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About This Edition

This book is a simplified English adaptation created for extensive reading practice.
The text was translated from Japanese into English and simplified using ChatGPT for intermediate English learners as part of an educational project.

Target reading level: CEFR A2-B1

The adaptation aims to improve readability while preserving the narrative content and spirit of the original work.

Source Text

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Author: Miyazawa Kenji (宮沢賢治)

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https://www.aozora.gr.jp/

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https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000081/card43736.html (“Chūmon no Ōi Ryōriten” Jo)
https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000081/card43752.html (Donguri to Yamaneko)
https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000081/card43753.html (Oinomori to Zarumori, Nusutomori)
https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000081/card43754.html (Chūmon no Ōi Ryōriten)
https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000081/card43755.html (Karasu no Hokuto Shichisei)
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https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000081/card43759.html (Kashiwabayashi no Yoru)
https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000081/card43756.html (Tsukiyo no Denshinbashira)
https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000081/card43760.html (Shishiodori no Hajimari)

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Miyazawa Kenji, *The Restaurant of Many Orders [Chūmon no Ōi Ryōriten]* (Simplified Edition, Adapted and Simplified from the Japanese by ChatGPT)

Preface

We do not always need rich food or fine things from a shop to live with joy. Even when we have no money to buy sweet ice sugar, we can still eat the clear wind that moves through the world. We can still drink the soft pink light of morning when the sun comes up. There are gifts like this everywhere, and they come to us for no price at all. If we open our eyes and our hearts, we can receive them.

I have also seen another kind of wonder many times. In fields and in woods, I have looked at people in torn and poor clothes, and yet those clothes did not stay poor in my eyes. They changed into the most beautiful cloth, like velvet, wool, or cloth with jewels in it. Nothing on the body itself had changed, but the world around it had given it a new light. For a moment, what was rough became rich, and what was plain became bright. I love such food and such clothes more than the kind that can be bought and sold.

The stories in this book came to me from places like that. I did not take them from a far country, from old books, or from the talk of clever people in a city room. They came from woods, from open fields, from railway lines, and from quiet places where I was alone. They also came from rainbows, from moonlight, and from the changing air of the seasons. I feel that these stories were given to me by the land itself, and I only wrote down what I received.

There are times when this feeling becomes so strong that I cannot push it away. When I pass alone through an oak wood in the blue evening, everything around me seems full of life and hidden meaning. When I stand in the cold wind of a mountain in November, shaking from the deep cold, I feel that the world is trying to speak. Then I begin to think that things we call strange are not strange at all. I feel that such events must surely happen somewhere, in some true way, and I cannot help believing it.

Because of that feeling, I wrote these stories just as they came to me. I did not try first to make them neat, safe, or easy to explain. I simply wrote what seemed true to that moment in the woods, the field, the cold air, the moonlight, or the evening road. Some people may say that these things are only dreams, but to me they are not empty dreams. They are the shapes that the world takes when we look at it with a clear and lonely heart. I wrote them because I could not leave them unwritten.

For that reason, there may be parts of these stories that help you in some way. There may also be parts that do nothing more than exist as they are. I myself cannot always tell the difference between those two kinds. I do not know which lines may be useful to you and which lines may pass by like wind. A reader may also find places that seem hard to understand, but when that happens, I must speak honestly and say something simple.

There are places here that I do not fully understand either. I do not say this to hide anything, and I do not say it as an excuse. I say it because it is true. Sometimes the world shows us something before it explains itself. Sometimes a feeling arrives before clear meaning comes. When that happens in these stories, I have left it there as it was, because I think that mystery also belongs to truth.

Even so, I hold one wish very deeply. These are only small stories, and I know that they are small. Still, I hope that when you finish reading them, at least a few of them will remain inside you. I hope that in the end they may become clear and real nourishment for you, like pure food that enters the body without noise. I cannot say how strongly I wish this. More than praise, more than success, I want these little tales to become your own true food.

I place this wish before you quietly and with all my heart. If you find beauty in clear wind, in pink morning light, in lonely woods, in mountain cold, in moonlight over the earth, then perhaps these pages may speak to you. If they do, then they have done what they were meant to do. If they seem strange, then let them remain strange for a while, as many true things do at first. I wrote them as faithfully as I could, and now I send them on their way to you.

December 20, 1923. Miyazawa Kenji.

The Acorns and the Wildcat [Donguri to Yamaneko]

Part 1

One Saturday evening, a strange postcard came to Ichiro's house. It was addressed to him, and the writing was so poor that the ink looked rough and almost came off on the fingers. The message said, in a broken and careless way, that there would be an important trial the next day and that he must come. It also told him not to bring a gun or bow and arrows. The card was signed only, "Wildcat."

Ichiro was so happy that he could hardly stand still. He read the postcard again and again, then put it carefully into his schoolbag as if it were a great treasure. After that he ran and jumped all over the house. Even after he got into bed, he could not sleep for a long time. He kept thinking of the wildcat's face, with its catlike smile, and of the troublesome trial that was waiting for him somewhere in the hills.

When he woke up the next morning, the day was already bright. Outside, the mountains stood in a clear blue sky, fresh and shining as if they had just been made. Ichiro ate his breakfast in a hurry and then went out alone. He followed a small path beside a stream and walked higher and higher into the mountains. The air was clean, and when the wind passed through the trees, it felt as if the whole morning were speaking to him.

Soon the wind shook a chestnut tree, and the nuts fell down with a dry, quick sound. Ichiro looked up and called, "Chestnut tree, chestnut tree, did the wildcat pass this way?" For a moment the tree became still, and then it answered that the wildcat had gone east in a carriage early that morning. "East is the same way I am going," Ichiro said. "That is good. Thank you." Then he walked on while the chestnut tree dropped more nuts behind him.

After a little while he came to Flute Waterfall. It was a white rock cliff with a small hole in the middle, and from that hole water flew out with a sound like a whistle before it fell roaring down into the valley. Ichiro stood before it and shouted, "Hey, Flute Waterfall, did the wildcat pass here?" The waterfall answered

in a thin, sharp voice that the wildcat had gone west in a carriage. Ichiro stopped and frowned. “West is back toward my house. That is strange,” he said, “but I will go on a little farther.” Then he thanked the waterfall and continued his way.

Soon after that, he found many white mushrooms under a beech tree. They seemed to be playing in a queer little band, all busy together in a way that made no sense at all. Ichiro bent down and asked them the same question. The mushrooms answered that the wildcat had gone south. A little farther on, a squirrel jumped on the top of a walnut tree, and when Ichiro stopped it and asked again, the squirrel also said that the wildcat had gone south, before dawn, in a carriage. “Two of you say south, but the others said east and west,” Ichiro thought. “This is very strange.”

The path by the stream soon grew thin and disappeared. Then Ichiro saw a new, small path leading toward a dark forest of tall kaya trees. He took it and climbed upward. The branches were so thick and black that he could not see even a piece of blue sky, and the slope was steep enough to make his face red and wet with sweat. But when he reached the top, the darkness suddenly opened, and bright light struck his eyes. Before him lay a beautiful golden field, where the grass moved in the wind and an olive-colored forest stood around it like a wall.

In the middle of that field stood a short and very strange-looking man. He was bent at the knees, held a leather whip in his hand, and stared at Ichiro without speaking. When Ichiro came closer, he stopped in surprise. The man had only one good eye, while the other was white and trembling. His clothes looked like a coat and a work jacket mixed together, and his legs bent badly like a goat’s legs. Even his feet looked like flat rice paddles, and the whole shape of him made Ichiro feel uneasy.

Still, Ichiro tried to stay calm and asked, “Do you know the wildcat?” The man smiled from the side of his mouth and said, “Lord Wildcat will be back here at once. You are Ichiro, aren’t you?” Ichiro jumped back and said, “Yes, I am Ichiro. But how do you know my name?” The man only smiled more and asked whether Ichiro had seen the postcard. When Ichiro said yes, the man lowered his head sadly and said, “That writing was very poor, wasn’t it?” Feeling sorry for him,

Ichiro answered kindly, “No, it was very good.” At once the man brightened, opened his collar to let in the wind, and asked, “And the letters too? Were they well written?” Ichiro almost laughed, but he held it in and said, “Yes. Even a fifth-year student could not easily write like that.”

The man at once looked unhappy again and asked in a weak voice, “You mean a regular fifth-year schoolboy?” Ichiro quickly replied, “No, no. I mean a fifth-year student at a university.” Then the man became delighted. His whole face seemed to turn into a mouth as he grinned and cried, “I wrote that postcard myself.” When Ichiro asked what he was, the man answered seriously, “I am Lord Wildcat’s coachman.” At that very moment a strong wind passed over the field, the grass rose in waves, and the coachman suddenly bowed very low.

Ichiro turned around and saw the wildcat standing there. He wore something like a yellow war coat, and his round green eyes shone brightly in his face. Ichiro noticed at once that the wildcat’s ears stood up in sharp points. The wildcat bowed politely, and Ichiro bowed too. “Good day,” Ichiro said. “Thank you for your postcard.” Pulling his whiskers straight, the wildcat answered in a proud voice, “Good day. I am glad you came. Since the day before yesterday, I have had a troublesome quarrel before me, and the trial has become too difficult. I wished to hear your opinion.”

Then the wildcat told Ichiro to rest and wait, because the acorns would soon arrive. He took out a cigarette case, placed one in his mouth, and even offered one to Ichiro, who was so shocked that he quickly said no. The wildcat laughed in a broad, easy way and said, “Of course. You are still young.” Then he lit his cigarette, made a show of narrowing his eyes, and let out a long blue line of smoke. The coachman stood stiff and straight beside him, but he looked so desperate to smoke as well that tears ran down his face.

Just then Ichiro heard little sharp sounds at his feet, like grains of salt popping in a pan. When he bent down, he saw golden round things shining in the grass in every direction. Looking more closely, he found that they were acorns wearing red trousers, and there were so many that three hundred would not have been enough to count them all. They came crying and shouting together in a wild noisy

crowd. “They are here,” said the wildcat quickly, throwing away his cigarette. “They are coming like ants. Ring the bell. Cut the grass there. That place has the best sun.” The coachman rushed forward with his sickle, and the field began to fill with the bright, restless acorns as the trial was about to begin.

Part 2

The acorns rushed into the cut grass from every side, bright as little pieces of gold in the sun. They pushed, jumped, rolled, and cried out all at once, so that Ichiro could not tell where one voice ended and another began. The coachman rang the bell again and again until the sound rolled through the dark kaya forest. Then he cracked his whip in the air, and for a short moment the crowd became quieter. In front of them the wildcat now sat in a long black satin robe, looking very grand and very serious, though Ichiro thought the whole scene looked a little foolish as well.

The wildcat lifted his chin and said, “This trial has already gone on for three days. Isn’t it time for you to stop fighting and make peace?” At once the acorns burst out again. One shouted that the sharpest head must be the noblest. Another cried that the roundest one was clearly the greatest. Others said size was what mattered, or height, or some other thing that seemed no better than the rest. Their small golden bodies shook with anger, and their red trousers flashed as they stamped and argued in the grass.

Again the wildcat tried to quiet them, and again the coachman cracked the whip. For a little while the acorns fell silent, but as soon as the wildcat repeated his question, the same noise rose once more like bees from a broken nest. They had said the same things for three days and had come no closer to an answer. Even Ichiro could see that the wildcat himself had no idea what to do. At last the wildcat bent toward Ichiro and asked in a low voice, “You see how it is. What shall I say to them?”

Ichiro almost laughed, but he held himself still and thought for a moment. Then he remembered something he had heard in a sermon, and the thought pleased him

at once. He leaned forward and answered, “Then tell them this: the one who is the most foolish, the most mixed up, and the least proper of them all is the greatest one.” The wildcat nodded slowly as if he had heard a wise law from a great judge. Then he opened the front of his satin robe a little so that his yellow war coat showed beneath it, and he drew himself up with great pride.

“Very well,” he declared. “Be silent now. Here is my judgment. The one among you who is not great at all, who is foolish, disorderly, badly made, and even has a crushed head, that one is the greatest of all.” The acorns became silent at once. It was such a deep silence that even the wind seemed to stop and listen. Ichiro stared at them in surprise, for their argument had ended in a single breath. The wildcat rose quickly, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and took Ichiro’s hand in both of his paws.

“Thank you very much,” he said. “You have settled this terrible trial in hardly more than a minute.” The coachman was wild with joy and cracked his whip again and again until the sound rang over the field. The wildcat went on to say that Ichiro must become an honorary judge of his court and come again whenever a postcard arrived. Ichiro agreed at once, though he said he needed no reward. The wildcat refused to accept that answer and said that taking no reward would hurt his dignity.

Then the wildcat spoke of another important matter. From now on, he said, the postcard should be addressed properly to “Honorable Ichiro,” and the sender should be written as “The Court.” Ichiro said that would be fine. But the wildcat was still not satisfied and twisted his whiskers while blinking his round green eyes. At last he asked, “And what about the message itself? Would it be better if I wrote, ‘There is business. Appear tomorrow without fail’?” Ichiro laughed and said, “No, that sounds too strange. It is better not to write that.”

The wildcat looked truly disappointed, as if a small dream had been taken away from him. He stared down for a while, twisting his whiskers sadly, and then gave up. After that he asked Ichiro whether he would rather receive one measure of golden acorns or the head of a salted salmon. Ichiro quickly answered that he liked the golden acorns better. The wildcat seemed relieved by this choice and ordered

the coachman to bring one full measure at once, adding that plated acorns could be mixed in if there were not enough. The coachman measured them carefully and cried out with pride, “There is exactly one measure.”

Then the wildcat stretched himself, half closed his eyes, and ordered the carriage to be made ready. A large white carriage made of mushrooms was brought out, and it was pulled by a strange gray horse with an awkward shape. The wildcat invited Ichiro to ride home in it, and the coachman placed the measure of acorns inside beside him. With a crack of the whip, the carriage left the golden field. Trees and bushes shook and swayed like smoke as they passed, and Ichiro sat looking down at his shining reward while the wildcat stared ahead with an empty, distant face.

As the carriage went on, the golden acorns slowly lost their bright light. By the time the carriage stopped, they had become ordinary brown acorns again. In the same moment, the wildcat, the yellow coat, the coachman, the gray horse, and even the mushroom carriage all vanished together. Ichiro found himself standing in front of his own house, holding the measuring box in his hands. After that, no more postcards signed “Wildcat” ever came to him. Still, from time to time, he thought that perhaps he should have allowed the wildcat to write, “Appear tomorrow without fail.”

The Wolf Forest, the Basket Forest, and the Thief Forest
[Oinomori to Zarumori, Nusutomori]

Part 1

North of Koiwai Farm, there stood four dark pine woods. The one farthest south was Wolf Forest. Next came Basket Forest. Then there was Black Slope Forest, and at the far north edge stood Thief Forest. Long ago, before these woods had names, a huge black rock in the middle of Black Slope Forest said that it alone knew the whole story from the beginning, and it told that story proudly.

In very old times, Mount Iwate burst again and again, and ash covered the land. The great black rock itself, so the story went, had once been thrown out by the mountain and had fallen where it now lay. After the fire at last grew quiet, grasses came from the south and spread over the hills and plain. Later, oak trees and pines began to grow, and in time the four woods were formed. But they still had no names then, and each one simply stood there, thinking only of itself.

One cold autumn day, when dry oak leaves whispered in a clear wind and the shadow of a cloud lay dark on the silver top of Mount Iwate, four farmers came over the eastern ridge. They wore rough clothes and carried every kind of tool and weapon they owned. One had a field knife, another a hoe, and another a heavy tool for breaking earth, and all of them had large swords at their sides as well. They came stepping heavily into a small open field surrounded by the woods, and the first man pointed in every direction with great pleasure.

“Look at this place,” he said. “It is good land. We can make fields here at once. The woods are near. The water is clean. And the sun reaches this spot well.” Another man bent down, pulled up a grass stem, rubbed the soil in his fingers, and even tasted it before he answered. “The earth is not very rich,” he said, “but it is not very poor either.” Then the men looked around once more, and the last one, who had been silent until then, said, “Yes. Let us decide on this place.”

They all cried out toward the way they had come, and soon three wives appeared from the grass with large loads on their backs. Behind them came nine

small children, shouting and running. Then the four men turned in different directions and called to the woods, “May we make fields here?” At once the woods answered together, “Yes.” The men shouted again, “May we build houses? May we make fire? May we take a little wood?” Each time the answer came back strongly and all at once, and the families were so glad that the children began to jump and fight and the mothers hit them and laughed.

By evening a small round log hut with a grass roof had been built, and the children danced around it in great joy. From the next day on, the woods watched those people work like mad. The men struck the ground with their hoes until the metal flashed in the sun, and the women gathered chestnuts that squirrels had not taken and cut pine for firewood. Before long, snow covered everything. All through that winter, the woods did their best to block the north wind for the sake of the new people, but even so the little children often cried, pressing their red cold hands against their throats and saying, “Cold, cold.”

Spring came, and then another hut appeared. Buckwheat and millet were planted, and later the buckwheat opened white flowers while the millet lifted dark heads in the wind. That autumn the crop came in, new ground was cleared, and a third hut was built. The people were so happy that even the grown men leaped about like children. But one morning, when the ground was hard with frost, four of the smallest children were gone.

The families searched in every direction like people out of their minds, but there was no sign of the children anywhere. Then they turned to the woods and cried, “Does anybody know where the little ones are?” The woods answered together, “We do not know.” The people shouted, “Then we will come and look.” The woods replied, “Come.” So the men took up farm tools and entered the nearest wood, Wolf Forest, where cold wet air and the smell of old leaves struck them at once.

They pushed deeper and deeper into the trees until they heard a sharp crackling sound ahead. When they hurried toward it, they saw a strange clear pink fire burning brightly in an open place. Around it ran nine wolves in circles, singing as they went, and the four missing children sat facing the fire, eating roasted

chestnuts and mushrooms. The wolves were like dancers around a summer lantern, and the whole wood seemed to turn with them. Then the men shouted with one voice, “Wolves, give our children back.”

At once the wolves stopped their song and turned their bent mouths toward the people in surprise. The pink fire went out at once, and the place became blue and still, so suddenly that the children by the ashes began to cry. The wolves looked from side to side, not knowing what to do, and then all nine ran away together into the deeper wood. The people took the children by the hand and led them home, and from far inside the forest the wolves called out, “Do not be angry. We gave them chestnuts and mushrooms and treated them well.” So after the families reached home, they made millet cakes and carried them back to Wolf Forest as a gift of thanks.

Part 2

The years passed, and the little settlement grew stronger. More ground was cleared, more crops were planted, and the people worked from morning until dark. By the next summer, almost every flat place had become a field. New sheds had been built beside the houses, and a large barn stood where there had once been only grass. They even had three horses now, and when autumn came and the harvest was safely brought in, the joy of the families was greater than ever before.

They said to one another that this year, at last, they had enough grain to make very large millet cakes for the woods. No one thought that trouble would come again. But on a bitter morning when white frost stood high from the ground, the men went to begin their work and found that all their tools were gone. Not one field knife remained, not one hoe, not one earth-breaking tool. They searched around the houses and the edges of the fields with growing fear, but there was no sign of anything.

At last the people turned in different directions and shouted together, “Do you know where our tools are?” From all four woods the same answer came back at once, “We do not know.” The people cried, “Then we will come and look.” Again

the woods answered together, “Come.” So the families went toward the forests in a worried group, though this time they carried no tools with them, for there were none left to carry.

First they entered Wolf Forest, because it was nearest. At once nine wolves came out from among the trees with serious faces and quick, busy movements of their paws. “No, no,” they said. “Certainly not here. Look somewhere else, and if you still do not find them, come back again.” The people thought that sounded reasonable, so they left Wolf Forest and went westward into Basket Forest. There, as they went deeper in among the trunks and fallen leaves, they came to an old oak tree, and beneath it lay a great basket woven from branches and turned upside down on the ground.

“This is suspicious,” the people said. “Basket Forest may well have a basket, but who knows what is under it? Let us lift it and see.” So they bent together and raised the basket. Under it were all nine missing tools, laid there neatly as if someone had arranged them with care. But that was not all. In the middle sat a mountain man with a bright red face and golden eyes, sitting cross-legged and staring at them with a wide open mouth.

The children gave cries and almost ran, but the grown people did not move back even a step. They all spoke together in one voice and said, “Mountain man, stop your mischief from now on. We ask you seriously. Please do not play tricks like this again.” The mountain man looked greatly ashamed. He scratched his head, rose awkwardly to his feet, and stood there as if he did not know where to put his hands. The people picked up their tools one by one and turned to leave the forest.

Then from deeper among the trees the same mountain man shouted after them, “Bring millet cakes for me too.” At once he turned away, covered his head with his hands like someone embarrassed, and ran farther into the wood. The people burst out laughing and went home in much better spirits. They made millet cakes again and carried them to Wolf Forest and Basket Forest. In that way the names of those two woods seemed to settle into place, and the families felt that perhaps trouble had ended.

By the next summer the place had become richer still. The level ground was all

fields now, the houses had more sheds, and the large barn stood full after harvest time. That autumn everyone rejoiced more deeply than before, because now they believed they truly had enough. They said that no matter how large the millet cakes might be this year, they would still have plenty left for themselves. But then, just as before, another strange thing happened.

On a cold morning after a night of frost, all the millet stored in the barn had disappeared. The people ran around in every direction in great alarm, but nowhere on the ground was there even a single grain. They shouted toward the woods, “Do you know where our millet is?” and from the forests came the answer, “We do not know.” Then the people cried, “We are coming to search.” The woods answered at once, “Come.” So the people took up whatever weapons they liked and went first again to Wolf Forest.

The wolves came out and waved their paws busily, saying, “It is not here, not here at all. Search elsewhere, and if you do not find it, come back once more.” The people went on from there and searched through the woods, but the millet did not appear. At last, beyond the northern edge, a mountain man came running and crying, “Come this way. Mount Iwate is calling you.” The people followed him and came to the great black rock in the middle of Black Slope Forest. Then, high above, Mount Iwate seemed to speak and said that everyone should stop being angry and go home, for the millet would be returned.

The mountain said that Thief Forest had long wanted to try making millet cakes for itself, and that was why it had stolen the grain. When the people heard this, they were so astonished that they could do nothing but stare and murmur among themselves. Then they hurried home and found that the millet had indeed been returned to the barn exactly as before. So they laughed, made millet cakes, and carried them to all four woods. They brought the most to Thief Forest, though it was said that a little sand had gotten mixed in, and after that the forests became true friends of the people and received millet cakes every year, even when the cakes later grew smaller and smaller.

The Restaurant of Many Orders [Chūmon no Ōi Ryōriten]

Part 1

Two young gentlemen, dressed like British soldiers, were walking deep in the mountains with bright guns on their shoulders. With them were two large white dogs that looked almost like polar bears. As they walked over dry leaves that made a sharp sound under their feet, they spoke in cheerful, cruel voices about hunting. One said that these mountains were useless because there was not a single bird or animal to shoot. The other said it would be a fine thing to fire at the yellow side of a deer and watch it spin and fall.

But the mountain was far deeper and stranger than they had thought. It was so wild that even the skilled hunter who had guided them there had lost his way and gone off somewhere. Then something worse happened. The two white dogs suddenly became dizzy, gave a few rough cries, foamed at the mouth, and died where they stood. One gentleman bent over his dog, lifted its eyelid a little, and said with anger that he had lost two thousand four hundred yen. The other lowered his head and answered that he had lost two thousand eight hundred.

Their brave talk ended at once. The first man turned pale and looked hard at his friend before saying that he wanted to go back. The other said he also felt cold and hungry now and wanted the same thing. They tried to speak lightly and said they could always buy a mountain bird or a rabbit at the inn on the way home, so in the end it would come to the same thing. But when they stopped and looked around, they found that they no longer knew which way led back.

A strong wind came through the grass, and the whole mountain began to sound around them. The grass whispered, the leaves rubbed together, and the trees knocked and groaned in the dark air. The two gentlemen felt their hunger grow sharp and painful. One said that his side had been hurting for some time, and the other answered that he was too tired to walk much farther. They stood in the noisy grass and said again and again that they wanted something to eat.

Then one of them turned and gave a cry of surprise. Behind them stood a fine

Western-style house, as if it had appeared out of the mountain air itself. Over the entrance was a sign that said it was a restaurant, and below that was the name Wildcat House. At once their fear changed into joy. One said that the world was well made after all, because after a day of trouble they had found a place where food must surely be waiting for them.

They walked up to the entrance and admired the white brick around it and the glass door with its gold letters. On the door was written, “Please come in. Do not hesitate.” The two men were delighted and said that this clearly meant the house would serve them generously, perhaps even without charge. They pushed the door open and stepped inside. At once they found themselves in a hallway, and on the back of the door were more gold letters saying that especially fat people and young people were warmly welcomed.

This pleased them even more. They laughed and said that they fit both descriptions well enough, and so they went farther down the hall. Soon they came to another door painted light blue, and one of them remarked that the house was strange, with so many doors one after another. His friend answered at once that it must be a Russian style, the kind used in cold places and mountain lands. Over this next door were the words, “This is a restaurant with many orders. Please understand that.” They thought this only meant that the house was famous and busy, and when they opened the door, the writing on the back asked them to be patient with all the many requests.

After that they found another door, and beside it stood a mirror and a long brush. Written there in red letters was a polite request for guests to put their hair in order and brush the mud from their shoes. The two gentlemen said this was very proper and guessed that many important people must visit the house. So they carefully brushed their hair and cleaned their shoes as they had been told. But the moment they placed the brush back on the board, it became dim and seemed to vanish, and a cold gust of wind rushed through the hall.

The men started in fear and quickly moved on. They both felt that unless they soon had something warm to eat, some terrible thing might happen to them in that place. On the next door they read an order to leave their guns and bullets there,

and nearby stood a black stand made ready for them. They agreed that no one eats while carrying a gun and again said that some very grand people must be farther inside. So they laid down their guns and belts and passed on.

The next door asked them to remove their hats, coats, and shoes. They obeyed once more, though one of them now asked in a low voice whether this was really necessary. The other answered that it could not be helped, because the people in the inner rooms must be persons of great rank. So they hung up their coats, took off their shoes, and walked on in their socks. Then another message told them to leave their tie pins, cuff buttons, glasses, wallets, and all metal things, especially sharp ones, inside a fine black safe with a key already in it.

Even this they explained away. One said that some kind of electric cooking must be used inside, and metal things would be dangerous. The other agreed and wondered whether payment would be made later at this very place. So they removed all such things, locked them into the safe, and moved on again. Soon they came to a glass jar before another door, and the order there told them to cover their faces, hands, and feet completely with the cream inside. The cream looked like rich milk cream, and one of them said that since it was so cold outside, this must be to keep their skin from cracking in a room that was very warm.

They were still foolish enough to believe this. They spread the cream over their faces, hands, and even their feet after taking off their socks. There was some left, and each of them secretly pretended to rub it on again while really eating a little of it. When they hurried through the next door, they found yet another note asking whether they had also put cream on their ears, with a small second jar waiting there. One man said with relief that he had almost forgotten his ears, and the other praised the owner’s careful thought, though he added that he wished they would stop walking through hall after hall and finally reach a table.

At once they found another door. This message told them that the food would be ready very soon, that they would not be kept waiting even fifteen minutes, and that before entering they should shake the perfume from the bottle well over their heads. A shining bottle stood there, and in their hunger and hope they obeyed. They poured the liquid over their hair with quick hands, but at once they noticed

that the smell was not sweet at all. It smelled strangely like vinegar. One of them said so, and the other answered that a maid must have made a mistake because she had a cold. Still trying to believe that nothing was wrong, they opened the next door and went inside.

Part 2

On the back of the new door, they saw large letters that thanked them for bearing with so many orders and said that only one thing remained. It asked them to rub a great deal of salt all over their bodies from the jar that stood there. The jar itself was a handsome blue earthen jar, but the two gentlemen no longer cared how fine anything looked. They stared at the words, then at the salt, and then at each other's faces, shining with cream and fear. For the first time, the meaning of everything they had done began to come together in their minds.

One of them said in a shaking voice, "This is wrong. Something is very wrong." The other answered, "I think so too." Then the first man swallowed hard and whispered that the many orders did not mean that the restaurant had many customers. It meant that the people inside had been giving orders to them from the start. The second man stared at him, and his face seemed to collapse with fear even before he fully understood.

Then, in a broken voice, he said that a Western restaurant might not be a place where Western food was given to guests at all. It might be a place where the guests themselves were turned into Western food and eaten. He tried to go on, but his teeth struck together so hard that the words fell apart in his mouth. The first man also tried to speak, but he could only stammer and shake. Both of them had now become so frightened that even saying the truth aloud seemed almost impossible.

One of them suddenly cried, "Run," and threw himself at the door behind them. But the door did not move even the width of a finger. He pushed with both hands, then with his shoulder, but it would not open. At the far end of the room, however, there was still one more door. It had two large keyholes, and silver shapes like a knife and a fork had been cut into it as decoration.

On that last door were words that were more terrible than anything they had yet seen. They said, “Thank you for your trouble. You are beautifully prepared. Now please come in to our stomach.” From the two keyholes, two blue eyes were looking out, turning and shining as they watched the gentlemen. At that sight, both men gave broken cries and began to shake from head to foot. Their legs could no longer hold them well, and they felt that the ground itself was unsteady beneath them.

Then they began to cry. They cried with open mouths and trembling shoulders, without dignity and without shame. Inside the closed door, they heard whispering voices. One voice said that the men had noticed at last and would not rub in the salt now. Another voice answered that this was only natural, because the master had written the earlier message badly and had made the trick too clear.

More voices joined in with annoyance and hunger. One said that, whatever happened, they would not even get a share of the bones. Another complained that if the guests failed to come through the last door, the blame would fall on them. Then the voices changed and called out loudly in false politeness. They cried, “Dear guests, please come quickly. The plates are washed, and the greens have already been salted. All that remains is to arrange you and the greens nicely on the white dishes.”

The gentlemen cried still harder when they heard this. Another voice called, “If you do not like salad, shall we light the fire and fry you instead?” Then a different one laughed and said that if they kept crying, the fine cream would all run off their faces. Yet another voice said that the master was already waiting with a napkin round his neck, holding a knife and licking his lips. The more the hidden creatures spoke, the more the two men felt their hearts breaking inside them.

They cried until their faces were as crushed and wrinkled as wet paper. They looked at one another and saw not proud young hunters from the city, but two weak and foolish men who had walked happily into their own trap. They trembled so hard that even their tears shook on their cheeks. The room seemed to close in around them, and the smell of cream, vinegar, and salt became sickening in the air. They felt that another moment would finish them.

Then, all at once, a great barking roar came from behind them. With a crash, the two white dogs that had seemed to die in the mountain burst through the door and leaped into the room. In the same instant, the blue eyes vanished from the keyholes. Growling deeply, the dogs ran round and round the room like a storm of white fur, and then one of them gave a fierce high bark and threw itself at the last door. The door flew open with a hard sound, and both dogs vanished through it as if they had been pulled into darkness.

From beyond that doorway came wild sounds in the blackness, a catlike cry, a rough crowing cry, and the noise of something rushing about in panic. Then the whole room disappeared like smoke blown apart by the wind. The two gentlemen found themselves once more standing out in the cold grass of the mountain. Their coats, shoes, wallets, tie pins, and other things lay scattered around them, caught on branches or lying under roots. The wind blew strongly again, the grass whispered, the leaves rattled, and the trees knocked together in the dark.

A moment later the dogs came back, breathing hard and growling low in their throats. Then from behind the grass a human voice called, “Sirs, sirs.” At once the gentlemen felt strength come back into their bodies. They shouted loudly that they were there and begged the caller to come quickly. Soon the hunter who had once guided them appeared, wearing a straw rain cape and hat and pushing through the grass with quick steps. When they saw a real human face at last, the two men felt safer than they had ever felt in all their lives.

The hunter gave them dumplings to eat, and slowly their breath became calm again. On the way back, they even bought a mountain bird for ten yen and returned to Tokyo as if they wished to pretend that nothing very strange had happened. But one thing could not be hidden or undone. Their faces, which had once become crumpled like waste paper from fear, never returned to what they had been before. Even after they got home, and even after they bathed in hot water, their faces remained changed forever.

The Crow's Big Dipper [Karasu no Hokuto Shichisei]

Part 1

Cold, cruel clouds hung so low over the earth that the wide field below seemed caught between snow light and daylight. Because of those heavy clouds, the volunteer crow fleet had to stop for a while and rest on the frozen fields. They lined up across the white ground in dark rows, as still as stones. Not one of the crow ships moved. The young captain, black and smooth and handsome, stood firm among them, and the old great commander stood even more stiffly than the rest.

The great commander was very old. His eyes had turned gray, and when he cried out, his voice sounded rough and broken, almost like a bad wooden toy. Some child who did not understand crow years had once said that there were two crows in town with broken throats. That was wrong, for there was only one, and his voice was not broken at all. It had simply become worn and rusty after so many years of calling orders in the sky, and so the whole fleet respected it more than any other sound.

On the snow, the resting fleet looked small and hard, like black pebbles thrown across a white road. If one looked closely, the crows were of many sizes, and their dark bodies stood out against the shining ground in quiet order. Then little by little evening came on. At last the clouds rose a little, and a narrow space opened in the sky, just wide enough for crows to fly. The old commander drew a deep breath and gave the order to begin the exercise and take off.

The young captain struck the snow first and rose into the air at once. Eighteen ships under his command followed him one by one, keeping careful distance as they moved forward. After them came the fighting fleet, and then, in a grand and solemn way, the great commander rose into the sky himself. Soon the first ships were already circling high above, turning through the dark air near the edge of the clouds. When the order came to fire, the whole fleet cried out together like guns, and one wounded ship even lifted one leg behind as it fired because an old war

wound still hurt in the sound.

At last the exercise ended, and the order to break formation was given. The fleet scattered, each crow returning toward its own place in the woods. But the young captain did not go straight back to his own station. Alone, he flew west to a thorn tree where someone had been waiting for him. The sky there was dark except for a pale blue line low above the western mountain, and the first cold evening star had begun to shine.

On a branch of that tree sat a young crow from the gunboat line. Her voice was said to be the finest in the fleet, and she was the captain’s promised bride. He came down beside her quickly, like an arrow, and she turned to him at once. He apologized for being late and asked whether the day’s exercise had tired her. She told him that she had waited a long time, but she was not tired at all. Then his voice changed, and he said that soon he might have to leave her for a while.

She was frightened at once and asked why. He told her that, according to the head of the fighting fleet, he would go the next day to chase the mountain crows. She asked whether those enemy crows were strong, and he answered that they looked proud, with thin beaks and eyes that stood out, but he did not fear them. Still, he added, war was war, and no one could know what would happen in the sky. Then he said something that hurt her deeply: if he died, then all promises between them would end, and she must marry someone else.

At once she began to cry in pain and shock. He told her not to cry and not to shame herself, for someone was coming. Just then his chief petty officer arrived in haste, bowed, and reported that the men were lined up and waiting for roll call. The captain ordered him to go ahead and said that he himself would return at once. Then he turned back to the young crow and told her again not to cry, because perhaps they would still see one another in formation the next day. They held each other’s hands tightly for a moment, and then he flew away, while she remained on the branch as still as if she had frozen there.

Night came, and later deep night came. The clouds cleared away, and the sky above the dark woods shone like newly burned steel, full of hard cold light. The stars seemed to gather and burst in little shining groups, and strange sounds moved

through the night like hidden wheels crying in the dark. In that sharp and fearful sky, many crows slept uneasily. The moon at last rose from the eastern mountains, bent and blue, almost like a broken thing, and the woods became quiet again.

Yet the young captain could not sleep. He turned his head toward the wood where his promised bride was resting and whispered to himself that perhaps he would die in battle the next day. In that same dark wood, she dreamed one troubled dream after another. In one dream, she and the captain flew upward together through the blue-black sky until the Big Dipper of the crows, which they called Magiel, grew huge above them, and even the pale apple tree growing in one star could be seen. Then their wings suddenly became stiff as stone, and they fell straight down, crying out to Magiel as they woke in terror on their branches.

She slept again and dreamed that a mountain crow wearing strange glasses came before them and tried to shake the captain’s hand. When he pushed the enemy away, the mountain crow pulled out a shining pistol and shot him dead, and once more she woke in fear, crying out to Magiel. The captain heard even that prayer through the night and listened in silence. He too looked up at the seven beautiful stars and prayed quietly. He said in his heart that he did not know whether it was better for him to win or for the mountain crow to win, that he would only fight with all his strength as he had been given to do, and that all things were in the higher thought of Magiel.

While he prayed, the eastern sky began to fill with the faint first silver of morning. The long night was ending, but peace had not yet come. The captain kept watch in the cold air, his eyes open and clear at last. Somewhere far to the north, a very small sound came through the dark, as light as metal touching metal. He lifted his night glass at once and looked toward the pale ridge, and there his next duty was waiting.

Part 2

The young captain lifted his night glass and looked hard toward the pale northern ridge. There, on the top of a chestnut tree at Sepira Pass, sat a mountain

crow, staring up into the sky as if he were watching the stars. At once the captain's heart beat strongly with battle spirit. He gave the alarm in a sharp voice, and his men flew up from their branches before the sound had even died away. Circling close around him, they waited for only one word.

"Charge," the captain cried, and he shot northward at once, leading them straight through the freezing dawn air. Behind him his eighteen destroyer ships followed in perfect order, beating their wings with fierce speed. By now the eastern sky had turned white like newly sharpened steel. The mountain crow heard them too late and kicked hard from the branch in sudden fear. He spread his wings wide and tried to escape to the north, but the destroyers had already rushed around him and closed the circle.

Then the firing began. The whole ring of crows cried out together so loudly that it seemed the air itself would split apart. The mountain crow could not break through them and, with no other choice, rose upward with his legs shaking beneath him. In that instant the captain flew after him and struck his black head with one hard, sharp blow. The enemy crow wavered in the air and fell half sideways toward the snow below.

Before he could recover, the chief petty officer came from the side and gave him another fierce strike. The mountain crow shut his gray eyelids, and his body lay cold and still on the snow of the pass at daybreak. The captain at once ordered the chief petty officer to carry the body back to camp. Then he gave the order to withdraw, and the whole force turned together toward their own wood. The strong petty officer lifted the dead enemy, and the captain flew ahead while the eighteen ships followed him home.

When they returned to the wood, each destroyer breathed out white clouds into the freezing air. The captain walked among them, asking one after another whether anyone had been hurt. He would not rest until he had checked them all with his own eyes. By then the night had completely ended. Light like peach juice poured first over the snow on the mountains and then flowed lower and lower until white lilies seemed to bloom across every field of snow.

The glittering sun climbed above the eastern hill and shone so brightly that the

beauty of it almost hurt. Then the old commander called out for the review, and each fleet leader repeated the order. In a moment all the crows stood arranged in the snowy field like black marks on white paper. The young captain left his place in the line and ran straight across the shining snow toward the commander. Stretching his legs smartly, he stopped before him and gave his report in a strong, clear voice.

He said that at dawn, on the ridge of Sepira Pass, he had found an enemy ship lying at rest. He said that his fleet had gone out at once and destroyed it, and that his own side had suffered no losses at all. When he finished, the destroyer fleet became so glad that hot tears fell from them onto the snow. Even the old commander wept from his gray eyes. In his rough rusty voice, he praised the captain again and again and told him that he had done splendidly.

Then the commander said that the young captain was worthy of promotion and might now become a major. He added that the honors for the captain's men could be decided by the captain himself. But the newly made major was not proud in that moment. Instead, he remembered the mountain crow who had come down from the hills because he was hungry and had then been surrounded and killed by nineteen ships. Thinking of that lonely enemy, he shed fresh tears and bowed his head.

Then he thanked the commander and asked for one thing more. He said that he wished to bury the enemy dead and asked permission to do so with respect. The commander agreed at once and told him to bury the body well. The new major bowed, stepped back from before the commander, and returned to his place in the line. Then he lifted his eyes to the blue part of the sky where the stars of Magiel had been.

In his heart he prayed quietly that the world might soon become a place where one would not have to kill even an enemy whom one could not truly hate. He prayed that, if such a world could come sooner, his own body might be torn apart any number of times without regret. From the blue sky near where Magiel had been, a soft blue light seemed to rise and spread. All that time, the beautiful black gunboat crow stood motionless in her line with the others, yet tears kept shining

and falling from her eyes. Her gunboat captain pretended not to see, for from the next day on she would again be able to take part in exercises beside her promised one, and she was so happy that she opened her beak again and again to the sunlight until it glowed red inside.

The Fourth Day of the Narcissus Month [Suisenzuki no Yokka]

Part 1

Snow Granny had gone far away that day. With her catlike ears and her rough gray hair, she had crossed the bright twisted clouds above the western mountains and traveled over distant cold lands. While she was away, a single child wrapped in a red blanket hurried home along the foot of a snowy hill shaped like the head of a great elephant. He walked as fast as he could, thinking only of calimera, the sweet thing he hoped to make when he got back. In his mind he saw the pointed paper tube, the blue fire from the coal, the brown sugar, the white sugar, and the small pot beginning to boil.

Far above him, in a clear and bitter part of the sky, the sun burned a hard white fire. Its light fell straight down over the silent plain and turned the snow into a wide bright sheet, smooth and pale as polished stone. On the upper slope of the elephant-shaped hill, two snow wolves walked with their long red tongues hanging out. Human eyes could not see them, but once the wind grew wild, they could race over snow clouds and run high through the air. They moved restlessly, as if they already felt that something in the weather was beginning to change.

Behind them came the Snow Child, slow and light on his feet. He wore a white bear-fur cap pushed back on his head, and his face shone red and fresh like an apple. “Hush. Do not go too far,” he called to the wolves, but they only shook their heads, turned in circles, and ran on with their tongues flashing. Then he lifted his face toward the deep blue sky and called to the invisible stars, singing to Cassiopeia and Andromeda in his strange bright voice. As he sang, blue light seemed to tremble down from the sky, and the wolves ran far away like little moving flames.

When the Snow Child gave a sharper cry, his white shadow flashed and became a sheet of light on the snow. At once the wolves stopped and came running back, their ears stiff and their bodies low. The Snow Child climbed swiftly to the top of the hill where the wind had shaped the snow into shells and waves. There stood a

great chestnut tree, and on it grew a beautiful round cluster of golden mistletoe. “Bring it down,” he said, and one wolf leaped up like a ball of rubber, seized a small red-fruited branch, and tore it free.

The branch fell at the Snow Child’s feet, and he picked it up with pleasure. He looked out over the white and blue plain, where a lovely town stood far away beside a shining river, and thin white smoke rose from the station. Then he looked down to the lower path and saw the child in the red blanket still hurrying toward home. “That boy pushed a charcoal sled yesterday,” the Snow Child said with a little laugh. “He bought sugar and came back alone.” With that, he threw the mistletoe branch, and it flew straight down like a bullet and dropped in front of the boy.

The child stopped at once and stared around in surprise. He picked up the branch and looked this way and that, but he could see no one at all. The Snow Child laughed and cracked his leather whip once. At that sound, white snow began to fall out of the polished blue sky, soft and light like the feathers of herons. It made the quiet Sunday land even more beautiful, the white plain, the beer-colored sunlight, and the brown cypress woods all shining more gently than before. Holding the mistletoe, the child walked on again as fast as he could.

But after that bright snow had fallen for a while, the day began to change. It seemed as if the sun had moved far away into some hidden inn in the sky, where it was lighting a new white fire for itself. A wind began to blow from the northwest, and the cold in the air grew sharper and heavier. Far in the east, toward the sea, there came a small hard sound, as if part of the sky’s great machine had been loosened. The Snow Child tucked his whip beneath his arm, crossed his arms tightly, and stared toward the place from which the wind was coming.

The wolves also stretched out their necks and looked the same way. The wind grew stronger, and the snow at their feet began to slide backward in fine dry streams. Then, all at once, a white smoke rose on the top of the far mountain range, and the west turned dark gray. The Snow Child’s eyes burned sharply. Soon the whole sky had gone white, and the wind came tearing through the world while dry snow rushed in before it, so that nothing could be clearly seen, not hill, not

cloud, not even the line between earth and air.

Then, through the splitting and roaring of the storm, an eerie voice cried out. It told him to make the snow fall harder, not to be lazy, to drive it and scatter it, because this was the fourth day of the Narcissus Month. The Snow Child jumped as if struck by lightning. Snow Granny had arrived. His whip cracked, the wolves sprang upward all together, his own face turned pale, his lips grew tight, and even his cap flew from his head as Snow Granny's rough cold hair whirled in the wind and her pointed ears and golden eyes flashed through the black clouds.

Three more Snow Children, brought from the western plain, had also appeared now. All of them were pale, their lips pressed together, and they did not even stop to greet one another. They only moved back and forth, cracking their whips in haste while the wolves ran crazily through the whiteness below. The Snow Child could hear almost nothing except Snow Granny's shouting, the sharp sounds of the whips, and the breathing of the nine snow wolves. But through all that noise there came, once in a while, the faint crying of the child in the red blanket.

The Snow Child's eyes flashed strangely. He stood still for a moment, listening, and then ran toward the sound. At first he rushed the wrong way and struck against a dark pine-covered slope in the south, but he stopped, listened again, and found the cry once more through the wind. Then he ran straight through the storm, Snow Granny's wild hair striking his face as he passed. At last he found the child on the snowy pass. The boy had fallen in the drifting snow, his feet trapped, his hands pressed against the ground, and he was trying to rise while crying in fear.

"Cover yourself with the blanket and lie face down," the Snow Child shouted as he ran. But to the child it was only the voice of the wind, and he could not see who was speaking. "Lie still. Do not move. The storm will soon stop. Cover yourself and lie down." The child still struggled to rise. "Lie down quietly," the Snow Child cried again. "It is not cold enough to freeze today." But the boy kept trying to stand, his mouth shaking as he cried.

"That will not do," said the Snow Child, and he struck the child hard on purpose and knocked him down again. Just then Snow Granny came near, her torn purple mouth and sharp teeth dimly visible through the snow. "Oh, there is a strange child

here," she said. "Take him in. It is the fourth day of the Narcissus Month. One or two more will do no harm." "Yes," said the Snow Child aloud, as if obeying her, and then, in a softer hidden voice, he said to the boy, "Stay down. Do not move. Do not move at all."

The wolves raced about like mad creatures, their black legs flashing through the storm clouds. Snow Granny flew away again, still shouting for more snow, and the child once more tried to get up. Again the Snow Child struck him down, though he was smiling as if he were only doing rough work in the storm. By then the whole world had grown dim, and though it was still not yet three o'clock, it already seemed like evening. The child's strength was gone at last, and he stopped trying to rise.

Then the Snow Child reached down and pulled the red blanket fully over him. "Sleep like this," he said. "I will give you many blankets. Then you will not freeze. Dream about calimera until morning." He ran over the same place again and again, covering the child with more snow each time. Before long, even the red blanket could no longer be seen, and the place was level with the rest of the drifting white ground. "That child was carrying the mistletoe I gave him," the Snow Child murmured, almost ready to cry.

But Snow Granny's voice came once more from far away, ordering them not to rest, because on the fourth day of the Narcissus Month the snow must continue without stopping. So the Snow Child turned back to his work. Wind, snow, and gray broken clouds filled the world, and the day truly ended under that storm. All night the snow fell and fell and fell, while the buried child slept beneath it, and the Snow Child kept watch in the rushing dark.

Part 2

At last, near the coming of dawn, Snow Granny raced once more from south to north through the thinning dark. As she passed, she cried that they could stop soon, because she herself would go on toward the sea. She told them not to follow her and ordered them instead to rest and make ready for the next time. She sounded

pleased, saying that the fourth day of the Narcissus Month had gone well. Then her strange blue eyes flashed in the dark, her loose hair whirled round her face, and she flew away toward the east.

After she had gone, the hills and fields seemed to breathe again. The snow on the ground gave out a pale blue-white light, and the air became suddenly quieter. The sky had cleared before anyone noticed it, and far above the earth a deep violet dome had opened again. Stars burned there in great numbers, cold and sharp and peaceful after the long storm. The Snow Children stood in that stillness as if waking from some hard night work.

Then, for the first time since the storm had begun, they greeted one another properly. Each Snow Child had his own wolves beside him, and the wolves were breathing hard from their long running. One said that the storm had been terribly fierce. Another answered that it had indeed been severe, and then asked when they would meet again. A third replied that perhaps they would see one another two more times before the year ended.

Their voices were soft now, almost tired, and they spoke like children who had done heavy work beyond their years. One said that he wanted to return north together with the others as soon as possible. Another agreed, and then they fell quiet for a moment. At last one of them remembered the buried child and said that a boy had died there in the storm. The Snow Child who had hidden him answered at once that it was all right, that the child was only sleeping, and that he himself would leave a sign there in the morning.

Another of them said it was time to go, because they had to reach the other side before full daybreak. But the Snow Child who had watched over the buried boy was still thinking about the stars. He said that he did not understand something no matter how long he thought about it. He pointed in his mind toward Cassiopeia and said those stars were blue fire, and yet somehow that fire sent snow down to earth. The other replied that it was like spun sugar, when heat turns grains into something soft and light.

The first Snow Child answered only, “Ah,” because he was still not fully satisfied. Yet there was no more time for wondering. They exchanged quiet

farewells and turned away one by one. Then the three Snow Children, with their nine wolves, went back toward the west over the dim fields and hills. The one who had guarded the child remained behind a little longer.

Soon the eastern sky changed. It first shone with a yellow color like pale roses, then with amber light, and at last it began to burn with gold. The hills and the plain were covered from end to end with clean new snow, smooth and deep after the night's great storm. The wolves, exhausted at last, sat down heavily on the white ground. The Snow Child also sat down and laughed a little, his cheeks red as apples and his breath sweet as lilies in the cold air.

Then the fierce sun rose. That morning it shone with a slight blue edge and looked even grander than usual. Its light spread everywhere with a warm peach color over the snow. One of the wolves stood up, opened its mouth wide, and from deep inside its throat a blue flame seemed to move and burn. The Snow Child rose quickly and said that now day had broken, they must wake the buried child.

He ran at once to the place where the boy lay under the snow. When he reached it, he called to the wolves and told them to scatter the snow around that spot. At once they began kicking hard with their back legs, throwing snow behind them in flying clouds. The wind caught the loose snow and carried it away like smoke. Little by little the surface there began to sink and change.

From the village side a man came hurrying over the snow. He wore snowshoes and fur clothing, and he ran with all the strength in his body. The Snow Child saw the edge of the red blanket show for just a moment through the white and cried out that it was enough now. Then he ran up the slope behind and shouted toward the buried boy that his father had come and that he should wake up. From under the snow, the child seemed to stir a little.

The man in fur came on without stopping, almost falling in his haste. He had likely searched through the late night and now followed some last hope into the bright morning. The Snow Child watched him for only a moment more. He did not go down again, because that was work for human hands now. The world of storm and the world of morning had changed places, and the boy belonged once more to the warm world below.

All around them, the snow shone under the new sun. The long storm of the fourth day of the Narcissus Month had ended, and the terrible noise of wind had been replaced by morning light and quiet. The wolves stood waiting beside the Snow Child, their work done at last. Somewhere below, the father reached his child in the snow. High above, the sky was clear again, and the hidden beings of storm were already fading from the day.

The Mountain Man in April [Yamaotoko no Shigatsu]

Part 1

The mountain man walked through the cypress woods of Nishine Mountain with his back bent low and his golden eyes wide and round like plates. He was hunting a rabbit, and he moved with heavy care between the trees, watching every shadow. But the rabbit escaped him. Instead, he caught a mountain bird in a much rougher way. When the bird jumped up in fear, he threw his whole body at it like a cannonball, and the poor creature was crushed half flat under the blow.

The mountain man came out of the forest with his face red from effort and joy. His big mouth bent into a foolish grin, and he swung the dead bird by its hanging neck as he walked. Soon he reached a warm patch of dry grass on a south-facing slope where the sun fell kindly. He threw the bird down there at once, scratched through his rough red hair with his fingers, rounded his shoulders, and lay flat on his back. It was the sort of spring day that makes even a wild creature forget caution.

Somewhere nearby, a small bird gave a thin little cry. Purple katakuri flowers, growing here and there through the dry grass, trembled gently in the soft air. The mountain man looked up into a deep blue sky that seemed almost too wide to understand. To him, the sun looked like a red-and-gold wild pear with many spots on its skin. The smell of dry grass drifted over him, and behind him the snowy mountain range shone with such white light that it seemed to have a holy brightness of its own.

Lying there, he began to think in his slow and wandering way. “Candy must be a wonderful thing,” he thought. “The sun makes great heaps of it every day, but somehow it never gives any to me.” A little while later he saw soft wet-looking clouds drifting east across the pure blue sky. Then he made another thought out of them. “Clouds go and come as they please,” he said to himself. “Sometimes they vanish, and sometimes they appear again. That must be why they call a cloud fellow a cloud man.”

As he went on thinking in that lazy way, something strange began to happen to him. His head and feet suddenly felt very light, as if they no longer properly belonged to the ground. He had the odd feeling that he might float upside down in the air. Without meaning to choose any path, he got up and wandered on in a half-dream, as if the wind itself were pushing him from behind. “This is Seven Woods,” he muttered. “There are really seven woods here. Some are full of pines, some are bare and yellow. If I keep walking like this, I will soon come to the town, and if I go into a town, I will have to change my shape, or they will beat me to death.”

Saying that to himself, he did indeed change. He turned himself into the shape of an ordinary woodcutter, or at least something near enough to one. Almost at once he found that he had reached the edge of town. Even then his head still felt too light, and his body seemed poorly balanced, as if his bones had been put together in the wrong order. Still, he went on, slow and awkward, into the town street.

At the entrance stood the fish shop he knew from before. Dirty straw wraps around salted salmon were piled there, and crushed sardines lay on a board in a dull row. Under the eaves hung five boiled octopuses, dark red and ugly and wonderful. The mountain man stood staring at them for a long time. “Those red legs with the bumps and the fine bends in them,” he thought, “are better than the legs of the county office engineer in his riding trousers. A creature like that, opening its great eyes in the deep blue sea, is truly something noble.”

He was standing there with one finger foolishly in his mouth when a Chinese peddler came by. The man wore a dirty pale blue coat and carried a large bundle on his back. His eyes were red at the edges and moved in a quick, crawling way that made the mountain man think of a lizard. The peddler stopped at once, tapped him on the shoulder, and said, “Chinese cloth, very good. Rokushingan pills, very cheap.” The mountain man jumped, turned around, and shouted, “Good,” so loudly that the fish seller and the villagers nearby all looked at him.

Realizing this, he waved his hands quickly and lowered his voice. “No, no. I mean I will buy. I will buy.” But the peddler only said, “Not buy, that all right.

Only look, very good," and lowered his bundle into the middle of the road. The mountain man grew more uneasy the longer he watched him. The man untied a yellow cord, opened the wrapping cloth, lifted the lid of a traveling chest, and took out a tiny red medicine bottle from among many paper boxes placed on top of bolts of cloth. "Those fingers are far too thin," the mountain man thought. "And his nails are much too sharp. This is getting worse and worse."

The peddler then took out two little glass cups no bigger than a finger and handed one to the mountain man. "This medicine, drink, very good," he said. "No poison. Certainly no poison. I drink first. No worry. I drink beer, I drink tea, I drink no poison. This is medicine for long life. Drink, very good." And before the mountain man could answer, the peddler swallowed his own portion with a quick gulp. The mountain man looked around, wondering whether he ought to do the same, and found that the town had somehow vanished. He and the peddler now stood alone in the middle of a wide blue field under the open sky, with the bundle between them and their shadows black on the grass.

"Drink now," said the peddler again, pointing with one sharp finger. "Medicine for long life." The mountain man was so troubled that he decided to drink it quickly and run away afterward. So he swallowed it all at once. At first he felt only a strange shrinking all through his body. Then the ridges and bumps of him seemed to smooth away, he became smaller and flatter and lighter, and when he tried to understand what had happened, he found that he had turned into something like a tiny box lying on the grass.

Rage filled him at once. "I knew it," he thought. "Those sharp nails were wrong from the beginning. I have been tricked completely." But he could do nothing. He was now only a little box of Rokushingan pills, and however hard he tried to struggle, no real movement came. The peddler, however, was beside himself with joy. He leaped into the air, lifted his feet one after the other, slapped the soles with his hands, and made a sound like a small drum beating across the field.

Then a huge hand came down before the mountain man's eyes. In another moment he was lifted high into the air and set down among the paper boxes inside the open chest. Before he could fully understand where he was, the lid fell shut

above him with a flat hard sound. Yet some sunlight still came through the tiny spaces in the chest and shone beautifully inside. “So this is prison,” he thought. “Still, at least the sun is shining outside.” But then it grew darker still, and he understood that the peddler had wrapped the chest in cloth. “Now it will be a dark journey,” he told himself, trying as hard as he could to stay calm.

Part 2

The mountain man had barely calmed himself when the voice beside him spoke again from the darkness of the chest. It asked, in a dry and friendly way, where he had come from. At first the mountain man jumped in fear, but then he quickly formed a foolish idea. He decided that all Rokushingan pills must once have been living people, changed by medicine just as he had been. So he gathered himself and answered in a proud low voice that he had come from in front of the fish shop.

At once the Chinese peddler outside bit back at him in an angry whisper. “Your voice is too loud,” he shouted. “Be quiet.” The mountain man had been growing more and more annoyed with the fellow for some time, and now his temper broke. He cried out that the man was a thief and a cheat, and that the moment he got back into town he would shout to everyone that this Chinese seller was a dangerous rogue. After that, there was silence outside the chest.

The silence lasted so long that the mountain man began to imagine strange things. He thought perhaps the peddler had folded his hands over his chest and begun to cry. Then he thought of all the Chinese sellers he had seen on roads and in woods, sitting down beside their bundles and seeming to think about something very sad. “So this must happen to them all,” he thought. “Someone must always speak harshly to them.” His anger began to melt, and before he could call out that his words had been only a lie, the peddler spoke at last in a worn and pitiful voice.

“That has no kindness in it,” the man said. “Then my trade will fail. Then I will not eat. Then I am finished.” The mountain man became sorry for him at once. He thought that if the man earned sixty sen and ate fish heads and vegetable soup at an inn, then perhaps even his own body as a pill was not too high a price. So he

called out more gently that it was all right, that the man need not cry, and that he would keep his voice low if he returned to town. Outside, the peddler seemed greatly relieved. The mountain man heard a long breath and even the sound of hands slapping happily against feet.

Soon after that, the bundle was lifted again, and all the little boxes in the chest began to bump one another as the peddler walked. The mountain man remembered the first unseen voice and asked who had spoken to him. The answer came at once from right beside him. The owner of the voice said that he wished to continue their earlier talk and asked, since the mountain man had come from a fish shop, how much a sea bass cost now and how many pieces of dried shark fin came to ten taels. The mountain man admitted that he knew nothing of such things, though he said the octopus hanging at the fish shop had looked truly excellent.

His neighbor grew warm at once and said that he too loved octopus. The mountain man answered that everyone loved octopus and that anyone who did not was surely no good at all. The other agreed heartily and said that nothing in the world was finer. Then the mountain man asked where his new companion had come from. “From Shanghai,” came the answer. The mountain man said that this meant he too must be Chinese, and that Chinese people seemed a pitiful race if they were sometimes made into medicine and sometimes forced to sell medicine.

The other voice answered with some dignity that this was not so. He said that the fellow outside, whose name was Chin, was a low and unpleasant kind of man, but that true Chinese people could be noble and grand, and that they themselves were descendants of the holy Confucius. The mountain man did not understand that very well, but he decided it sounded impressive. The dark chest had grown hot by now, and his new friend said that it would be good if the lid could be opened a little. At once the mountain man called out to Chin and complained that it was terribly close and airless inside.

Chin answered from outside that they must wait a little longer. The mountain man replied that if air did not enter soon, they would all steam themselves soft, and that this would be bad for business. Chin grew flustered and begged them to endure it. The mountain man said they were not steaming by choice and ordered

him again to open the lid. Chin only repeated that they must wait twenty minutes more. So the mountain man gave up for the moment and asked the voice beside him whether many others were inside. The answer came that yes, there were many, and that most of them only cried.

Hearing that, the mountain man felt sorry for them all. He declared that Chin was a wicked man and asked whether there was any way for them to return to their old forms. His neighbor answered that there was. He explained that the mountain man had not yet been changed into medicine all the way to the bone, and that if he swallowed the black pellet bottle lying beside him, he could return to his former shape. The others, however, could not save themselves in that simple way. They would first need to be soaked in water and kneaded well after the mountain man changed back, and only then, if they too took the right pills, would they become themselves again.

The mountain man was delighted by this plan. He said at once that he would do it and rescue them all. Then, feeling around in the dark, he asked which bottle was the one that changed a person into medicine and which was the one that changed a pill back into a person. He also wondered aloud why Chin had not become a pill when he had swallowed the same water medicine earlier. His neighbor explained that Chin had also taken a black pill at the same time, and that was why he had stayed human. The mountain man found this very interesting. Then he began to wonder what would happen if Chin swallowed only the black pill by itself.

At that very moment, Chin's voice rose from outside the chest again. He had begun trying to sell his goods to someone else. "Chinese cloth, very good," he said. "Please buy. Please buy." The mountain man whispered that the work had started again. Suddenly the lid of the chest flew open, and such a flood of light poured in that he almost lost his senses. Still, forcing himself to look, he saw a child with bobbed hair standing blankly before Chin. Chin had already lifted one black pill near his mouth while setting out the water medicine and a cup, ready to perform the trick again.

Voices in the chest muttered that it had begun at last. Chin repeated his old false speech, saying he drank beer, drank tea, and never drank poison, and urging the

child to swallow the long-life medicine. In that same instant, the mountain man secretly swallowed one black pill himself. At once he felt something tear and pull through his whole body. It was a harsh, cracking feeling, as if he were being unfolded from inside. Then, in a moment, he had become once more his great red-haired self.

Chin was just about to swallow the black pill and the water together before the child. But he was so shocked by the mountain man's sudden return that he spilled the water and swallowed only the black pill. What followed was terrible and absurd. Chin's head stretched out at once with a soft ugly motion, growing longer and longer, and his body rose higher and higher until he seemed twice his former size. Crying out wildly, he threw himself toward the mountain man. The mountain man curled himself round and ran with all his strength, but for some reason his feet only made a running motion in the air. Before he could escape, Chin caught him by the back.

"Help, help," the mountain man screamed. Then he opened his eyes. Everything had vanished. The blue sky was above him once more, clouds were running in the sun, and the dry grass around him smelled warm and sweet. He lay again on the south-facing slope where he had first stretched himself out, and the crushed mountain bird still lay where he had thrown it. For a while he remained there in a dull half-sleep, staring at the bird's bright feathers and thinking strangely of soaking paper medicine boxes in water and kneading them back into people.

At last he gave one enormous yawn. Then he said aloud that the whole thing had been nothing but a dream and that Chin and Rokushingan could go however they pleased. After that he gave one more great yawn, still half angry and half ashamed, and lay blinking in the April sun.

Night in the Oak Grove [Kashiwabayashi no Yoru]

Part 1

Seisaku was heaping earth around the roots of the millet and saying to himself, “Now it is getting dark. It is getting dark.” The copper-colored sun had already dropped toward the deep blue foot of the southern hills, and the open field had begun to feel strangely lonely. Even the white trunks of the birch trees looked as if some pale dust had settled over them. The whole evening had that quiet, empty feeling that comes just before night truly begins. Seisaku worked on quickly, wanting to finish before the last light was gone.

Then, all at once, a wild voice rang out from the oak grove across the field. It was badly out of tune and so strange that it seemed to have no proper shape at all. The voice shouted something about a red cap and a loud clanging sound, as if it were some foolish song made by a madman. Seisaku jumped, dropped his hoe, and stared toward the grove. Then he began to run there softly, trying not to make a sound.

Just as he reached the front of the grove, someone suddenly caught him by the back of the neck. Seisaku spun around in fright and found himself staring at a tall painter with sharp eyes. The man wore a red Turkish cap, loose gray clothes, and shoes, and he looked both ridiculous and dangerous at the same time. He stood there full of anger and asked Seisaku what sort of shameful way of walking that had been. He said Seisaku had moved almost like a crawling mouse and demanded an answer at once.

Seisaku had no answer ready, and he did not much care to explain himself anyway. He felt that if things became troublesome, he might just fight the man and be done with it. So instead of apologizing, he threw back his head and shouted in a full voice, repeating the same foolish song about the red cap and the clanging sound. At once the painter let go of him and burst into laughter so violent that it seemed almost like an animal roaring. The laughter rolled and echoed through the grove until the trees themselves seemed to be listening.

The painter cried that Seisaku was excellent and said they should go into the grove together. Then he remembered manners and declared that they had not yet exchanged greetings properly. He gave a strange greeting of his own, speaking in a proud tone about the evening field being full of little cut shadows, as if that were the most natural thing in the world to say. Then he demanded that Seisaku give a greeting in return. Seisaku, already hungry and confused and seeing the clouds almost like dumplings in the sky, stammered out a clumsy evening greeting about the sky soon being covered with silver flour. Instead of mocking him, the painter became delighted and clapped his hands in joy.

At once the painter changed from laughter to seriousness. He hoisted his filthy paint box, stained with red and white and all kinds of mixed colors, and strode into the oak grove. He said that he had come as a guest of the Oak King and that he would show Seisaku something interesting. Seisaku followed after him, his hands free now that he had left the hoe behind. Inside the grove, the air was pale and cool, and it smelled sweet and sharp like cinnamon. The place felt both beautiful and uneasy, as if it belonged to a world close to his own and yet not his own at all.

Near the entrance, a young oak tree had been lifting one leg as if beginning a dance. But when it saw the two of them, it grew embarrassed at once and began licking the raised knee in an awkward way, all the while watching them from the corner of its eye. As Seisaku passed, it even gave him a small mocking smile. He said nothing and kept walking, but he soon noticed that many of the trees behaved the same way. They all showed friendly faces to the painter, while giving Seisaku cold or hostile looks.

One thick rough oak thrust out a leg in the dimness, trying to trip him as he passed. Seisaku only leaped over it and said lightly, “There now,” as if it were no great matter. The painter glanced back and asked whether anything was wrong, but before Seisaku could say much, he turned again and walked on. Then a wind passed through the grove, and all the oak trees together began making ugly sounds in thin ghostly voices, trying to frighten him. Seisaku answered them at once in an even louder and more foolish tone, twisting his mouth and mocking them back

until the whole grove fell silent from shock. The painter laughed in quick jumping bursts, clearly enjoying the fight.

At last they came before the Oak King. He was a great tree with nineteen arms of different sizes and one thick heavy leg, and around him stood many strong oak servants, serious and watchful. The painter set down his paint box with a hard sound. The King straightened his bent trunk and said that the painter had returned at last, but that the new guest with him should not have been brought there. He declared that Seisaku was an old offender, guilty many times over, because the grove still bore the marks of all the stumps left behind by his axe.

Seisaku at once shouted that this was nonsense and that he was an honest man. The Oak King shouted back that the proof was right there in the grove and even written in the records. Seisaku laughed and answered that the so-called ninety-eight crimes were only ninety-eight stumps, and that he had cut those trees with permission after buying sake for the landowner Tosuke. The King demanded to know why Seisaku had not bought sake for him as well. Seisaku said there was no reason he should, and the King insisted that there was every reason. The quarrel rose quickly, and the painter stood beside them with an unhappy face, saying nothing.

Then suddenly he pointed east and cried that they should stop fighting, or the round great lord in the sky would laugh at them. When they looked, they saw a large soft pink moon rising above the dark blue mountains. The younger oak trees stretched both arms toward it and sang a song of apology for failing to recognize it at once. The Oak King too grew calm, twisted his white beard, gazed at the moon for a while, and then sang in a low beautiful voice about the moon's garments and the joy of the oak grove on this summer dancing night. The painter was thrilled and clapped with real excitement.

He declared that this was excellent and that the third night of the summer dance should now begin properly. He said that every tree must come out in turn and sing its own song in its own tune. He promised medals from first prize to ninth, all to be made by his own hand and hung from branches the next day. Seisaku, carried away by the mood and still angry at the trees, shouted that he himself would cut

down the worst singers and carry them off to a dreadful place. The Oak King flared up again, and they nearly fell back into their old quarrel, but the painter waved his hands and forced peace between them.

The moon by then had changed from pink to a clear watery blue, and its light spread across the grove like the light at the bottom of a shallow lake. The oak trees formed a great ring facing their king. The shadows of branches fell like thin nets over the ground. The painter stood straight with his red cap glowing strangely in the moonlight, opened his notebook, licked his pencil, and looked around with the proud face of a judge. The contest was about to begin.

Part 2

"Now then, begin at once," the painter said, licking his pencil and holding his notebook high like a real judge. A small oak tree sprang into the middle of the ring and bowed to the Oak King. At that very moment the moonlight suddenly deepened and turned blue, so that the whole grove seemed to sink under cool water. The painter asked in a severe voice what the title of the song was. The little tree answered proudly, "Horse and Rabbit," and the painter cried, "Very well. Begin."

The young oak had only sung a few words about the rabbit's ears when the painter threw up a hand and stopped everything. He said that his pencil had broken and that no one must go on until it was fixed. Then he calmly took off his right shoe and began sharpening the pencil inside it. The oaks watched this with deep respect, whispering to one another that such a guest must be a man of great care and wisdom. Even the Oak King thanked him solemnly for trying not to dirty the grove.

But the painter answered without the least shame that he would later use the pencil shavings to make vinegar. At once the Oak King turned his face a little aside, and many of the oaks lost some of their pleasure. Even the moonlight, which had been blue and clear, seemed for a short moment to grow pale and uncertain. Yet the painter soon stood up again, merry as before, and ordered the singer to begin once more. The young oak lifted its chest and sang a simple song about the

rabbit's ears being long, but not as long as a horse's, and the whole ring burst into delighted laughter and praise.

The painter shouted that this deserved first prize, a platinum medal, and wrote busily in his notebook. Then another young oak stepped forward with a song about a fox whose tail had caught fire in the moonlight. The moonlight shifted a little greener while the tree sang, and again the grove roared with laughter and admiration. A third oak came with a cat song, and after that a somewhat larger tree sang of walnuts moving in the wind like green-gold fans of tengu. Each time the painter cried out a new prize, silver or nickel or some other shining metal, and every singer came away proud.

One oak sang of a monkey's mushroom seat growing wet in the mist, and the painter praised it warmly in his jumping, foolish voice. Then the young oak from near the entrance stepped forward and sang, in open imitation, the very song that Seisaku himself had shouted earlier about the red cap and the clanging sound. The painter laughed and gave it a false-metal prize, but Seisaku could not bear it. He cried out that the song was stolen, that it was only a copy of another man's words, and that such cheating should not be praised. At once the Oak King grew angry and told him to be silent, saying this was no place for such a fellow to speak.

Seisaku shouted back that a copy was a copy, and that if they angered him too much he would come tomorrow with his axe and cut the whole lot of them down. The Oak King asked again why Seisaku had not bought him sake if he had bought sake for the owner Tosuke. Seisaku answered, as before, that there was no reason for such a thing. The quarrel might have grown large again, but the painter thrust himself between them and said that the copied song had been given only a false-metal prize because it was false. He ordered them to stop fighting and called for the next singer.

Then the moonlight grew so clear and blue that the grove seemed like the bottom of a quiet lake. A stout young oak stepped out and announced that it would sing a song about Seisaku himself. Seisaku jumped forward in anger and was just about to strike it when the painter held him back and said the song might not necessarily be an insult. The oak began to sing, swaying its legs, about Seisaku

wearing a soldier's coat and going into the fields to gather many grapes. Then it stopped and called for someone else to continue the verse.

At once the oaks all shouted and laughed like a noisy storm. Another tree leaped out and continued the song, singing that Seisaku had squeezed the grapes, mixed in sugar, and filled many bottles. A third oak added that the wine Seisaku had hidden in the shed had burst one after another in proper order until it was all gone. The whole grove shook with laughter, and Seisaku burned with shame and fury because the trees somehow knew about that old private trouble. He tried again and again to rush out and strike them, but the painter stood before him every time and would not let him pass.

The painter called out the last of the listed prizes, a match medal, and demanded that more singers step forward. But now no one moved. All the oaks had fallen silent, and no promise of finer medals could draw another one into the ring. Just as the painter was growing annoyed, a dry rustling sound came from deep within the grove. Then, out of the dimness, many owls came gliding forward, their pale feathers turning blue-white in the moonlight as they settled on branches, shoulders, chests, and outstretched hands all over the oak ring.

Their leader was an old owl wearing fine gold braid, and he flew down before the Oak King with great dignity. His face was strange and red around the eyes, and he spoke in a sweet heavy voice that sounded almost like melted black sugar. He said that their own grand test of flying and tearing had just ended, and that the wonderful music from the grove had reached even their meeting place. Because of that, he said, they had come to ask whether a great united dance might now begin. Seisaku muttered under his breath that such praise was nonsense, but the Oak King pretended not to hear and welcomed the visitors gravely.

Then the owl captain sang a dark and foolish song about crows and kites and the brave owls seizing worms and attacking sleeping birds in the dark. The other owls shouted the refrain over and over until they looked quite mad with pleasure. The Oak King frowned and said coldly that their songs were low and not fit for a gentleman to hear. The owl captain made an odd unhappy face at that, but an owl officer with red-and-white cords laughed gently and proposed that there should

be no anger that night. He called on birds and trees together to prepare for a dance.

Then all at once the grove became a place of strange joy. The oaks threw up both arms, bent backward, flung heads and feet as if tossing them toward the sky, and danced with all their strength. In time with them, the owls opened and shut their silver feathers with quick soft sounds, and together they made something strangely beautiful. The moonlight grew slightly dim, like pearl seen through a thin veil, and even the Oak King, pleased at last, began to sing loudly about rain and wind and hail. It seemed for a moment that the whole grove had become one living song of tree, bird, and moon.

But the joy did not last. The owl officer suddenly cried out that it was no good, because mist was falling. Looking up, they saw that the moon had already been hidden by a pale blue-white fog and now appeared only as a blurred round light. That mist came down into the grove like flying arrows, cold and fast and without mercy. At once all the oaks lost their senses and froze where they were, one-legged, arms raised, eyes stretched wide, as if they had turned to stone in the middle of their dance.

A cold sheet of mist struck Seisaku full in the face. When he turned, the painter was gone. Only the red cap had been thrown down there, and of the man himself there was not the least sign, not even a shadow. Through the fog Seisaku heard the frightened flapping escape of the owls, who had not yet mastered flying well enough in such thick mist. So, with no more reason to remain, he left the grove at once while the oak trees stood helpless in their dance poses, watching him go with side-long looks full of regret.

When he came out from the grove and looked into the sky, the place where the moon had been was only faintly bright now. A cloud shaped like a black dog ran across that pale place, and from far beyond the grove, somewhere near the marshy woods farther off, he heard the painter’s voice very faintly. It was still shouting with all its strength the same foolish cry about the red cap and the clanging sound. The night field lay wide and dim around Seisaku, and the strange festival behind him had already begun to feel like something half dreamed and half forgotten.

The Telegraph Poles on a Moonlit Night [Tsukiyo no Denshinbashira]

Part 1

One night, Kyoichi put on his straw sandals and walked briskly along the flat ground beside the railway line. To walk there was certainly something that could have brought him punishment. If a train had come and some long rod had been sticking out from a window, he might have been struck and killed at once. But that night no line inspector came, and no train with such a danger passed by. Instead, he saw something so strange that he would never forget it.

The ninth-night moon hung in the sky, and scale-like clouds covered everything above. The moonlight had sunk so deeply into those clouds that they looked weak and dizzy, as if they had been filled with light clear down to their insides. From the spaces between them, cold stars flashed now and then with sudden sharp brightness. Kyoichi kept walking. By then he had come far enough that he could see the lights of the station ahead, red lights standing alone and purple ones burning dimly like sulfur fire, so that the place looked almost like a great castle in the distance.

Then, all at once, the signal post on his right gave a hard shake and lowered its white crossbeam at an angle. That in itself was nothing strange. It only meant the signal had gone down, and such a thing happened many times in a single night. But what happened next was very different. From the left side of the line, where there had already been a deep droning sound, the long row of telegraph poles suddenly began marching north.

They moved with enormous pride, each one hopping forward on a single leg. Every pole seemed dressed like a soldier, wearing a tin cap with a wire spear at the top and fine porcelain ornaments like epaulettes fixed to its arms. As they passed, they turned their eyes toward Kyoichi and looked him over in a rude and mocking way, as if he were a foolish little thing standing at the edge of a parade ground. The droning sound rose higher and higher. Soon it changed into something like an old military song, grand and strange and ridiculous at the same

time.

The marching poles sang that their army was the fastest in the world and that no other force could equal its fine order. One especially proud pole lifted its shoulders so sharply that the wooden arms creaked as it went by. Then Kyoichi saw another formation farther off, this time a line of poles with many more arms and far more porcelain decorations, marching together and singing a second proud song about engineers and mounted soldiers. It was all so serious and so absurd that Kyoichi could do nothing but stand and stare.

In the middle of the line, two poles came along together with their wooden arms joined, limping badly side by side. They shook their heads as if worn out, bent their mouths as though sighing, and looked ready to fall over at any moment. A strong healthy pole behind them shouted angrily that they must walk faster or the wires would hang loose. The two tired ones answered that they could not go on much longer, because their feet were beginning to rot and the tar on their long boots had already been ruined. Even so, they were forced to move again, and the endless line kept coming after them.

More and more poles marched past, singing about their spear-topped caps, their hard wires, and the heavy duty shown by the ornaments on their shoulders. The shadows of the two tired poles had already gone far away toward a greenish grove in the distance when the moon suddenly slipped free of the cloud scales and the whole world grew brighter. By then the telegraph poles were in excellent spirits. Whenever they came before Kyoichi, they made a point of lifting their shoulders proudly or laughing sideways at him as they passed.

Then Kyoichi saw something even stranger. Beyond the six-armed troops there seemed to be another force with three arms and bright red epaulettes, marching in a separate line. Their song was different in tune and rhythm, though the voices of the nearer army were too loud for him to catch the words. The nearer poles kept advancing with all their strength, singing that even terrible cold could not make them lower their arms and even great heat could not make them cast down their decorations. The marching went on and on until Kyoichi himself grew tired just from watching.

The poles flowed by like river water, one after another without end. Every one of them seemed to look at him, and at last his head began to ache so badly that he dropped his eyes and stared at the ground. Then, mixed with the singing, he heard from far away a cracked old voice calling, “One-two, one-two.” He looked up again in surprise. Along the side of the marching line came a short old man with a yellow face, wearing a worn-out mouse-colored overcoat and inspecting the telegraph poles as he went.

Whenever the old man looked at a pole, that pole stiffened at once, set its foot properly, and marched on without turning aside. The old man kept calling his rough command again and again until he had come almost in front of Kyoichi. Then he glanced at Kyoichi for a little while out of the corner of his eye. Turning back toward the marching poles, he shouted an order that made them loosen their step just a little, though they still kept singing as they went. After that, the old man stopped directly before Kyoichi and bent himself slightly, as if he were at last ready to speak to him.

Part 2

The old man bent toward Kyoichi and asked in a low rough voice whether he had been watching the march for some time. Kyoichi answered honestly that he had. “Then there is nothing to be done,” the old man said. “We must be friends now. Come, let us shake hands.” He brushed off the sleeve of his torn gray coat and held out a huge yellow hand, and Kyoichi, not knowing how to refuse, timidly gave him his own.

The old man cried, “There,” and seized it. In that same instant, blue sparks flew from his eyes like little tiger flames, and a violent shock ran through Kyoichi’s whole body. He trembled so hard that he nearly fell backward onto the ground. The old man laughed and said that Kyoichi had felt only a very weak current, and that if he had gripped him properly, the boy would have been burned black in a moment. All the while the telegraph poles kept marching on, and their song now praised their tar-coated boots and the enormous length of their stride.

Kyoichi had grown completely afraid, and his teeth began to knock together. The old man watched him for a while, then seemed to feel a little pity and spoke more calmly. “I am the Electric General,” he said at last, as if that title explained everything. Kyoichi felt slightly safer at hearing a name and asked whether the Electric General was a kind of electricity after all. At once the old man grew annoyed again and said that he was not ordinary electricity at all, but the head of all electricity, the very commander of it.

Kyoichi, still only half understanding, said vaguely that if he was a commander, then his work must be very interesting. This delighted the old man beyond measure. He twisted his face into a terrible smile and cried that of course it was interesting, because the engineer corps, the dragoons, and even the artillery beyond them were all his troops. Then he puffed himself up with pride, swelled one cheek, and looked up toward the sky as if all the moonlit world were under his rule.

Just then one telegraph pole passing before them happened to glance sideways. The Electric General shouted at once, “You there, why are you looking aside?” The poor pole jumped as if struck, bent its leg badly for a moment, and then hurried on again, facing straight ahead in great confusion. More and more poles came on in thick lines. The old man pointed after them and began telling Kyoichi stories of human foolishness, stories that plainly gave him the greatest joy.

He said that there had once been a famous case in which a son living in London had sent a message to his father in Scotland that meant, “Send my boots instantly.” The father, misunderstanding, had hung an actual pair of boots on the telegraph wire, and the Electric General said this had caused him endless trouble. Then he laughed so hard that his shoulders shook inside the old coat. After that he told another story, about new soldiers ordered by a superior to put out the light, who had tried to blow at an electric lamp with their mouths as if it were a candle flame.

He went on and on, saying that in the first days when electric lights came to towns, people even wondered whether the electric company must use a hundred koku of lamp oil each month. All this, he said, would not seem very funny to anyone who understood the law of the endless power of force and the second law

of heat, but to ordinary people it was truly wonderful. Kyoichi understood almost none of these grand words, yet he listened because he could not break free from the old man's strange power. The Electric General then asked proudly whether his army did not show splendid discipline. As if to prove him right, the poles passed by with stiff dignity and suddenly raised their voices higher than before, singing that the name of the telegraph pole army would thunder across the whole world.

At that moment, far down the track, two small red lights appeared. The Electric General became flustered at once and cried that a train was coming and that if anyone saw this strange parade, there would be serious trouble. Lifting one hand high, he turned toward the marching army and shouted an order for the whole force to halt and gather itself at once. In a single moment, every telegraph pole became exactly what it had seemed before, silent and ordinary and fixed in place. Their military song disappeared and changed back into the deep droning hum that wires make in the night wind.

Then the train came roaring toward them. The coal in the engine burned a fierce red, and the fireman stood black in front of it with his feet planted firmly apart. But as the train drew near, something was wrong. All the windows of the passenger cars were dark. The Electric General cried out at once that the electric lamps had gone out and that such a thing was disgraceful.

Without another word, he bent himself double like a rabbit and sprang beneath the moving train. Kyoichi gave a frightened cry and tried to stop him, but he was too late. The very next moment all the windows of the cars flashed bright at once. From one of them a little child threw up a hand and shouted happily, "It is bright again. Hooray." The telegraph poles hummed quietly in the moonlight, the signal post rose again with a hard sound, and the moon slipped back once more into the scale-like clouds. Then the train rushed on, and it seemed to Kyoichi that it had already reached the station.

The Beginning of the Deer Dance [Shishiodori no Hajimari]

Part 1

At that time, the red light of evening was falling slantwise over a mossy field from between torn shining clouds in the west. The silver grass bent and flashed like white fire in the wind. The speaker of this tale said that, when he grew tired and slept there, the rushing sound of the wind slowly changed into human words. And those words told him the true spirit of the deer dance that had once been seen in the fields and hills of Kitakami.

Long ago, when that country was still mostly wild grass and dark woods, Kaju came there with his grandfather and the older people from the east side of the Kitakami River. They opened a small field and planted millet and barnyard grain. One day Kaju fell from a chestnut tree and hurt his left knee a little. When such things happened, people often went into the western hills where hot water came out of the earth, built a hut there, and stayed until they were better. So, on a clear day, Kaju set out alone.

He carried food, miso, and a cooking pot on his back, and he walked very slowly across the silver grassland, limping a little as he went. He crossed many little streams and stony places, and as he went farther, the shape of the mountain range became larger and clearer before him. Even the trees on the hills could be seen one by one, as if they had been drawn with care. By the time he reached a place where about ten blue alder trees stood together, the sun had moved low in the west and shone there with a pale, burning light.

Kaju put down his load heavily on the grass and took out dumplings made of horse chestnut and millet. The silver grass shone in waves over the whole field as if the earth were covered in bright white water. While he ate, he looked at the straight black trunks of the alder trees rising among the grass and thought they were truly splendid. But after walking so hard all day, his stomach felt strangely full. So, when he had nearly finished, he left one small piece of chestnut dumpling, only about the size of a nut itself.

“Perhaps I should give this to a deer,” he said softly to himself. “Come, deer. Come and eat.” He put the dumpling under some little white flowers and lifted his load onto his back again. Then he began walking on once more, slowly and carefully. But after going only a short way, he suddenly remembered that he had left his white towel behind where he had been resting. Since the alder trees were still close by, he thought it would be easy enough to go back and get it.

Yet when he returned, he stopped at once and did not move. He was sure that he heard deer. At least five or six of them seemed to be there, walking softly with their wet noses stretched forward. Kaju smiled in his throat and thought, “They came quickly enough.” Then, taking care not to brush the silver grass, he bent low, stepped on the moss with the tips of his toes, and crept nearer and nearer.

From behind one thick clump of grass, he put out his face just a little, and then he quickly pulled it back in surprise. About six deer were moving round and round in a great circle on the very patch of ground where he had been resting. He held his breath and looked through the narrow spaces in the grass. The sun was caught exactly on the top of one alder tree, so that the tree’s crown shone with a strange blue light and seemed almost like a blue living thing standing still and watching over the deer. Every silver plume of grass glittered, and the coats of the deer looked especially beautiful in that evening light.

Kaju was so delighted that he slowly dropped to one knee and simply gazed. The deer kept making a great ring and moving round and round, but when he looked more closely, he saw that all of them were paying attention to the middle of the circle. Their heads, ears, and eyes all turned that way. Again and again they seemed pulled toward it, taking two or three weak little steps inward before starting back in alarm. In the center lay not only the piece of chestnut dumpling that Kaju had left, but also, next to it in the grass, Kaju’s own white towel, bent like the shape of the letter V.

Kaju sat down properly on the moss and bent his sore leg with his hand. The circling of the deer grew slower and slower, and one after another they stretched out a front leg toward the middle as if they were about to run in, only to pull it back and trot away again with little quick sounds. Their hoofbeats were so light

and pleasant that Kaju felt they must be ringing even down in the dark soil under the field. Then the deer stopped circling and all came to the near side of the towel together. At that very moment Kaju's ears gave a sharp ringing sound, and his whole body began to tremble.

It seemed to him that the feelings of the deer, light and wavering like grass heads in the wind, were coming to him in waves. Then something even stranger happened. He heard the deer speaking. One said that he would go and take a look, while another warned him not to be foolish and to wait a little longer. Some said the thing might be a living creature, some said it might be a mushroom, some joked that it looked like an old pale guard standing over the dumpling. Kaju could hardly believe his own ears, but he heard every word.

At last one deer made up his mind and walked out from the ring with his back straight. The others stopped and watched him closely. He stretched out his neck as far as he could, tightened all four legs, and crept toward the towel little by little. Then he suddenly jumped high in terror and ran back at full speed. The others nearly scattered in every direction, but when the first deer stopped, they slowly gathered round him again and began talking all at once about the long white thing.

After that a second deer went, then a third, then a fourth and a fifth, each one creeping toward the towel and then rushing back with some new report. One said it smelled like willow leaves. Another said it felt soft, but not like mud and not like grass. Another licked it with the tip of his tongue and came back in horror, crying that his tongue had shrunk. At last the sixth deer stepped forward. He sniffed the towel for a while, then, as if he no longer feared anything at all, he suddenly seized it in his mouth and carried it back. At once the others leaped high with joy and began to cry that now there was nothing to fear, and that they should sing and go round it together.

Part 2

The deer that had carried the towel in its mouth came back proudly and stood in the middle of the others. The rest jumped high with relief and delight, saying

that now the white thing had been taken, there was nothing left to fear. One said it must be the dried body of some huge slug from long ago. Another said that whatever it was, it had no power now. Then the bold deer cried that it would sing, and that all of them should begin to go round together.

At once the six deer formed their ring again and began circling the towel and the small chestnut dumpling. Their voices rose in a rough sweet rhythm, half song and half wild call, while their feet beat the moss in time. They sang that in the middle of the field there was a found thing, and that the chestnut dumpling was fine food indeed. But beside it lay a pale guard, thin and long and strange to the eye, not barking, not crying, and bent like some dried crawling thing. As they sang, they laughed at the white towel and made it into part of their play.

Running and circling and dancing, they came at it again and again like gusts of wind. Sometimes they struck it with a horn, and sometimes they stamped on it with their feet. Kaju could only watch in pain as his poor towel gathered mud and holes and was crushed flatter and flatter into the moss. But even then he could not be angry, because the beauty of the deer was too great, and the whole field had already become something beyond ordinary human loss. The ring turned more and more slowly as the song came to an end.

Then one deer cried that now the real thing to eat was the dumpling itself. Another answered that it was a boiled dumpling and nicely round. One after another they gave short eager calls, all speaking of it in tones of greedy pleasure. Then the deer broke their ring and came together from all sides toward the single piece of food Kaju had left. They gathered around it closely, their wet noses shining and their eyes bright in the low evening light.

The first deer, the one that had first dared to approach the towel, took the first bite. After that the others ate in order, each taking only a little. By the time the sixth deer bent its head, almost nothing remained, and it received only a piece the size of a bean. Yet even then there was no fight among them. When the last taste had been taken, they drew back and once more formed a wide circle in the field. Kaju had watched them so long and so deeply that he began to feel as if he himself were turning into one of them.

For one dangerous moment he thought that he might leap out and join the ring. He felt the wish rise in him with such force that he almost forgot his own name. But then, before his eyes, he saw his own large human hand resting on the moss, and at once he knew that he could never truly enter that circle. So he held his breath and stayed still. The sun by then had lowered into the middle of the alder branches and shone with a rich yellow light.

The circling became slow again, and now the deer seemed full of another kind of feeling, not fear and not hunger. They nodded to one another busily, and at last they formed a straight line, all facing the sun as if it were something holy. Kaju sat as if in a dream, unable to move. The deer stood still in that golden light, and the whole field seemed to wait with them. Then the one at the far right lifted a thin clear voice and sang of the alder tree, of its tiny green leaves, and of the sun hanging among them with a ringing sound like little bells.

The next deer suddenly leaped upward, then ran in waves between the others, bowing its head toward the sun again and again before returning to its place. There it stopped sharply and sang that when the sun was carried on the back, the alder tree itself shone like broken iron mirrors. Kaju bowed his own head as well, for the sun and the tree truly looked worthy of worship. Then the third deer sang that even when the sun was beyond the alder, the silver grass still burned too brightly to bear. And indeed the whole field of grass looked like white fire spread over the earth.

The fourth deer sang of the long shadow of the alder legs rising among the shining silver grass. After that, the fifth lowered its head and sang more softly, almost like a whisper, that in the evening under that field of silver, not even an ant crossed the mossy plain. Then the sixth deer suddenly raised its head straight and bright and sang that beneath that same silver grass the little white flowers were blooming, lovely and dear. At those words, all six deer cried out together in short flute-like notes and leaped high into the air.

What followed was no longer only a ring dance. It became fierce and beautiful beyond anything Kaju had ever known. The deer spun round and round with all their strength, and just then a cold wind came from the north with a sharp whistling

sound. The alder tree flashed as if it truly were made of broken iron mirrors, and the leaves seemed almost to strike one another with little hard sounds. Even the heads of silver grass looked as if they too had joined the turning dance.

Kaju forgot himself completely. He forgot his hurt knee, his load, the hot spring hut, the westward road, and even the difference between man and deer. Crying out, “Ho, dance, dance,” he burst from behind the grass and leaped into the open. In the same instant the deer sprang straight up like poles. Then they fled, bodies slanting, swift as leaves blown by a storm, cutting paths through the silver grass and breaking the red stream of the evening sun as they ran farther and farther away. Long after they had vanished, the grass in their path still shone like bright lines on a quiet lake.

Kaju stood there for a little while with a bitter smile, half ashamed and half full of wonder. Then he bent down, picked up his towel, now dirty and torn and full of holes, and looked at it as if it too had become part of some sacred thing. After that he turned west and began walking again, slowly, through the evening field. And yes, in the red light on that mossy plain, I myself later heard this story from the clear autumn wind. It told me that this was the true spirit of the deer dance once seen in the hills and fields of Kitakami.