

\*This PDF is a simplified English version of the source text below. It has been translated from Japanese by ChatGPT for intermediate English learners.

Source text:

Miyazawa Kenji, *Ginga Tetsudo no Yoru* (Night on the Galactic Railroad)

Available at Aozora Bunko:

<https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000081/card456.html>

Miyazawa Kenji, *Night on the Galactic Railroad* (Simplified Edition, Translated by ChatGPT)

## Part 1

It was afternoon in the classroom. The air was still and a little warm. The teacher stood in front of a large black star map that hung on the board. A white band ran from top to bottom across the map. It looked soft and pale, like smoke in the night sky. The teacher pointed to it with a long stick and asked, “Do you know what this white thing really is? Some people say it is a river. Some say it is milk that was spilled in the sky. But what is it in truth?”

Campanella raised his hand at once. Four or five other children did the same. Giovanni also started to raise his hand. He remembered reading in a book that the white band was made of many stars. But he felt tired every day now. He worked in the morning and in the afternoon. He did not read much anymore. He felt as if he did not understand anything clearly. So he slowly put his hand down again.

The teacher saw him. “Giovanni, you know the answer, do you not?” he said.

Giovanni stood up quickly. But once he was on his feet, his mind went blank. Zanelli turned around from the front seat and gave a small laugh. Giovanni’s face grew red. His heart beat hard. The teacher spoke again in a calm voice. “When we look at the Milky Way through a large telescope, what do we see?”

Giovanni thought, It is stars. Of course it is stars. But he could not speak. Campanella was called next. He stood up too, though he had raised his hand with such bright hope before. Now he also could not answer. The teacher looked at him

in surprise. Then he turned back to the map.

“If we look closely, we see that this white band is made of many small stars. Is that right, Giovanni?”

Giovanni nodded. His eyes filled with tears. Yes, he had known it. He and Campanella had once read about it together in a book in Campanella’s father’s study. They had opened a large book and looked at a page full of small white points on a dark ground. They had looked at it for a long time. Campanella could not have forgotten. So why had he not answered? Giovanni felt a sharp pain in his chest. Maybe Campanella did not answer because he felt sorry for him. Lately Giovanni did not talk much. He was tired from work. He did not play with the others. He did not speak much even to Campanella. Maybe Campanella knew this and did not want to make him feel worse. The thought made Giovanni feel both sad and warm.

The teacher went on. “If we think of the Milky Way as a river, then each small star is like a grain of sand in that river. If we think of it as milk, then each star is like a small drop of fat in the milk. We and our sun float in space. When we look across that space, the stars far away gather into a white band. That is why we see it so.”

He showed them a model with small shining grains inside a round glass. He explained how the sun was near the middle, and how the stars looked many and white in one direction. The children listened. Then the bell rang. “Tonight is the festival of the Milky Way,” the teacher said. “Go outside and look at the sky. That is all for today.”

The children closed their books and left the room. Some boys stayed in the school yard. They stood around Campanella near a cherry tree. They were talking about going to the river to float lights made from small fruit. But Giovanni waved his arm and walked out of the gate alone.

The town was busy. People hung green leaves and small lights at their doors. Giovanni did not go home first. He turned three corners and entered a large print shop. He bowed to the man at the front desk, took off his shoes, and went inside. Even though it was still light outside, lamps burned over many machines. The

machines turned and made a loud sound. Workers read lines and counted letters in low voices.

Giovanni went to a tall table. A man gave him a small piece of paper and said, "Can you pick up this much type?" Giovanni took a flat box and sat near a bright lamp. With small tools he picked up tiny metal letters one by one. Some workers laughed softly when they saw him. "Good morning, little bug with the glass," one said. Giovanni wiped his eyes again and again and kept working.

When the clock struck six, he brought the full box back. The man took it and gave a small nod. At the desk in front, another man handed Giovanni a small silver coin. At once Giovanni's face grew bright. He bowed and ran out. He bought a loaf of bread and a small bag of sugar. Then he ran home.

His home was a small house in a back street. In front were boxes with green plants. "Mother, I am home," he called as he took off his shoes. His mother lay in the front room with a white cloth over her head. She had been ill for some time.

"You worked hard, did you not?" she asked in a soft voice.

"It was cool today. Are you better?" Giovanni asked.

"Yes, I feel a little better."

He opened the window. "I bought sugar. I will put it in your milk."

"You eat first," she said. "Your sister made something with tomato."

Giovanni ate bread and tomato. Then he said, "Mother, I think Father will come home soon."

"Why do you think so?"

"The paper said the catch in the north sea was very good."

His father had gone far away to work. Some boys said bad things, that his father had done wrong. Giovanni did not believe it. "Father would not do such a thing," he said. "He gave a large crab shell to the school. It is still there."

His mother smiled a little. They spoke of the past, of days when Giovanni often went to Campanella's house. There had been a small train there that ran with alcohol fire. Giovanni remembered how bright and happy those days had been.

"Tonight is the festival," his mother said. "Go and look. But do not go into the river."

“I will only look from the bank,” Giovanni said. “I will be back in an hour.”

He closed the window and stepped out into the dark street. The air was clear. Blue lights shone. Children ran in new clothes and blew whistles. They called out for the stars. But Giovanni walked with his head low. He went to the milk shop at the edge of town. The old woman there told him to come back later. So he turned toward the hill.

He climbed a small path through grass wet with dew. At the top, the sky opened wide. The Milky Way ran from south to north in a pale band. Giovanni lay down on the cool grass near a tall pole on the hill. The town lights shone far below like a deep sea palace. A train sound came from the dark plain. Small red lights moved in a line. Giovanni imagined people inside, peeling apples, laughing, talking. A deep sadness filled him.

He looked again at the Milky Way. The teacher had said it was empty space with stars. But to Giovanni it did not look cold and empty. It looked like a field, or a forest, or a wide land waiting to be walked. A blue star seemed to shake and grow long like a mushroom. The town itself looked like a cloud of stars.

Then the pole behind him seemed to change shape. It shone faintly, like a small fire. A strange voice called, “Milky Way Station, Milky Way Station.” The world grew bright at once, as if countless lights had been spread across the sky. Giovanni rubbed his eyes.

He felt a gentle shaking. A small train was running. He sat in a yellow-lit car at night. The seats were blue. In front of him sat a tall boy in a dark coat, looking out of the window.

Giovanni felt he knew that shape. The boy turned.

It was Campanella.

## Part 2

Campanella looked at Giovanni with clear eyes, as if it were the most natural thing in the world that they should meet there. The train moved with a soft, steady sound. Outside the window, the field of stars flowed past like bright grass in a

night wind.

“The others ran very fast,” Campanella said. “But they were late. Even Zanelli ran hard. He could not catch up.”

Giovanni felt no surprise. It seemed true that they had started together. It seemed true that the others had fallen behind. “Shall we wait for them somewhere?” he asked.

“Zanelli went back,” Campanella said. “His father came for him.”

When he said this, his face grew a little pale, as if he were thinking of something far away. Giovanni also felt a strange feeling, as if he had forgotten something very important. But the thought would not come clear.

Soon Campanella brightened again. He took out a round black map that shone with small blue and orange lights. “Look,” he said. “We are here. Soon we will reach Swan Station. I like swans. Even if they fly far away, I think I could see them.”

Giovanni leaned close. On the map, a white line like the Milky Way ran from south to north. Along one side of it was a thin rail line. Small bright marks showed stations and woods and springs. The black ground looked like polished stone. “Where did you get that?” Giovanni asked.

“At Milky Way Station,” Campanella said. “Did you not get one?”

“Did we pass that station?” Giovanni asked. He did not remember. He pointed to a mark. “We are here, are we not?”

“Yes,” Campanella said. “Look at the river.”

Giovanni pressed his face to the glass. A wide river of pale light flowed beside the train. The water was so clear that it seemed not water at all, but light itself. On its banks, silver grass bent and rose like waves. Blue lights stood in rows across the plain, some near and large, some far and small. The near ones looked pale and soft. The far ones shone orange and sharp.

“It is not moonlight,” Campanella said. “It shines because it is the Milky Way.”

Giovanni felt joy rise in his chest. He tapped his feet on the floor and put his head out the window. He blew a long whistle into the bright wind. He wanted to see the water clearly. At first he could not. But when he looked long and hard, he

saw that it was more clear than glass. Small purple waves flickered across it. It flowed without sound, yet it moved fast.

“We are in the field of heaven,” Giovanni said.

“This train does not burn coal,” he added. “There is no smoke.”

“It must be alcohol or light,” Campanella answered.

The train ran on and on. Purple flowers stood along the track like cups carved from stone. “It is already autumn,” Campanella said softly.

“I want to jump down and pick one,” Giovanni cried. “I could run and jump back on.”

“They are already far behind,” Campanella said. And truly the flowers flashed past in endless rows, glowing like small lamps in the night.

After a while, Campanella spoke in a low voice. “Will my mother forgive me?”

Giovanni turned. “Why would she not?” he said quickly.

“If I do what is truly right,” Campanella said, “then she will be happy. But what is the thing that will make her most happy?”

Giovanni did not know what to say. He felt as if his own mother were far away, like a small orange light on the plain. “Your mother has not suffered,” he said at last.

“I do not know,” Campanella said. “But if I do something truly good, then she will forgive me.”

At that moment, the car filled with white light. The river widened. In the middle stood a small island. On it rose a tall white cross, bright and still. A golden ring of light shone around it.

Voices rose from the other seats. “Hallelujah, hallelujah,” they sang.

Giovanni looked around. The car was full of travelers. Some held black books. Some held strings of shining beads. All prayed with bowed heads. Giovanni and Campanella stood without knowing why. Campanella’s cheeks shone red, like ripe fruit.

The island moved slowly behind them. Soon it grew small, like a picture. The silver grass hid it from sight.

The train slowed. Green lights flashed past. Then a line of lamps appeared in

order. The train stopped before a large clock. The hands pointed to eleven.

A sign said: Twenty minutes stop.

“Let us get off,” Giovanni said.

They jumped down. The platform was empty. No station master, no porter stood there. A purple lamp burned above the gate.

They walked out to a small square. A wide white road ran straight into the blue glow of the river. No one else was in sight.

They followed the road and soon came to the bright riverbank. Campanella picked up a handful of sand. It shone like crystal. “This sand is crystal,” he said softly. “There is small fire inside.”

Giovanni dipped his hand into the river. The water was clear beyond belief. When it touched his skin, his wrist shone faintly like silver. Small waves of light rose and fell.

Upstream, near a cliff of white rock, several figures moved. They seemed to dig in the ground. Tools flashed.

“Let us see,” Campanella said.

They ran to a sign that read: Pliocene Coast. A tall man with glasses and boots gave orders to three helpers. From the rock, the great bones of a beast lay half uncovered.

“That is from long ago,” the man said. “More than a million years old. Once this was a shore of salt water.”

Giovanni listened, though he did not understand all. Soon Campanella looked at his watch. “It is time,” he said.

They bowed and ran back. They ran like the wind. Giovanni felt he could run across the whole world.

They reached the train and sat again in their seats, looking out at the river they had just walked beside.

A rough but kind voice spoke behind them. “May I sit here?”

A man with a brown coat and red beard stood there, carrying two white bundles. He smiled in a shy way.

“Yes,” Giovanni said.

The train began to move again. The man placed his bundles on the rack above and looked at the boys with warm eyes.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“As far as it goes,” Giovanni said.

The man laughed softly. “This train truly goes far,” he said.

“Where are you going?” Campanella asked boldly.

“I get off soon,” the man said. “I catch birds. Swans, geese, herons.”

“How do you catch them?” Giovanni asked.

“They come down to the river,” the man said. “I press them before they touch the ground. Then they rest and grow still. After that, I sell them.”

He opened one bundle. White herons lay flat like pressed flowers. Their eyes were closed.

“They look real,” Campanella whispered.

The man opened another bundle. Yellow and white geese lay in rows. He pulled off a leg and offered it. “Try some,” he said.

Giovanni tasted it. It was sweet like candy. He thought, This is not a bird. It is like chocolate. Yet he said nothing.

The man laughed and wrapped the bundles again. The train ran on beside the shining river, deeper and deeper into the field of stars.

### Part 3

The red-bearded man sat with his hands on his knees and looked out the window. The silver river and the pale grass moved past in a soft light. For a little while, none of them spoke. The train made a low, steady sound, as if it were breathing.

After some time, the bird-catcher leaned closer and said in a low voice, “If you wish to eat heron, you must hang it in the light of the river for ten days. Or you must place it in the sand for three or four days. Then it is ready.”

“Why does it need that?” Campanella asked.

“Because that is the way of it,” the man said. “If you do not, it will not taste right.”

Giovanni looked at him and felt a strange sadness. He thought, Is this man real? Are these birds real? Yet he did not wish to hurt the man's pride. He only nodded.

The train slowed again. A small green light passed the window. The bird-catcher stood. "This is my stop," he said. "I must get down here."

He took his bundles from the rack. "It is good to travel far," he said kindly. "May you have a fine journey."

"Good-bye," Giovanni and Campanella said together.

The man stepped off the train. For a moment, his shape stood in the pale light. Then the train moved, and he was gone.

Soon after, two new travelers entered the car at another stop. They were children, a boy and a girl, who looked like brother and sister. The girl held a small basket. The boy had bright eyes and looked a little proud.

They sat across from Giovanni and Campanella. The girl smiled gently. "Are you going far?" she asked.

"As far as it goes," Giovanni answered again.

"So are we," the boy said. "We have tickets to the end."

"To the end?" Campanella repeated.

"Yes," the boy said. "We are going to a very far place."

The girl opened her basket. Inside were small cakes wrapped in paper. "Would you like one?" she asked.

Giovanni took one and thanked her. It was soft and sweet. Campanella also ate one. The four children sat facing one another as the train ran through the shining plain.

Outside, the river grew wider. Great fields of light stretched on both sides. Sometimes the land rose into small hills. Sometimes it fell into deep dark places where no light shone.

"We were on a ship," the boy said suddenly. "It was very large. There were many people. Then something happened."

The girl looked at him, and her eyes filled with tears. "A great wave came," she said softly.

Giovanni felt a chill. "A wave?" he asked.

“Yes,” the boy said. “But we are not afraid now. We are going to a place where there is no fear.”

Campanella listened without moving. His hands were folded tightly on his lap.

The train rushed on. In the distance, a long bridge of light crossed the river. Beyond it, tall shapes rose like towers made of pale fire.

The girl leaned closer. “Do you think our father and mother are happy?” she asked her brother.

“Yes,” he said at once. “If we are brave and good, they will be happy.”

Campanella’s face grew very still. Giovanni felt his own heart grow heavy.

The train passed over the bridge. For a moment, the river shone directly below them, deep and endless. Then the land changed. Dark trees stood in rows. The lights grew fewer.

A soft voice called the name of the next station. The boy and girl stood.

“This is our stop,” the boy said.

“Good-bye,” the girl said with a gentle smile.

“Good-bye,” Giovanni answered, though he did not know why his voice shook.

The two children stepped off. They walked hand in hand toward a faint white path. Soon they were small shapes in the glow. Then they were gone.

The train moved again. Now the car was almost empty. Only Giovanni and Campanella sat side by side.

The river beside them grew dimmer. The blue lights in the fields flickered and went out one by one.

“Campanella,” Giovanni said softly, “where are we going?”

Campanella looked out of the window. “To a place where there is no sorrow,” he said.

Giovanni turned to him quickly. “Will we stay there?”

Campanella did not answer at once. He seemed to listen to something far away. Then he smiled a little. “If we must,” he said.

The train entered a dark place. The light outside was thin, like mist. Giovanni felt afraid. He wanted to hold Campanella’s hand, but he did not move.

At last, faint lights appeared again. A wide plain opened before them. Far ahead,

a bright white light shone like a star close to the ground.

The train began to slow.

“It is almost time,” Campanella said very quietly.

Giovanni felt his chest tighten. “Time for what?” he asked.

Campanella turned to him. His eyes were clear and calm. “For me,” he said.

The train stopped.

Campanella stood. Giovanni stood too.

“You must go on,” Campanella said gently.

“No,” Giovanni cried. “We will go together.”

Campanella shook his head. “I must go here.”

The door opened. White light filled the car. Campanella stepped down.

Giovanni rushed to the window. He saw Campanella walking toward the bright light. He did not look back.

“Campanella!” Giovanni shouted.

But his voice made no sound.

The train began to move again. The bright light grew smaller. Campanella’s shape faded into it.

Giovanni pressed his face to the glass. Tears ran down his cheeks.

Then all at once, the light vanished. The sound of the train faded. The river and the fields of stars were gone.

Giovanni found himself lying on the cold grass of the hill. The night sky stretched above him. The Milky Way shone in silence.

From far below, he heard voices and running feet. People were calling out.

“Campanella! Campanella!”

Giovanni sat up quickly. His heart beat hard. He ran down the hill toward the river.

Lamps moved along the bank. Men shouted. The water of the real river flowed dark and strong.

Someone said, “He saved Zanelli. He pushed him to the shore.”

Another voice said, “He did not come back up.”

Giovanni stopped. The world felt empty and wide.

He looked up at the sky. The Milky Way ran from south to north, pale and silent. “Campanella,” he whispered.

The river flowed on. The stars shone on. And Giovanni stood in the night, holding the bright memory of the long journey through the field of heaven.

#### Part 4

Giovanni stood on the dark riverbank. The air was cold. The lamps along the water shook in the night wind. Men ran here and there. Some held long poles. Some bent low and looked into the water.

“He jumped in,” someone said. “Zanelli fell. Campanella pushed him toward the shore.”

“Where is he now?” another voice cried.

No one answered.

Giovanni felt as if his body were not his own. The sound of the river filled his ears. It was not the bright river of light from the train. It was dark and deep and moved with a strong, low sound.

He walked closer to the edge. A man held him back. “Do not go near,” the man said.

Giovanni did not speak. His eyes searched the black water. He wanted to see Campanella rise from it, smiling as before. He wanted to hear him say, “We will go on together.”

But the water moved on without a break.

On the bank, Zanelli sat wrapped in a coat. His face was white. He did not speak. His father stood behind him with both hands on his shoulders.

Giovanni looked at Zanelli for a long moment. He felt no anger now. He felt only a deep pain that spread through his chest.

Someone said, “He was brave.”

Someone else said, “He was a good boy.”

Giovanni thought of the train. He thought of the bright cross on the island. He thought of the boy and girl who had stepped off at their stop. He thought of

Campanella's quiet voice: If I do what is truly right, then my mother will be happy.

The river flowed on.

The men searched for a long time. At last, they carried something from the water. A still shape lay in their arms.

Giovanni could not move. He watched as they laid Campanella gently on the grass. His face was calm. His eyes were closed.

The lamps shone on his wet hair. His lips were quiet, as if he were sleeping.

Giovanni stepped forward slowly. He knelt beside him.

"Campanella," he said in a low voice.

He remembered the last smile in the train. He remembered the pale light around him as he stepped down.

Campanella had gone on.

The sky above was full of stars. The Milky Way stretched wide and white. It did not look cold now. It did not look empty. It looked deep and wide and full of paths.

Giovanni felt tears run down his face. But inside the pain, there was also a strange light. It was small, but it was steady.

Campanella had done what was right. He had saved another boy. He had stepped down at his stop without fear.

Giovanni stood up slowly. The river sound grew softer in his ears.

He looked once more at the bright band of stars.

"I will go on," he said in his heart. "I will live strong. I will be good. I will not fear."

The night wind moved through the grass on the hill. The town lights burned below. The river flowed on toward the dark plain.

And under the wide sky of stars, Giovanni walked home.