

MIHO NONAKA

*And We, Theater of Girls*

I always called my best friend *Tako*, which means octopus. I don't remember its exact origin. It had something to do with one of the trendy TV commercials in Japan in the late eighties—a tanned lady with an expression of ennui, suddenly assaulted by miniature octopi showering down on her in the foamy bathtub. The cartoonish body of each octopus glowed cherry-red to the very tip of its baby beak. These octopi had grown happily drunk on Japanese spirits distilled from sweet potatoes, called *shôchû*. Yes, it was the *shôchû* commercial we loved, and we hummed its tune twisting our hips the whole time we changed into our white shirts and brown bloomers for physical education.

But really, it doesn't explain why every kid in our school had come to call her *Tako* or *Tako-san*, attaching an honorific in the latter case. She was neither bashful nor drunk. She was extremely popular though, the only daughter of a wealthy futon maker. In winter, I slept on the exquisite futon her father had made, with a pattern of cranes rising at dawn, embroidered in white and gold silk.

Once, a girl in our class decided to call me *Ika-san*, Miss Squid; she thought that *Tako* and I shared as close a kinship as that of an octopus and a squid under the ocean, however imaginary. Even though I wasn't keen on this particular girl, I was flattered. In those days, boys gave me multiple names to make fun of my light complexion: Snow Zombie, Egg White, and Mayonnaise. They never ran out of names for me, because they found my pale skin nauseating. "Hey, Rotten Corpse, can I borrow a pen?"

*Ika* was infinitely better for me. For the first time, I was given a name that suggested an oceanic tie to my popular friend, and it gave me a share of her glory, or so I felt. I regret that it only happened just that one time; no other kid ever called me Miss Squid again.

It is the morning of our entrance ceremony. I am running in my newly starched, black serge uniform, its style unremarkable, but its breast pocket hides my parents' special gift, a silver mechanical pencil with a digital-watch face. Its inaudible ticking is the source

of my pride this morning. Tako is already standing at the footpath between rice fields. She is twice my size. She waves her shiny briefcase made of real leather. It feels like just yesterday we had to carry tulip-red satchels on our backs. Tako starts running and I follow her, as if racing her all the way to Uchikoshi Junior High, on the other side of the Yudono River. All the boys in close-buttoned jackets turn around and frown at us: together, we are one invincible whirlwind.

When we finally enter the school gate, gasping, we see a huge notice board encircled by two hundred anxious incoming students like us. We fight our way through the crowd only to find out that we will no longer be in the same classroom. In Japan, each student stays in his or her assigned classroom the entire day while teachers pay visits to deliver lectures on different subjects. Tako goes off to the class 1-1, where she will eventually gather enough acolytes to start a secret society called the “Earth’s Axis,” in praise/defense of one’s self-centered behavior and view of the world. I slowly walk to the class 1-2, where boys will come up with yet another nickname for me, something to do with decomposing flesh. I will become famous for sleeping with my eyes wide open in the afternoon lectures.

At lunchtime, we are still confined to our respective classrooms. Perhaps, I am alone in experiencing this tightening in the chest without a close friend. Tako never lacks friends to eat lunch with; girls’ desks used to start moving towards Tako’s as if they had entered a magnetic field once morning classes were over. At least, this time, we can bring our own lunch from home. At Hashirimizu Elementary School, they would occasionally serve fibrous, dark cubes of whale meat smothered in miso paste. Under no condition were we allowed to leave anything on our plates, and I was a despondent child haunted by the question of how many pieces of whale flesh I would have to consume in order to graduate. I am proud of the fact that before those six years of my primary education came to a close, I threw up only once.

My desk faces the homeroom teacher’s desk with a huge golden kettle on it. My classmates line up in front of me to pour toasted brown tea into their plastic mugs.

One of the girls shrieks, “Nonaka, aren’t you a big eater! Are you planning on joining Sumo Club for your extracurricular?”

I blush. My mother always makes me bring two lunchboxes: one packed with steamed rice, and the other with an unattractive blend of cold fish and root vegetables. I am embarrassed by my underweight body and ungraceful appetite suggested by multiple lunchboxes. How can I ever attain any balance, some semblance of normality?

When Schubert's quintet Opus 114 ("The Trout") begins to flow from the speaker set in each classroom, our lunch hour is over. Like a trout just released from the hook, I dart out of my classroom and poke my head in the room 1-1.

"Is Tashiro Junko there?"

A boy with a square-cropped head points to the back of the room where Tako is still moving her pink plastic chopsticks and telling jokes to a group of girls.

"Tako, Tako, Tako-san!"

She finally turns her face to me, startled. "Is that you, Miho? Come on in."

The other girls stop giggling and stare at me.

I hesitate to cross the doorway. "I just thought I'd ask you if you'd like to come and brush teeth with me..."

The girls exchange glances. The boy looks at my tooth-brushing kit with obvious disdain. They are now all convinced that I am "goldfish feces," meaning I must always string along on someone else's heels. Droppings of a goldfish are simply one long line, in refusal to separate from its brassy underbelly.

I do not join Sumo Club. No girls allowed anyway. Nothing masculine or unfashionable is on our list when Tako and I first go shopping for different extracurricular activities. We visit Tennis Club and are told to chase after whatever ball gets outside the court while others are playing. We quickly grow exhausted by this ungainly chore. The upper-class women remain uncharitable.

Next, we sit in one of the meetings for Dance Club. All the girls are dressed in pearly leotards that cut into their flesh. Their limbs shimmer like unskinned mackerels. These self-consciously beautiful creatures will likely not tolerate my clumsiness. I am a foreigner in their eyes. They are foreigners to me.

Tako and I decide to settle in Drama Club. On our first day, we are introduced to the other newcomers. There is Chûjô Miyuki, whom we will end up calling “Peter,” because she played Peter Pan when she was in the sixth grade. One of her arms is crooked like a piece of wire, and her face is sallow. Next to her is Aoki Saeko, “Tinker,” who also acted in the same play. This Tinker Bell appears feminine, dark, and stately. How did they get away with her being taller than Peter Pan? We meet Funayama Shizuka; everyone calls her simply “Funa-san,” a type of carp. She does have a fish mouth, leaden lips, and bad breath. The only boy in our group is Mita Sôsuke, with a prominent Adam’s apple and disturbingly long lashes. We call him “Mita” or “Mita-kun.” He calls me “Nonaka-san” in such a polite tone that I feel utterly disoriented. As if I were a normal girl and not a rotting cadaver.

First-years must address upperclassmen as *senpai* to pay proper homage to them. For instance, if we happen to pass by any *senpai* on the hallway, we bow to her, saying “Suzuki-senpai *konnichiwa*,” “Satô-senpai *sayônara*,” and so on. Tako and I agree that all our *senpai* seem much friendlier and more idiosyncratic than the ones we met at Tennis Club. They make us line up in front of the open window and tell us to shout out *a e i u e o a o*, exercising abdominal breathing. If any boy playing soccer or baseball outside hears you and turns his face, you get a pass.

“*Amenbo akaina* (red pond skaters) a, i, u, e, o!”

“*Kakinoki kurinoki* (persimmon trees, chestnut trees) ka, ki, ku, ke, ko!”

My shrill voice pierces the evening sky and one of the soccer players lifts his face towards me. His eyes meet mine. My gibberish makes him burst into uncontrollable laughter. I don’t mind. There is safe enough distance between us; I am free to shout in whatever voice is inside me. I will even receive praise for my utterance, be it a scream or a song. At this moment, anything feels possible. My cry could even cast a spell on an orange cloud and turn it into a gilded whale.

I am fascinated by the tadpole’s belly, how it’s shaped like a lima bean. In spring, the water in rice paddies is warm and rich in nutrients for tadpoles; each morning, their translucent tummies seem to have swollen a little. On the way to school, I try to point this out to Tako who is mostly oblivious to the minutiae of nature.

“Look, Tako. Tadpoles are truly wondrous creatures. Watch their stomachs bulging out like broad beans!”

Tako glances down to the surface of the water, skeptically.

“You might bend your knees a little to get a closer look.”

With a sigh of resignation, she hands me her briefcase. She is about to squat down when she loses balance and falls straight into the rice field. An enormous splash.

Tadpoles shoot out in all directions, like music notes strung onto the spokes of a wheel. Tako stands agape, muddled from the waist down, with bits of dirt on her cheeks.

“Damn you!” is the first thing that comes out of her mouth.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry... are you all right there?”

“Do I look all right to you?”

Suppressing laughter, I hold out my hand to help Tako up from the lukewarm water.

“Damn it!” she groans.

As I busy myself wiping her face and uniform with my cotton handkerchief, it dawns on me what I have secretly wanted. Like two characters in a film, I want us to linger in this scene a little longer, if not forever. In the spring rice paddies, tadpoles can fatten as big as their appetite, even to the point where their bodies grow into perfect glass marbles. Still, I pray that they will remain tadpoles. Let us stay here. Don’t ever turn into frogs.

For the Autumn Festival, our senpai decided to put on a play, “*Sabakareru mono yo*” (The Ones Who Will Be Judged). It is a satire against a supposed totalitarian regime, written by some Japanese underground writer in the seventies. We take turns reading its script out loud. They say that the school requires every student and teacher to come and watch our play. I am terrified. I don’t want anyone to see me being part of something as obscure and gloomy as this. Between us, Tako and I secretly shorten the title of the play to “*Saba karê*” (mackerel curry), and soon, no one in Drama Club refers to the play by its original title, but our curried version.

Except Koba-chan. Mr. Kobayashi is the advising teacher of our club. He is like a tough sergeant in his manner. He is a man of few words, but from time to time, he uncurbs his passions by repeating the same old story to us: there once was an incredibly skillful actor

who made his audience break down into tears simply by enunciating the lists of names and numbers from a yellow phone book.

Behind his back, Maeda-senpai initiates us into the myth of Über Koba-chan, who really is Mr. Kobayashi, but when he becomes angry beyond control, his eyes flash red and blue, his body turns invisible, and at last, he reemerges as Koba-chan with a *ninja*-like hooded head and blazing purple eyes.

Around four o'clock, after school hours are over, we gather in the multipurpose room. By the time Mr. Kobayashi stops by to check in on us, the entire blackboard has been filled with graffiti, all portraits of Koba-chan in various stages of his transmutation with eyes that are reddish blue, bluish red, and finally purple. He takes little notice of this phenomenon. Scratching his balding crown (it glitters under the fluorescent light and we must avert our eyes), he asks brusquely, "How goes it with you people?" And then, Ari-senpai, the vice-president of Drama Club, must recount to him what routine exercises we have run through this afternoon. In her operatic soprano voice, she reports, "After vocal exercises, we decided to practice pantomime: we drank water; we built walls." She pirouettes once and drops a curtsy to Mr. Kobayashi. We mechanically clap our hands in applause, but Mr. Kobayashi merely frowns.

This time what Ari-senpai tells Koba-chan is no lie. Instead of playing house as we are prone to do for the entire club hours, we did spend a good amount of time swallowing the dusty air, pretending to drink water from several invisible mugs. In fact, I practiced it so wholeheartedly that I felt sick to my stomach afterwards.

Tako pulled one of my braids and asked, "How are you feeling, Miho? You look pale."

"I think I drank too much."

"Are you kidding me? This is just oxygen."

"Come on, Nonaka-chan, get up," said Funa, holding my hands in a manner a touch too friendly.

Still dizzy, I joined the rest of the first-years in stretching our palms against the supposed walls. We felt our way around these unseen barriers under construction, moving our hands left and right, up and down.

“Good job, Aoki-san,” Ari-senpai called out to Tinker, “your hands’ movement is perfectly straight no matter whether it’s upward or downward; keep it up!”

Mizuhara-senpai’s sharp voice cut through my foggy head: “What’s going on with you, Nonaka? Looks like you are building walls everywhere, none of them straight, but wobbly.”

Mikami-senpai chimed in, “Nonaka, are your walls made of rubber?”

*No, they are glass walls, I thought to myself, helplessly. They grow like clear plants made of hot, melting glass; their top parts are starting to sag, closing in on me by inches.*

My dizziness reached its peak, and the next moment, I landed on my butt with a thump, like Alice coming to the end of her tunnel.

The whole company of senpai exploded with laughter. Peter and Tinker bent over to look into my face.

“Were you hurt?”

I was. A hard lesson to embrace: my imagination would build nothing solid, nothing vertical.

After two afternoons of rigorous auditioning, I am given the role of Asami in “Saba karê.” Asami is one of the girls who happen to join the strange meeting at a ferroconcrete apartment house in downtown Tokyo. They have all received invitations to meet at this place on the exact same date, at the exact same time, but for different purposes. Two delinquent girls arrive first, ready to duel with some rowdy students from whom they have accepted a written challenge. Another girl rushes in, because she has been informed that there will be a private gathering of fans for the famous rock group called Puckery Persimmons. Then, yet another girl enters the scene, expecting a highly competitive study session for an entrance exam. Asami is the last. She comes in excitedly, thinking she will be joining her secret boyfriend, Tôru-kun, who has sent her a note to meet him there to elope.

The girls wait and wait in vain. Eventually, they realize that they have been locked up. And from above their heads falls a mysterious voice, accusing each of them of seemingly minor sins committed in the past. They will be executed, informs the Voice of Shadow, according to the perfect and good pleasure of Japan’s totalitarian government.

The voice declares Asami a criminal because she spent her parents' money on dinner with Tôru-kun at McDonald's, the money they had given her to buy textbooks.

Tako is assigned the role of Megumi, one of the two groupies, on a mission to ask her favorite rock group to put their autographs on her belly.

We are blissful. As first-years, we never thought we would be given any role at all. There are a few concerns, however. As Megumi, Tako will have to look absolutely ridiculous on the stage, wearing a polka-dot headband and constantly screaming the name of each member from Puckery Persimmons. Asami, on the other hand, must repeat some brainless phrases like "Tôru-kun, help, help me Tôru-kun!" "Where are you, Tôru-kun?" and so on. Of course, Tôru-kun never makes his appearance in the play. I haven't had a boyfriend, let alone suspected any boy would ever fancy me. What will my classmates make of me, the "rotten corpse," deluded enough to fantasize a boyfriend who is entirely absent from the stage? Whenever I think of my future audience, I become so nervous that I get a chill in the pit of my stomach.

According to Uchikoshi Junior High regulations, buying food and eating it on the way home is one of the gravest sins. Our student pocketbook, which we must carry with us at all times, says so. We aren't allowed to bring any sweets to school either. It becomes inevitable that my mother packs food in more than one lunch box for me. Because of the Drama Club meetings, often I come home well past my dinnertime. Most of our school rules are unreasonable; but at least, they don't specify the brand girls must choose for their underwear. Some schools do. They make girls line up in front of boys, and their senior teacher will flip the girls' skirts, one by one, to check whether their underwear has any color, extraneous appliqué, lace, ribbon, etc.

It is a joy to break rules. After the practice, without inviting any senpai, we first-years file out the school gate if it's still open. If it's already shut, there is nothing we can do but climb up and down the peeling iron gate on our own strength, throwing our bags to the other side of the gate, which is freedom. In 1986, we have no McDonald's yet, not in this part of suburban Tokyo.



The core group are Peter, Tinker, Tako, and me most of the time, and feeling rather jazzed by the air of delicious complicity, we skip-walk to the pancake house a few blocks down from the school. The shadows of night have already fallen, but the sky above the buildings retains a tinge of cobalt blue.

“What if we get caught? I heard some teacher-detectives frequent that pancake place and the noodle shop next door,” I warn the group, even though I am well aware that nothing at this point can deter us from proceeding with our enterprise.

“Shut up, chopstick girl. Aren’t you starving?” yells Tako.

“Aren’t you ready to get your usual?” entices Peter.

“Two superduper pancakes with bits of squid?” adds Tinker.

I am. And giddy, too. Is it possible to make real friends without some absurd rules imposed on you?

I hate being scared of ghost stories. We sit down at the counter, and as soon as we finish ordering, Tako coaxes Peter into telling us a story.

“I won’t listen to it, if it’s about ghosts and all,” I announce, ready to plug my ears with my forefingers. Even though boys have turned me into a ghastly corpse, I am more squeamish about the dead and the spirits than most human girls, as Tako knows full well.

“There is no ghost in it, I swear. But you must remember, it’s a true story,” says Peter with a grin.

“It takes place in the buckwheat-noodle shop next door. I heard this from Kenta, the owner’s son. A few years ago, they had a customer who would come in and order a bowl of *soba* every evening; and after this woman had left, her seat was always damp and slimy. One night, Kenta decided to follow her. As they came upon the Kasuga Bridge, she stopped by its foot, and the next second, she threw herself into the fast-flowing Yudono River. A splash!” Peter hits the counter with a pair of wooden chopsticks.

“It’s already scary enough for me,” I protest bitterly.

“Suicide?” asks Tinker.

“No, let me finish my story. The very next day, Kenta caught a fish in the same river. His mother scraped off its scales for him, and when he sliced the fish open, all the *soba* noodles gushed out of its flesh.”

“Gro-ss!” we shout in unison.

“What’s the moral of this story, Peter?” Tako asks.

“Nothing, of course.”

“You said it’s a real story.” I can’t help but sound accusatory.

With a triumphant smile, Peter splits her chopsticks in two. “Who cares if it’s real or unreal? Let’s eat.”

Our post-practice pancakes are packed with shredded cabbage, pork slices, and squid bits. Bonito flakes dance like smoke on mine, smeared with Worcestershire sauce and Kewpie mayo. *What a liar*, I think to myself. It is not just Peter; our whole drama group is a bunch of cool liars. There exists a tacit agreement among us. By exchanging lies about the most improbable world, hand in hand, we step out of reality—so carelessly, as though there will be no penalty awaiting us in the end.

Everybody agrees that no one likes to tell ghost stories more than Funa-san. Every now and then, what she tells us sounds like a running commentary as opposed to a story of the past. I dread the moment in which her eyes grow opaque and her half-open mouth starts broadcasting what she claims to be hearing in the present tense, the voices of the unhappy spirits stuck between this world and the next. I am grateful that my spiritual constitution is not as sensitive as Funa-san’s. True, I hear small voices in my head sometimes, but I would rather call them “thoughts.”

This afternoon, we meet at the special-event stage in the gym. Funa-san squats down under the crimson velvet curtain drawn aside on the stage. The rest of us are lying on the gym mat behind the stage. The mat has become mouse-colored with years of dust, and it smells like worn-out slippers.

Mita-kun’s body is next to mine. With a pensive expression on his face, he is reading a passage from Herman Hesse’s *Memory of My Youth*. His uniform smells of sweat, mixed with sauced ramen noodles. I know the story, as all of us had to read it for our midterm. Its main character is a boy of our age, who ends up stealing a rare specimen of the moth from his friend, Emile.

“Isn’t it a bizarre story?” I attempt a conversation with Mita-kun. “The moth the boy wants so badly is nothing but hideous.” I point at the picture of the moth on the page. “Look at these enormous wings. They have such a weird pattern; it looks like an owl’s eyes. Besides, everyone knows that whereas butterflies are delicate and

dressed in pretty scales, moths are just fatty and tattered. Check out its hairy antennae.”

Mita-kun nods and continues his reading.

“Why would anyone fancy such a creature?”

No answer from Mita-kun.

All at once, I feel embarrassed. What possessed me to be so outspoken? I jump to my feet and walk to the far end of the stage.

“Where are you going, Miho?” From behind my back, Tako inquires sleepily.

“Nowhere, really.”

I stand up on one of the balancing beams and hold out my both hands to stabilize myself. I hold my breath. When a sense of shame overwhelms me, I like to stop breathing. This time, the feeling is so strong that I have to hold it for a long time. My body swings from side to side.

“I hear voices, I hear voices!” screams Funa-san in a melancholy tone. “The spirits of a couple who committed a double suicide by the Bay of Tokyo . . .”

“Watch out, Miho, you’re gonna trip!” cries Tako.

It’s too late. With a bump, I fall sprawling on the stage.

“You are so clumsy; it’s painful to watch you sometimes,” Tako says, splitting a steaming Chinese bun for me.

“Is there any remedy for that?” is my sincere question.

A few stars in the sky already. We are crossing the Kasuga Bridge together, homeward.

“How come Funa-san always manages to catch the voices of floating ghosts?” I ask Tako to change the subject.

“To get attention, I think.”

“Is that all? What if she is a born shaman?”

“Miho, please. Why buy the stories she makes up? Remember when she warned us about the portrait of Beethoven in the music room? She saw his eyeballs move and his lips form a smile and everything? Out of all the people in the world, how on earth should Beethoven choose Funa to be his medium?”

It’s true. I fail to see the connection between our Funa-san and the great German composer from the nineteenth century. At least, she is trying hard, I think, as all of us are. To be heard.

Suddenly, I feel a sharp pain in the stomach. I had dull cramps in the morning, but since then, I have conveniently forgotten about them.

“Sorry, Tako . . . I need to sit down.”

“What? Are you all right? I hadn’t poisoned the pork bun I gave you.”

The pain grows so severe that I become speechless for a moment. A few minutes pass in silence. We haven’t even crossed the entire bridge yet.

“Wait, I think it’s passing now . . . almost . . .”

Tako crouches down next to me, staring into my contorted face.

“Is it possible that your period has come for the first time?”

“NO.” I shake my head vigorously.

“Why not?”

“Because I’ve decided.”

“Decide what?”

“Not to menstruate, not now, not ever. I told my body so.”

It is terrible to learn that your body beyonds your will. The following night, in conformity with the Japanese tradition, my mother prepares red rice, the ultimate festival food. She tells me that my grandmother also cooked the same rice dish to celebrate the onset of her menstruation, thirty and some years ago. My father is not supposed to notice anything, but he does. There is no way to hide. A grand heap of cooked sweet rice is tinged pink all the way, studded with red *azuki* beans. My nine-year-old sister grins stupidly. For her age, she knows too much. I wish I could disappear on the spot. As usual, I eat my dinner in silence. I even finish my share of rice, most of it, although sweet rice has no flavor and *azuki* beans taste chalky to my palate. Things pass. Perseverance is the key. Let us eat up red rice in commemoration of the unspeakable bleeding spot in my body. I can only hope that my mother won’t pack one of my lunch boxes with such ostentatiously colored rice.

“I’m just sick and tired of ‘Saba karê,’” I groan.

“It’s good that our senpai didn’t choose ‘Suicide Club,’ though,” Mita-kun reminds me.

“I don’t know. At least in that play, the character is the one who judges herself and then decides to take her own life like the rest of her

friends did. There is some dignity in that. At least, I won't have to be screaming 'Tôru-kun' hundreds of times and then receive my death sentence from the Voice of Shadow, which is you, by the way."

"I'm sorry, Nonaka-san," Mita-kun apologizes gently. Such a gesture from a boy is totally alien to me, and I must look away for a moment to hide my shock.

"Well, it isn't your fault, really," I mutter. "Hey, you can have my strawberry-jam bun if you like. You look especially hungry today."

He always does. We all know that his mother has been working day and night since she divorced his father. Mita-kun does not bring a lunch box; he only eats fast food from Seven-Eleven, like pre-made rice balls and cheap rolls stuffed with sauced ramen noodles instead of frankfurters. He must be lacking some vitamins, I suspect. The girls in the club offer him food from time to time, but such random snacks won't suffice his essential needs. *If only I can make him a lunch box one day*, I think to myself, *I will make sure to include red and yellow and green vegetables*. "You should have the three traffic lights in every meal," we were taught in our home-economics class.

And the next moment, I realize where my thought is heading. I blush not only from embarrassment, but also from vexation at myself.

Then, I finally notice Tako observing from a little distance our whole exchange with a smile on her face: benevolent or malicious, I cannot divine her smile this time.

We have less than a month left before the Autumn Festival. Our rehearsal time lengthens and Ari-senpai's tone grows edgier. Feeling emboldened as a result of our frequent snacking after the practice, I smuggled a packet of jellybeans into school, a souvenir of my father's business trip to California.

"I've seen these before," says Tinker, who frequents the US base in Yokota.

"Such loud colors...kind of freaky." Peter carefully flicks the beans on her palm as if they were beads on an abacus.

"So which ones are the yummiest?" Tako raises the important question.

"Red and black...try black first...I remember it was quite good," I reply, laboring to sound nonchalant. It is a perfect chance for me to

revenge myself on my best friend, who has been teasing me mercilessly since my friendly transactions with Mita-kun a while back.

“Black? Are you sure? What does it taste like?”

“It’s ineffable. Just delicious.”

Nervously, Tako picks out a black bean and drops it into her mouth. Before I know it, she has spit it out on the stage, and is voiceless.

“What the hell is this?” cries Tako, wiping her mouth, after a moment or two.

“I don’t know. I don’t read English. I flunked my midterm because I misspelled ‘girl’ and ‘ice cream,’ remember?”

Years later, I will discover those dreadful beans were flavored with licorice.

“It has an interesting aftertaste, doesn’t it, or shall I call it *exotic*?”

Peter, Tinker, and Tako have all started putting the black jellybeans aside. I know what’s coming. As soon as they finish collecting, they will begin pelting me with their bullets that look like tiny mouse droppings, except that these are sugar-coated and much tougher.

While I am desperate to figure out how to evade their assault, Ari-senpai waltzes into the gym. “How are my girls doing?”

We must stand up and bow. “Very well, and you, Ari-senpai?”

“Have you done your tongue twisters yet?” interrogates Ari-senpai. “Remember what Koba-chan said during our last rehearsal? ‘You people sound all muffled from a distance; the audience won’t be able to comprehend a single word you utter.’”

“We haven’t done our tongue twisters yet, Ari-senpai.”

Her acorn-shaped eyes widen and slant upward. She makes a twirl on her toes.

“Well then, Chûjô, do the ‘raw wheat, raw rice, raw egg!’”

“*Namamugi, namagome, namatamago!*”

“Aoki, you do the ‘Oaya, make an apology to your parents.’”

“*Oayaya oya ni oayamari . . .*”

“For you, Tashiro, how about the ‘guest next door is a guest who eats persimmons all the time?’”

“*Tonari no kyaku ha yoku kaki kuu kyakuda!*”

“And Nonaka, why don’t you try the ‘dried chestnuts from the store at the corner of the Kaji street in the Kanda city are too crunchy on my teeth.’”

“But it’s too long, senpai. I’d rather do the ‘leaning a bamboo shoot against a bamboo fence’...”

“Don’t talk back to me! Do what I just told you to do.”

*“Kanda Kaji-chô, kado no kanbutsuya no kachiguri kattara katakute kamenai, kaeshini ittara Kanbê-san no kaka ga detekite kanshaku okoshite karikari kandara karikari kameta...”*

“Faster, and louder!”

I take a deep breath. What if I decide to rebel against Ari-senpai right at this moment? What if, instead of repeating my tongue twister, I just scatter the rest of my jellybeans all over the stage, like a string of foreign words cut loose?

The role of Asami continues to trouble me. For one thing, she doesn’t speak very much about herself throughout the play. Her thinking solely centers around Tôru-kun. And who is this Tôru-kun? Tôru is a popular name. Spelled in a Chinese character, it means “transparent.” Perhaps, he is a clean-cut, narcissistic boy who maintains that exquisite balance of being neither overly athletic nor too nerdish. But that doesn’t say much about his person. He is utterly boring. Many boys are. And still, as Asami on the stage, I must keep evoking his vacuous presence.

Mikami-senpai has brought me a costume, since I complained that I own no fashionable clothes that would suit Asami. At home, I am only allowed to wear clothes handed down from my cousin Miyuki, which arrive with all the mysterious stains of markers, soy sauce, peach juice, and even what looks like blood sometimes.

Before ascending to the stage, I put on the white dress with a black sailor collar. I take off my thick glasses. My vision becomes blurred and things lose their sharp edges. *You are Asami*, I say to myself, *you are properly a girl*.

“Are you all right without glasses?” Tako pats me on the head. “You have this look of ambivalence about you.”

“Do I look like a penguin in this dress?”

“You will never look as cute as a penguin even after years of trying. Just shut up and follow me. We have to start rehearsing soon.”

While the others are rehearsing their lines, Mita-kun and I have to wait patiently in the right wing of the stage until we are called. My turn is second to the last, and his is the very last.

“How do you feel when you are speaking as the Voice of Shadow?” I ask Mita-kun in a whisper.

“I don’t know, Nonaka-san. I am just performing, I guess.”

“There has to be something, though... is it pleasure or hatred that you feel, when you are giving sentence on each girl?”

“More like... indifference,” Mita-kun whispers back.

I stare at him. His profile is entirely obscured by the shadow of the velvet curtain. My eyes can only make out his awkward, lanky limbs and unkempt hair in silhouette. It strikes me for the first time that he is like an animal, foreign, inaccessible, and infinitely strange.

“That’s kind of... cruel, isn’t it?”

Mita-kun gives no answer.

The night before the Autumn Festival, I hardly slept. Since Mikami-senpai suggested that I curl my hair to look more adult, and since I had never figured out how to use curlers before, I spent long hours cutting up ropes and trying to twist and tie strands of my hair with them. We promised to meet at six a.m. As I dash towards the school gate, I pass by an elderly man after his morning exercise. He is wiping himself with a towel; and the moment he sees my head with inexplicable knots of hair dangling and bobbing, he opens his mouth wide, and then drops his towel.

As soon as I enter the multi-purpose room, I am met with a wild scream: “What happened to your head?” Peter stretches her crooked arm to stroke the snaky thickets of my hair.

After a moment of paralysis, Tako asks: “What were you trying to accomplish, exactly?”

Mizuhara-senpai, to prove her tact as a senpai, proposes: “We might be able to fix it, Nonaka; let’s see what we’ve got here for your hair.”

All the girls stand around me and start untying each piece of rope, while Mita-kun is spacing out on a wooden chair in the corner of the room. He claims that because of his unusually low blood pressure, he cannot function in the morning. I suspect that his lizard-like body maintains a low temperature, too.

Once all the knots are undone, Mizuhara-senpai sprays my hair with some stinky acid and begins blow-drying.



“Actually, your hair looks kind of nice now,” says Tinker in a surprised voice.

“Nonaka, you are actually pretty,” says Mizuhara-senpai as she manipulates her steel brush and blow dryer at the same time.

Before anyone notices, Mita-kun has gotten up from the chair and come directly before me.

“Wow, girls can really transform themselves,” he mumbles.

Tako nudges me in the ribs and I turn my face in the other direction.

The moments before curtain rise are piercingly real, and yet surreal. In the right wing of the stage, we huddle together, shaking. Ari-senpai brought a silver cross, Mikami-senpai a turtle figurine, Peter a Shinto amulet for childbirth, and Tinker a wooden Celtic rose.

Tako and I didn’t bring anything, so we make sure to touch each object so as not to miss out on the magic power. We are acting ridiculous, I know, and we will be laughing at ourselves as soon as the curtain comes down to announce the end of our “Saba Karê.” But for now, our collective fear has inflated and gone electric; we can hardly sustain ourselves.

“Asami, you will be all right,” whispers Tako, squeezing my hand.

I squeeze hers back. “Megumi, you’ll be just fine. Go crazy. Scream your heart out for Puckery Persimmons.”

When I finally enter the stage, crying “Where are you, Tôru-kun; Asami is here!” I realize that this is a peculiarly self-contained space. We have practiced enough to create an invisible wall between our audience and the story we live in as its characters. The only thing required of me is to move as Asami, speak as Asami, and never transgress the plot but traverse flexibly within its framework.

I start breathing more naturally. This is freedom, oddly enough. I delight in repeating the name “Tôru,” even though his face forever remains blank. Maybe Asami has always been in love with the idea of being in love rather than the actual person. Maybe Asami was never meant to know who Tôru-kun really was. In any case, I should no longer strive to understand Asami. At this point, I am Asami.

And what’s more, I am not alone. The stage is ours. Mikami-senpai/Chieko, one of the teenage delinquents, begins shouting to

announce that our room has now been locked. There is no way for us to escape. I glance at Tako/Megumi in her yellow skirt. She skitters back and forth on the stage with calculated naïveté and perfect obtuseness.

Ari-senpai/Sayaka, the bookworm, holds onto her thick textbook as if it were her god, the only source of hope for deliverance. Her tortoise-shell-rimmed spectacles tremble on her Roman nose.

Mizuhara-senpai/Reiko, the other delinquent girl, strikes the floor with her slim bamboo sword and looks sharply into the air.

And finally, from above us, the Voice of Shadow descends in the voice of Mita-kun, thick with indifference and ready to pronounce sentence on each and every girl. It reminds us that we have sinned and we must die the kind of death we deserve. In the end, this is no mackerel curry. We are “The Ones to Be Judged.” The spotlight fades.

Suddenly it occurs to me that perhaps, in the not too distant future outside the play, I will fall in love with someone who is neither kind nor loving. His voice will pin me down like an insect and pierce me to the core. How is it that girls are prone to idolize the figure of a judgment so absolute? What beauty do we find in cruelty? I am down on my knees.

And then what?

I will rise again. As my eyes get used to the warm dark, I see Tako and all my senpai slowly huddle together into a circle. Because the theater of girls is everywhere. Because no one voice can determine us. So long as our transformation continues, we are home.