, it is not a crime. A solvable puzzle is weak as evidence in a court of law. Inadvertently, the pair entertaining each other were at ease while tacitly approving of what happened between them. The whole world is at peace. No one can point fingers behind their backs. If they can, they're at fault. The world will be peaceful to the very end.

"Was your mother out?"

"Yes, she did a little shopping."

"I should be going," he said and adjusted his seating position before standing. He was a man who worried about ruining the pleats of his pants and always sat as relaxed as possible.

He lifted his backside, grabbing onto a support when needed. He placed both hands on his knees. Cuffs like snow covered the backs of his hands. From beneath his dull gray sleeves, sparkling his-and-hers cloisonné buttons appeared.

"Please, there's no need for you to go. My mother has returned, but we have no urgent tasks," said the woman, showing no sign of welcoming her mother home. The man did not attempt to stand.

"But," he said as he searched his pocket and retrieved a thick cigarette. The smoke from the cigarette mostly distracted him. The cigarette was an Egyptian brand and sported a golden mouthpiece tip. In the dark color blown into a ring, a mountain, or a cloud, with his hip raised, he adjusted his sitting position, which made it possible for him to shrink the space between Cleopatra and himself.

As thin smoke slowly drifted out and passed over his black mustache, as expected, Cleopatra gave a clear order, "Please, sit down."

The silent man sat more comfortably. The spring day was endless for both of them.

"I can't stand the loneliness these past days of only having women around."

"When will Kingo return?"

"When will he come home? I haven't the slightest idea."

"Has he sent any messages?"

"No."

"Kyōto is probably quite interesting this time of year."

"It would have been nice if you had gone, too."

"Well, I ..." said Seizō but stopped.

"Why didn't you go?"

"I have no particular reason."

"But aren't all of you old friends?"

"Are we?"

Seizō rudely let his cigarette ashes drop onto the tatami. When he said, "Are we?" his hand jerked involuntarily.

"Didn't you live in Kyōto for a long time?"

"So you know each other?"

"Yes."

"Because the friendship is fairly old, I didn't feel like going."

"You're too heartless."

"What? That's not so," said Seizō somewhat seriously and breathed the Egyptian cigarette into his lungs.

"Fujio. Fujio."

A voice called out across from the sitting room.

"Oh, is that your mother?" asked Seizō.

"Yes."

"I should probably be going."

"Why?"

"You may have things to do?"

"Does it matter if I do? Aren't you a scholar? A professor comes to teach, does it matter who comes home?"

"But I've hardly taught you anything."

"Well, I'm beginning to be taught. If I've learned only that, it has been a lot."

"Is that so?"

"Haven't you taught me about Cleopatra and many other things?"

"If you like Cleopatra, there's much to learn."

"Fujio. Fujio," her mother sharply called.

"Please, excuse me for a moment. Please wait. There's something I wish to ask you."

Fujio left. The man stayed in the six-tatami sitting room. Traces of residual smoke, spilled ashes, and undisturbed ashes lay on an antique Satsuma incense burner placed on the floor. Fujio's room was quiet yesterday and today. The warmth of the room waiting for the owner at the abandoned sitting cushion of twilled fabric was quietly swept away by a light spring breeze.

Seizō said nothing and looked at the incense burner and the futon. In a corner floating above the tatami of a broken lattice, a shiny object was wedged deep inside.

Seizō turned his head slightly to the side and thought about searching for the shiny object. It looked like a watch. He hadn't noticed it until that moment.

When Fujio got up, the futon might have flexed, brushed against the silk partition, and exposed the hidden object. There was no need to hide a watch under a futon. Seizō peeked under the futon again.

He folded over the chain of connected links formed from pine needles and revealed the front. An edge with a raised *nanako* pattern slightly rose in the depths reflecting fine light rays. It was a watch. Seizō tilted his head.

The gold was rich in color purity. Those who love wealth and rank always love this color. Those who beg for honors always choose this color. Those who achieve fame always adorn themselves in this color.

Just as a magnet attracts iron, this color turns every head. Anyone who does not kneel in reverence before this color is rubber with no elasticity. He can't pass through the world as an individual. Seizō thought, This is a good color.

From the direction of the opposite sitting room, the rustling sounds of silk approached, transmitted along the curved veranda. Seizō quickly averted his peeking eyes, feigned innocence, and found himself staring at a Yōsai hanging scroll when two figures appeared at the threshold.

One wore a black silk crepe kimono with three family crests stylishly draped over her shoulders and a dull half-collar. Only her traditional hairstyle shined.

"Ah, welcome," said the mother, slightly bowing and sitting near the open-air veranda.

Instead of the songs of bush warblers, in the garden thoroughly swept clean until not a speck of dust was seen, a lone, overly tall, pine tree stood as if it owned everything. This pine and this mother could be thought to be one and the same.

"Fujio has been only trouble for you. She speaks so selfishly because she is nothing more than a child. Must she always greet people with 'Please, make yourself at home.' As she has gotten older, it has become rude.

"In truth, she's a baby, only fusses, and quibbles endlessly. However, I am grateful to you for instilling a fondness for English in her. Lately, she seems to have been reading challenging works and has become fairly skilled.

"Since her brother is here, it would be nice if he taught her. Perhaps siblings are incapable of doing that."

The mother's eloquence was impressive. Seizō found no pause to interject one word, was seduced, and ran off, but his destination was never clear. Fujio silently opened the book borrowed from Seizō a short time ago and continued reading.

After making this lamentation and crowning and embracing the coffin, she ordered a bath to be prepared for her. After bathing, she lay down and enjoyed a splendid banquet. And there came one from the country bringing a basket; and on the guards asking what he brought, the man opened it, and taking off the leaves showed the vessel full of figs.... After feasting, Cleopatra took a tablet, which was already written, and sent it sealed to Caesar, and, causing all the rest of her attendants to withdraw except those two women, she closed the door. As soon as Caesar opened the tablet and found in it the prayers and lamentations of Cleopatra, who begged him to bury her with Antonius, he saw what had taken place. At first he was for setting out himself to give help, but the next thing that he did was to send persons with all speed to inquire. But the tragedy had been speedy; for, though they ran thither and found the guards quite ignorant of everything, as soon as they opened the door they saw Cleopatra lying dead on a golden couch in royal attire. Of her two women, Eiras was dying at her feet, and Charmion, already staggering and drooping her head, was arranging the diadem on the forehead of Cleopatra. One of them saying in passion, "A good deed this, Charmion."

"Yes, most goodly," she replied, "and befitting the descendant of so many kings."

She spake not another word, but fell there by the side of the couch.

Now it is said that the asp was brought with those figs and leaves, and was covered with them; for that

Cleopatra had so ordered, that the reptile might fasten on her body without her being aware of it. But when she had taken up some of the figs and saw it, she said, "Here then it is," and baring her arm, she offered it to the serpent to bite.

After the sentence, *Yes, most goodly ... and befitting the descendant of so many kings*, the entire page seemed subtly blurred, as though the delicate last wisp of burning incense was drawn into emptiness.

"Fujio," called her unobservant mother.

The man, at last relaxed, was generous and looked toward the one being called. She was looking down.

"Fujio," her mother called again.

Her eyes finally left the page. Beneath her white forehead touching her billowy traditional *hasashigami* hairstyle was her thin but not bony nose. Her lips tinted red ... her lips smoothly slipped. The edges of her cheeks blended firmly with her chin. Her throat gracefully abandoned her chin and gradually emerged in the real world.

"What?" answered Fujio. A response between day and night from the woman standing between day and night.

"Oh, you're too indifferent. Is that book that interesting? Please read it later. Aren't you being rude?"

"Your naive selfishness is troublesome. Did you borrow that book from Seizō? It's quite pretty. Please, don't sully it. You don't value books ..."

"I'm being careful."

"Well, that's good, not like that last time ..."

"That was Kingo's fault."

"What did Kingo do?" asked Seizō, opening his mouth to speak, as usual for the first time."

"No, you are a gathering of selfishness. From the beginning to the end, all you do is argue like a small child. Lately, your brother's books ..."

Her mother looked at Fujio and wondered whether to keep speaking. Blackmail with compassion is a game preferred by older people and used against younger ones.

"What happened to Kingo's books?" Seizō timidly asked.

"Shall I tell him?"

Half smiling, the older woman held back. Her spirit was as if she thrust out a toy dagger.

"I threw my brother's books into the garden," said Fujio, ignoring her mother. Her pointed answer was hurled to strike between Seizō's eyebrows. Her mother forced a smile. Seizō's mouth hung open.

"As you know, her brother is quite the eccentric," said Fujio's mother, indirectly humoring her daughter, who was given to despair.

"Has Kingo returned home, yet?" asked Seizō, finding the perfect moment to change the subject.

"He's exactly like you, a bullet. He leaves and doesn't return. He complains constantly about his terrible health.

"If that's so, I suggested he take a short trip. But he kept on fussing. Finally, Hajime asked the immovable man to accompany him.

"However, he is truly a bullet. Young people are ..."

"Kingo's young and exceptional. He's special because he excels in philosophy."

"I guess so. Although I don't know anything ... Hajime is a carefree fellow and is truly a bullet. That is a problem."

"Ah, ha, ha. He's full of life and an interesting fellow."

"Speaking of Hajime, where is that object you had earlier?" asked Fujio's mother, raising her keen eyes and scanning the room.

"It's here," said Fujio, leaned over, stood, and smoothly slid the twill sitting cushion on the new tatami. The signs of wealth and nobility were the seven lids stacked inside the chain coiled around three times.

She reached out her right hand. While she considered making the shiny object ring out, the chain slipped from her palm and dropped to the tatami. When stopped by its

length at one foot, excess force pulled it to the side. The decorative garnets affixed to the edge and the long object swung back and forth several times.

This first swing hit Fujio's white forearm with a deep red jewel. The second swing moved toward Kanze, the goddess of mercy, gently touching her cuff. When the third swing quieted down, she sprang to her feet.

She sat in front of Seizō who was gazing blankly at the scene of beautiful colors moving quickly and jumbled together in duos or trios.

"Mother," she said, looking back, "Do this and it will stand out." She turned back around.

The gold chain shaped like pine needles passed through the button holes on the front of Seizō's padded vest and glittered radiantly against the dark, felt-like melton fabric.

"Well?" asked Fujio.

"Of course, it's quite fetching," said her mother.

"What's going on?" asked Seizō while being wrapped in smoke. Fujio's mother giggled.

"Shall I give it to you?" asked Fujio, glancing to the side. Seizō said nothing.

"Well, we should stop," she said, stood again, and took the gold watch from him.

Chapter 3

On this rainy day, long, thin strands of smoke hanging like a willow tree were blown in columns. In the darkness of a navy blue business suit hanging on a clothes rack, black tabi socks were turned down by a third and curled into balls. An elegant carry-all cloth bag sat on top of narrow staggered shelves. Loose strings listlessly dangled down. Beside it, toothpaste and white toothpicks said, "Good morning." Threads of white rain passed through the glass of the tightly closed *shōji* sliding door and shined in long, narrow lights.

"Kyōto is a terribly cold place," said Hajime, as he put a padded meisen-silk workman's apron over his rented *yukata* summer kimono. He sat boldly with his legs flung out and his back supported by the alcove's pine post. While glancing outside, he began talking to Kingo, who was sitting with a camel hair blanket covering his lap and an air cushion puffing up his black hair.

"More than cold, this is a sleepy place," he said, slightly shifting his head. His combed, damp hair joined the discarded tabi socks by the bounce in the air.

"All you do is sleep. You came all the way to Kyōto to sleep."

"Uh-huh. This is a relaxing place."

"Then relax. That's fine. Your mother was worried."

"Hmph."

"'Hmph' is your response. Even so, I'm going to a lot of trouble that is unknown to others to get you to relax."

"Can you read those characters [霽雨愁風] in that picture?"

"Let me see. It's unusual. Is it read *sen u shū hū*? I've never seen it before. I see the radical for person [亻], so does it have something to do with people? People write unnecessary characters. What was it originally?"

"I don't know."

"Not knowing is all right. More than that, this fusuma sliding screen is interesting. The gold paper pasted on one side is magnificent. The wrinkles here and there surprised me. It looks like a prop in a shabby kabuki theater. Take those three bamboo shoots over there. They were drawn economically. What do you think? Hey, Kingo, this is a mystery."

"What's a mystery?"

"I don't know, but it's a mystery because something with an unknown meaning is drawn."

"Is it a puzzle because you don't understand the meaning? It's a mystery because it has meaning."

"But I think anything devoid of meaning is a mystery to a philosopher. I'm thinking as hard as possible. It's like bursting a blood vessel to study a crazy move discovered in a shōgi checkmate problem."

"Well, a crazed painter probably drew these bamboo shoots."

"Ha, ha, ha, ha. If you reason like that, the problem vanishes."

"Do the world and bamboo shoots go together?"

"Isn't there a legend called the Gordian Knot? Do you know about it?"

"You think everyone else is a middle-school student."

"Even if I don't think so, please listen. If you know it, tell me."

"What a pain you are. I know about it."

"So, tell me. A philosopher often deceives others because he's a person who is too obstinate and unable to confess not knowing no matter what he's asked ..."

"I don't know which of us is too obstinate."

"Either one is fine. Now, tell me."

"The Gordian Knot is a legend from the age of Alexander the Great."

"Yes, I know. And ..."

"A farmer called Gordias dedicated a cart to the god Jupiter ..."

"Hey, hey, wait a minute. Did that happen? And then ..."

"You ask if that happened. Don't you know?"

"I didn't know that much."

"What? You have the habit of not knowing yourself."

"Ha, ha, ha, ha. The teachers didn't teach that when I was in school. I'm sure those teachers didn't know that much."

"Anyway, no one could untie the knot tied by the farmer at the cart shafts and the crosspiece."

"Of course, that is the Gordian Knot. So? That knot was a problem to Alexander, so he cut it with his sword. Am I right?"

"Alexander didn't say it was a problem."

"All right. Go on."

"When he heard the oracle say the knot would be untied by whoever would rule all of The East, Alexander said, 'In that case, I'll do this ...'"

"I know that. I was taught that by my schoolteacher."

"Then, you understand now?"

"It's good. I think it's unacceptable if people don't understand his saying 'It doesn't matter how it's undone.'"

"That's fine, too."

"That is fine, too. This isn't a rivalry. No matter how much he thought about the Gordian Knot, he could not unravel it."

"Was cutting it the solution?"

"No, it wasn't, but it worked well given the situation."

"The situation? He was not a coward given the situation in the world."

"So the reason is Alexander became a big coward."

"Do you think Alexander is that great?"

The conversation briefly broke off. Kingo turned over. Hajime, still sitting with his legs flung out, opened up a travel guide. The rain came down at an angle.

When the lonely drizzle falling on the old capital city intensified enough to bounce off the back of a swallow showing its red belly to the sky as it darted off, the gentle rain dampened Shimokyō, the district bustling with merchants, and Kamikyō, the home of nobility and aristocrats. At the green base of the thirty-six peaks, the only sounds were

the flowing waters dissolving the reds of Yuzen silk dye and water pouring over the flowers of vegetables.

"You're upstream, and I'm downstream ..."

If he removed the weight of the hand towel hiding his eyebrows at the gate where parsley was being washed, he could see the giant Daimonji character on the mountainside.

Generations of springtimes have grown moss over the emperor's consorts, Matsumushi and Suzumushi. Only their graves remain in a thicket where bush warblers should be singing.

At Rashōmon Gate where demons appeared, the gate was torn down after demons no longer came out. No one knows the fate of the demon's arm lopped off by the warrior Watanabe no Tsuna. The spring rain of the old days fell. Rain falls on the temples in Teramachi, on bridges in Sanjō, on cherry blossoms in Gion, on pine trees at Kinkaku-ji Temple, and on Kingo and Hajime on the second floor of the inn.

Kingo wrote in his diary while lying down. He opened a bit of the brown cloth binding to bend a corner stained with sweat. After turning a couple of pages, he found a page about a third empty and began writing. He picked up the pen with spirit.

Rain falling on a beautiful house

People ancient and modern sit in tranquility

He wrote this Chinese verse and then thought for a moment. He seemed at a loss for what words to add.

Hajime flung aside the travel guide, startling the tatami with a thud, and went out to the veranda.

A one-legged rattan stool, perfect for the veranda, sat in the dampness as though waiting for someone. The sitting room in the house next door could be seen through scattered weeping golden bell flowers. The shōji screen was shut tight. Sounds of a koto escaped from inside.

Sounds of a koto suddenly heard
A weeping willow droops in resentment

Kingo wrote this ten-character verse on another line but looked displeased and immediately drew a line through it. The rest of his entry was plain prose.

The universe is a mystery. Each man solves the mystery as he wishes. Solving it his way and calming himself are happiness. If you doubt this, even a parent is a mystery. Even brothers are a mystery. A wife, children, and even seeing oneself are mysteries.

A person is born into this world to push against mysteries, become old and gray, and agonize in the dead of night.

To solve the mystery of parents, you must become one body with your parents. To solve the mystery of your wife, you must have the same heart as your wife. To solve the puzzle of the universe, you must have the same mind and body as the universe. If you can do this, your parents, wife, and the universe become suspect. It is an insolvable mystery. It is painful. At the moment the unsolvable mysteries are the parents and siblings, the preferred new mystery of a wife usually becomes distress over one's financial position and being entrusted with other people's money.

The problems of only having the new mystery of a wife or forcing the painful birth of a new mystery within a new mystery accumulated interest for the entrusted money and another person's earnings managed as one's own. All suspicions throw out the body and can find the solution for

the first time. The problem is how does one throw the body away. Death? Death is too ineffective.

Before Hajime settled down on the rattan stool, he was listening to the koto next door. Within the chill of early spring at the Omuro Imperial Palace, he should not know the elegance of an expert biwa performance. There is no elegant pursuit that nobly thinks about the thirteen strings stretched into a shape resembling a southern iris and the lacquered tongue decorated with gold set in ivory. Hajime listened casually.

The small garden was not even one hundred square feet. Opposite the yellow weeping golden bell flowers trickling over the fence, shadows of many varieties of moss crept out of a thicket of Narihira bamboo. Eizan moss crawled over the entire surface. The sounds of the koto were coming from this garden.

Rain is first. In winter, raincoats freeze. In fall, lamp wicks dwindle. In summer, loincloths are washed. In spring, with flat silver ornamental hairpins dropped onto the tatami, the sounds of strumming and plucking were beside the gleaming red, gold, and indigo undersides of the shells used in the *kai-awase* shell-matching game. Hajime is surely listening to the plucked sounds.

"Shapes are seen in the eyes," said Kingo and wrote another line.

"The ears hear voices. Shapes and voices are not the true substance of an object. Although nothing proves an object's true substance, both shapes and voices are meaningless.

When some object is caught deep inside this, both the shape and voice become an entirely new shape and voice. This is an abstraction. An abstraction is a way for a mystery that is fundamentally empty to be seen by the eyes and heard by the ears."

The hands coming to play the koto gradually became frequent. Pauses were threaded through the rain. White claws seemed to fly several times over the bridge. A warm melody seemed to alternate plucking to intertwine the notes of the thick strings and the delicate notes.

Listening to a stringless koto, for the first time, I sense the meanings of the artistic modulations of the opening, middle, and climax.

When Kingo finished writing, Hajime leaned back on the stool and looked down on the neighboring house. His voice carried from the veranda into the room.

"Hey, Kingo, I can't say why, but it would be good to listen a little longer to that koto. She's quite good."

"Yes, I've been listening attentively for some time," said Kingo, setting down his diary.

"You can't listen carefully while asleep. Please come out here. I'm ordering you to take a business trip to the veranda."

"What are you talking about? I'm fine here. Stop bothering me," said Kingo, showing no signs of rising from his tilted air cushion.

"Hey, I have a clear view of Higashiyama."

"Really?"

"Hey, some guy is walking along the Kamogawa River. It's actually poetic. Some guy's walking by the river."

"Walking is good."

"How does that saying go? *Like many sleeping figures wrapped in futons on* wherever. Maybe people will sleep anywhere on a futon. Will you please come here and tell me?"

"No."

"While you're doing that, the waters of the Kamo are rising. It's bad. Oh no, the bridge looks like it's gonna collapse. Yikes, the bridge is collapsing."

"Even if it does, it won't affect me."

"The bridge falling won't affect you? It won't trouble you even if you can no longer see The Miyako Odori in the evening."

"No. Not at all," said Kingo, who looked bothered. He turned over in bed and gazed sideways at the bamboo shoots on the unremarkable golden sliding screen door.

"If you're so calm, there's no use. The only option for me is to surrender," said Hajime. At last, he yielded and entered the room.

"Hey, hey."

"What now? You are a pain."

"You probably heard that koto."

"Didn't I say I heard it?"

"You know, it's a woman."

"Of course."

"How old do you think she is?"

"Hmm, how old?"

"There's no competition with your indifference. If you're going to tell me, then clearly say, 'Please, tell me.'"

"Who says that?"

"You won't say? If you don't, then only I'll speak. Oh, that's Shimada."

"Is the tatami room open?"

"What? The tatami room is shut tight."

"As usual, that's a lame alias."

"The alias is the real name. I saw that woman."

"Why?"

"I want to listen."

"Not listening to anything is fine. It's more interesting to study these bamboo shoots than to listen to that. As I lie here and look to the side at these shoots, I wonder why they appear shorter."

"It's mostly because your eyes are looking from the side."

"What is the fate of the three lines drawn on the two sheets of thick paper?"

"Because it's pretty bad, it probably should lose one point."

"Why are the bamboo shoots deep blue?"

"It may become the mystery of food poisoning when eaten."

"Yes, it's a mystery. Can you solve mysteries?"

"Ha, ha, ha, ha. Sometimes I try to solve them. Although earlier I said I would solve the mystery of Shimada, I believe the inability to find a full solution is an absence of enthusiasm, which is unbecoming for a philosopher."

"If you want a solution, then solve it. You're that pretentious and not a philosopher who defers to others."

"Well, for now, my solution is trivial. Later, I'll lower my head. That koto's owner ..."

"Yes."

"I saw her."

"I just heard her."

"Oh? There's nothing else to talk about."

"If there isn't, that's fine."

"No, that's no good. Then I'll talk. Yesterday, when I finished my bath, I dried off and cooled off on the veranda. You'll probably want to hear this.

"I calmly looked around at the view of Ōtō. I felt good. The moment I lowered my eyes to look at the house next door as the young lady slid open the shōji door halfway, leaned against the door, and looked at the garden."

"She's a beauty."

"Yes, she's lovely, not as pretty as Fujio but better looking than Itoko."

"Really?"

"That's all you have to say. You possess too little altruism. Out of courtesy, you should say, 'That's unfortunate. It would have been nice if I saw her, too.'"

"That's unfortunate. It would have been nice if I saw her, too."

"Ha, ha, ha, ha. So I tried to show her to you, I told you to come out to the veranda."

"Wasn't the shōji shut?"

"At some point, it might have been open."

"Ha, ha, ha, ha. If it were Seizō, he'd probably wait until the door opened."

"That's true. It would have been good to bring along Seizō and show him."

"Kyōto is a good place for a man like him to live."

"Yes, it's very Seizō-like. I told the general to come or whatever, but in the end, he doesn't show."

"He says he has to study during the spring vacation."

"Can you study during the spring vacation?"

"I can't study when it's like that. A literary man is carefree and must not."

"That's a bit too close to home because I, too, am not very serious."

"No, a simple literary man is only a little hazy from drunkenness. He has no character because he can't sweep away the haze and discover his true self."

"A hazy drunkenness? A philosopher contemplates extraneous matters and makes pained expressions. He's probably drunk on saltwater."

"Despite climbing Eizan, as you saw, a man who can go deep into Wakasa is drunk on rain showers."

"Ha, ha, ha, ha. It's strange because each one of us is drunk."

Kingo's black hair finally rose from the pillow. When air heavy with moisture pressed down by the glossy hair bulged out by elastic forces, the pillow's position turned slightly on the tatami. At the same time, as the camel-hair lap blanket slipped down, he turned it over and folded it in half. His flat, narrow obi sash sloppily tied around his waist was exposed.

"Of course, I'm drunk," quickly commented Hajime, sitting properly on the pillow. With his arms extended in two steps and holding up his thin frame and his torso supported on the palms of his hands, Kingo scowled as he scanned his hips.

"You do look drunk. Aren't you sitting up unusually straight?" he said, staring at Hajime for a long time from under his upper, single eyelids.

"That's because I'm sober."

"You only sit like you're sober."

"My mind is also sober."

"Wearing a padded kimono and sitting properly while drunk, you smugly believe nothing will go wrong. That's funny. It's fine to look drunk when drunk."

"Really? Then, please excuse me," said Hajime and immediately switched to sitting cross-legged.

"You are admirable because you don't insist on being foolish. You're not so absurd as to be a fool and think you are wise."

"What you said about me seems to flow smoothly when you heed advice."

"Despite being drunk, if that's so, it's all right."

"Why are you so cocky? While knowing you are drunk, you probably can't sit cross-legged or kneel properly."

"You're a loafer just waiting around," said Kingo and smiled sadly.

Hajime went over determined to speak but suddenly looked serious. When he saw Kingo's smiling face, Hajime had to look serious.

Of the many expressions of many faces, some never fail to touch the human heart. They do not make the muscles on the face scramble to dance. They do not spark lightning in each strand of hair on the head. They do not cut the connections to the tear ducts to see a torrent of tears.

Pointless fury is like a swaggering young man brandishing a sword and cutting the floor. The motions are shallow. It's a play at a Hongō theater. Kingo's laughter wasn't laughter for the stage.

A wave of elusive compassion from the bottom of his heart barely flowed through a pipe as fine as a strand of hair. Momentary shadows were cast during the day in this transient world.

An expression that comes and goes is different. If you stick out your head and notice the transient world, you instantly return to the inner sanctuary. The one captured before turning back wins. If the capture fails, Kingo cannot be understood over a lifetime.

His laughter was thin and mildly cold. Within its docility, quickness, and fading away, his life will be vividly sketched. His acquaintances will understand the meaning of this moment.

Kingo was placed at the border of savagery. Parents and children have difficulty understanding this sort of person. Even brothers are strangers. Placing him at the border of savagery and, for the first time, sketching out his character becomes a crude novel. Savagery will not recklessly emerge in the twentieth century.

A spring trip is peaceful. Kyōto's inns are quiet. The two men are safe. They joke. Between them, Hajime understands Kingo, and Kingo understands Hajime. This is the world.

"Are you a loafer just waiting around?" asked Hajime, starting to twist the leather straps of the camel-hair lap blanket.

"Will you be a loafer forever?" he asked but didn't look at his companion's face. He repeated "forever" like a question, a soliloquy, or as though speaking to the camel-hair lap blanket.

"Even if I loaf right here, I am determined," said Kingo. Now, for the first time, he half rose to his feet and turned to face his companion.

"It would be nice if your father were alive."

"What? My father being alive may have been a problem."

"Maybe so," said Hajime, drawing out the last word.

"In short, if I give the house to Fujio, it'll all be settled."

"Then what will you do?"

"I'll be a loafer."

"At last, you will be a true loafer."

"Yes. It doesn't matter if I inherit the house, I'll loaf around, or don't inherit, I'll loaf around."

"But you can't. First of all, your mother will be troubled."

"Oh, Mother?"

Kingo made a strange face and looked at Hajime.

If I have doubts, even I can be deceived. At the intersection of interests of people other than me, the thickness of the skin that filters away the dust of losses is not easily

measured. A close friend gave that assessment of my mother. Was the assessment of her interior only understood outside of her?

Inescapable feelings hide somewhere in me or a demon deceives me. They say he, a relative on my father's side, is my best friend. Heavenly secrets are hard to divulge in a roundabout way.

Were Hajime's words intended to trick me into examining the depths of my heart about my feelings toward my stepmother? Even after seeing this, if Hajime is the same as always, then that's it. If he's a man who plays tricks, after pulling out my thoughts, there's no guarantee things won't be turned upside down.

Do Hajime's words echo his honest intent, without duplicity, to sincerely understand my mother's inner feelings? Making assumptions from aspects of his life, that may be so.

Perhaps, having been asked by my mother, I will stop my cowardly behavior of throwing a weighted probe into the bottom of the frightening, even to me, abyss of my sorrowful heart.

However, the honest person is more easily used. Though aware of my cowardice and being reduced to a pawn, I accept the wishes of my mother who misjudged me out of kindness to me. The mutually uninteresting results might come to light in the family before an inevitable time. In any case, a mouth that doesn't interrupt does not speak.

The two were silent for a short time. Next door, the koto was still being played.

"Is that koto being played in the style of the Ikuta school?" asked Kingo, changing the subject.

"It has gotten cold. I'm putting on my fox vest," said Hajime, changing the subject. The two conversed about two different subjects.

He opened the chest of his padded kimono robe and took down his usual strange padded undershirt from the top of the staggered shelf. When he leaned his body and passed his arms through, Kingo asked, "Is that vest handmade?"

"Yeah. A friend who went to China gave me the fur. Itoko sewed the front for me."

"It's genuine. It's well done. Itoko is different from Fujio and is practical, which is a good thing."

"It's good? Marrying her off is a little troublesome."

"Are there no good proposals?"

"Good proposals?" asked Hajime, glancing at Kingo. He said with no interest, "It's not that there are none ..."

As his words trailed off, Kingo changed the topic.

"When Itoko marries, it'll be your father's problem, too."

"It's a problem, and nothing can be done, but the trouble will come. But more than that, will you marry?"

"I ... uh ... I can't earn a living."

"So as your mother says, you should inherit the house ..."

"That's no good. Whatever she said, I'm not doing that."

"It's strange. Sorry. Because you are unsure, Fujio probably can't marry."

"It's not that she can't. She won't."

Hajime said nothing and twitched his nose.

"Don't force me to eat eel again. We eat eel all day every day. My stomach is stuffed with small bones. The truth is Kyōto is a foolish place. Why don't we go home?"

"You can go home. If it's the eels, you don't have to go home. However, your sense of smell is extremely keen. Can you smell the eel?"

"You can't? They're constantly being baked in the kitchen."

"With your level of intuition, my father possibly did not have to die in a foreign country. He seemed to have a dulled sense of smell."

"Ha, ha, ha, ha. Have your father's belongings been delivered?"

"They might have arrived by now. A fellow named Saeki from the diplomatic mission should bring them to us. There's probably nothing. A few books, maybe."

"There may be his customary watch."

"Yes. That watch he bought in London and was so proud of? That will probably come. That watch has been Fujio's toy since childhood. Once she had it in her hands, she rarely let it go. She was fascinated by the garnets in its chain."

"Thinking about it. That watch was an antique."

"Perhaps. He bought it on his first trip to The West."

"Please, give it to me as a memento of your father."

"I was thinking that, too."

"When your father went overseas this time, he promised to give it to me as a graduation present when he returned."

"I also remember that. This time, Fujio may seize it again and make it her toy."

"Can't Fujio let go of that watch? Ha, ha, ha. It doesn't matter. I'll get it anyway."

Kingo was silent and stared for a long time at the space between Hajime's eyebrows. On the lunch trays were the eels predicted by Hajime.