

庵原高子

あんばらたかこ 小説家。東京生れ、鎌倉市在住。掲載作、「叔母の秋」は、「三田文学」（2001年秋季号）初出。作品集「表彰」（2005年、作品社刊）に所収。翻訳は、稲田実（慶應宗教研究会会長）。

AMBARA Takako is a Kamakura-residing novelist, born in Tokyo and graduated from Keio University. This novel "Autumn of the Aunt" first appeared in Mita Bungaku, a Japanese literary journal founded by Keio University. It was also published under the title "Hyousho- An Awarding Ceremony" together with her other works by Sakuhinsha K.K. in 2005.

叔母の秋

緋色に染めた暖簾を通して夕暮れの淡い光線が流れこんでいて、それが店内では紫がかった奇妙な色に変っていた。くすんではいるのだが、最近ではあまり目にしない赤い長襦袢のような、奥に隠れたなまめかしい色に感じられる。

「まったく信じられないことばかりだよ」

ラーメンを割り箸で口に運びながら、安則はそう呟いた。

髪の毛は歳月に晒されてかなり白くなっているうえ、アメリカ人好みの茶に黄や緑の混じった格子のシャツを着ているが、子供のころ坊主頭を見てジャガ芋のようだと思った頭のかたちや、象を連想させるような細い目に大きな鼻は、まったく変っていないように眺められた。

「ほんとうにひどい。日本と違って土地が広いというのに、墓を持っていないどころか、公営墓地の埋葬料も払えないひとがいるんだよ。ひとむかしまえのように、それが黒人というわけでもないんだ。白人は金がなくてもプライドを持っている。だから困る」

栄子は再会の喜びに好奇心を混ぜながら、その話を熱心に聞いている。

「うまいな。本場の喜多方ラーメンは」

声は少し囁れている。栄子は、いっこうに口を閉じない彼の表情に半ば見とれている。

いつからこんなふうにならと向きあっているのだろう。

今日の午前中、横浜市金沢区の自宅から車のハンドルを握り、桜木町に向ったことは覚えている。ランドマークタワー内の書店に行くつもりだった。しかし高速道路に乗り、狩場の地下トンネルを、円を描くようにくぐったあたりから、方角が変わってしまったらしい。首都高速から東北自動車道に乗ったのなら、料金所の通行券があるはずだが、車に戻らないとそれもわからない。店は地方の小食堂と言った造りであるし、暖簾の白い染め抜きも割り箸の袋の文字も喜多方名

物、となっているから、ここは東北の喜多方市の一角に違いあるまい。

ついでしたが時間つぶしに回った古い蔵屋敷のなかでも、彼は彼の妻とその周辺のひとたち、つまり貧しいアメリカ人たちの暮らしぶりを話していた。

支払い能力がないのに毎日のように長距離電話をかけて、相手構わず長話をする老女、ひとりではなにも決められず勤務中の夫に電話をする妻、お定まりのアルコール依存症、しかもこの町にはいつてからは、彼らが死者たちをどうやって葬るか、というところまで話が進んできているのである。

秋の夕暮れなのだが、気温の低さはほとんど感じない。話の内容のほうはずっと寒く感じられた。だからこちらがラーメンを食べましょうと言いだしたのかもしれない。ひと振りだけ汁にかけた胡椒が喉に染みて、栄子は咳をした。早期の肺がんの手術をしてから、喉や気管支が敏感に反応する。

「だいじょうぶかい」

と声をかけてくれた安則の顔は、昔と変わらず優しさに満ちていた。

午後の記憶が不意によみがえる。山形県の南、米沢市の郊外で悦子の墓参りをしてから、五色沼が一望できるドライブインで軽い昼食を取った。悦子は彼の初恋の女性である。彼がそう言うのだから間違いはない。三十年ぶりの墓参、それも外地からのことだから興奮もしているのだろうが、悦子の思い出はほとんど語らず、彼のアメリカ人妻とその親族の話を喋りつづけている。妻には連れ子が居るらしい。

それが彼の以前と変わったところ、と感じているわけではない。悦子が交通事故死して以来、彼には女運がないと言っても言い過ぎではないのだから、久しぶりにあった叔母に愚痴をこぼすのもおかしいことではない。

叔母、と言っても栄子は甥の安則よりも一年九ヶ月早く生れたに過ぎず、幼いころはままごとやかくれんぼをした間柄である。遠出の疲労のせいか胃袋が少し痛んだので、栄子は箸をそつと止めた。

「うまいな、夕食のまえでなければもう一杯欲しいところだ」

と汁を全部啜っている彼に気づかれたくはなかった。昔と変わらない気持で接しているのだが、体のほうが先に彼の変化を感じてしまったらしい。それは車の運転の仕方である。

「車がなくては隣りの家にも行かれない。子供たちにはスクールバスがきたが」

と言うように彼の住むアメリカ東部の町は人家もまばらで、庭には狐が訪れることもあるらしい。

「英会話の仲間と、ワシントンDCにはいちど、行ったことがあるけれど」

宿題を多くだすアメリカ人女性教師の顔が浮かぶ。次のフリートーキングでは、久しぶりに会った甥の話をしてみようか。

「ホワイトハウスとスミソニアンを中心とした観光だろう。博物館ではなにを見た？」

「宇宙航空館で飛行機を見たわ、ライト兄弟が作ったものとかいろいろ。それからネイティブの

教師に案内されて、バスでメリーランド州に行ったわ」

そのときの教師は男性だった。

「そこで格納庫のようなところに保管されている、旧日本軍のゼロ戦を見せてもらったわ」

「零式艦上戦闘機、か。子供のころの記憶は長持ちするなあ、どうだった印象は」

「胴体に英語でいたずら書きがしてあったわ。さらし者にされている飛行機が可哀そうで、早く始末してあげればいいのと思ったわ」

「あの保管場所から、二時間と少し走ったところだよ。ぼくの家は」

彼がハイウェイのスピードに慣れていることはわかっているのだが、どうもそのハンドルさばきが気に入らない。手は熟練を示すように達者に動くのだが、緻密ではない。細かい配慮に欠けるように思える。車は栄子の家から乗ってきた右ハンドルの国産車である。左ハンドルに慣れている彼に運転席を譲ったのは、信頼していたからということか。名義人は運転免許を持たない夫の勝本道生になっている。母子家庭で経済的な余裕がなかったから免許を取り損ねた、と聞いているが、和風レストランに就職してからも取ろうとしなかった。(いやな運転だな) 五色沼が見えるようになったころから、そう感じている。夫の運転する車の助手席に座るという経験がないからか。男の運転の荒っぽさとその振動が気になって仕方がない。

光線のせいかわ、ラーメン店の床の表面が青白い色に変っていた。また以前の記憶がよみがえる。彼の手紙がアメリカから届いた日、栄子は旧盆の迎え火を焚く準備をしていた。熟したほおずきの黄色混じりの赤が、地味な麻がらのそばで、輝きを放つのを横目で見ながら、封を切った。

悦子の墓参りをしたい。つきあってくれないか。できれば山形まで車で行きたいのだが。もちろん運転はぼくがする。

それは供養になって良い。そのあと近くの温泉に一泊しよう、と簡単に決めた。安則も六十歳になり、中学校の教師を退職したらしい。

その夜、夫は慣れた手つきでよく枯れた麻がらを折って迎え火を焚いた。折り込み広告紙を丸めてライターの火を点けたので、カラーインクが燃えて青い炎がでた。安則は子供のころから理科が好きで、早くから、不完全燃焼という言葉も、その意味も知っていた。

「ずっと理科を教えてきたの」

「それしか能がないからね。しかし最後の五年間は日本語も教えた。教師仲間で国際交流のプログラムを組んだり、いまちょっとした日本語ブームなんだ」

「わたしが通っている英会話教室の壁にも、国際交流協会のポスターが張ってあるわよ」

宿題のことをまた思い浮かべる。

彼は日本で理科系の大学を卒業していた。死んだ悦子もその大学の学生で、夏休みにいちど横須賀の実家に連れてきた。そこは東京大空襲後の母の住いになっていた。理科系の学問を志す娘、という先入観で見たせいか、思っていたより女らしく、表情や仕草にしなやかな印象を持った覚えがある。それに安則に紹介されたとき、

「栄子叔母さんですか。篠塚悦子です。どうぞよろしく」

という思いがけない言葉が帰ってきたのも好感を持った理由のひとつだった。

「いつもエイチと呼ばれているの。おてんばだし、ひとつしか年が違わないので」

照れながらそう言った。

多産の家には、世代の境目がはっきりとしない人間が多く居て、年下の人間に敬語を使われないということもよくあった。

安則の母比佐子と栄子は実の姉妹だが、二十一歳も年齢が違う。しかもその間には六人も兄姉がいる。母の多産は長姉比佐子へと引き継がれ、長兄や他の姉も結婚し、次々に子供が生まれた。関係で言えば、栄子はその子供たちの叔母なのだが、一族に次々に生れた赤ん坊のひとりに過ぎなかった、と言ってもまちがいはない。

近くに住む安則とはだれよりも仲良く遊んだ。親密になればなるほど立場の境目はなくなり、呼び名もエイチに落ち着いた。筆頭の安則がそうなのだから、あとにつづく甥姪も、敬語どころか時には乱暴な口を利くこともあった。家は東京下町で建築材料の卸売りをしていた。父は実利を重んじ、母はカトリック教徒だった。そのせいかどちらも、日本的な礼儀作法は二の次にしていた。

母を訪ねた折安則は、卒業したら悦子と結婚したい、ふたりとも教師の免許を取るつもりだから、共働きになる、と洩らしていたと言う。

「比佐子にはまだ話していないそうだ。可哀そうな子だよ」

彼の母は、そのころ婚家をでて別の男と暮していた。

その翌年の夏、悦子というその娘は長崎の友人を訪ね、自転車でパンを買いに行く道すがら、タクシーと接触して転倒した。坂道の下りであったらしい。

「なんにしてもよかったじゃない、きちんとお墓参りができて」

「ああ」

「思ったより綺麗な墓地だったわね。墓標もよく読めたわ。最近だれかお墓参りにきたのか新しいお花もったし、掃除もしてあった。地方のお寺は静かで風情があっていいわねえ」

「そうだな」

「よくきてくれたわねえ。嬉しいわ。わたしにもいろいろあったから」

最後は言葉を濁した。今回は自分のことより悦子の供養をしたいと思っていたからだ。

暖簾の外の光はかなり弱くなってきていた。それでも店内の赤を基調とした微妙な色あい、厳密にはくすんだ緋色なのだが、それは消えずに残っていた。

「子供はぜんぶで何人なの」

「ワイフが連れてきた女の子が白人系。そのとき身ごもっていて結婚してから生んだのが黒人系の男の子だ。すぐにまたぼくの息子を生んだからこれは東洋系。合計三人だよ」

返す言葉に詰まった。日本に居るのなら、そんな女と結婚しなくても、と言いたいところだが、基準の違う国、そして条件も違う男の話で、諦めも湧いてくる。

「しかし、子供はみんな可愛かったよ。なんとか三人育てて役目を終えた」

いま厄介なのは、その白人妻の母親であるらしい。

「まだ七十歳だよ。二十でワイフを生んだ」

近くに住むと言っても、やはりハイウェイを三十分くらい走るらしい。二年まえにその母の

同居人の男が死んだ。もちろんその男は彼の妻の父ではない。

「墓もない、埋葬料も払えない、となるとそのひとはどうすると思う？」

「もちろん遺体のままではないのでしょうか」

「火葬は公立で、無料でしてくれるところがある。ともかく骨にはしてもらえる。それから先のことだよ」

皆目見当のつかない話だった。

先ほど眺めた五色沼の風景がよみがえってきていた。観光ガイドが声を張り上げて、大勢の客に説明をしていた。

「沼のなかに点在する島、林を抱えたような小さな島を、流れ山、と呼んでおります。百年まえの磐梯山の噴火によって、山が散って流れました。やがてそこから緑の樹木が目を見ました。すべては自然の力です」

ひとの一生よりもはるかに長い歳月によって形成された風景だった。

「遺骨の始末をどうすると思う」

安則は自分の話を勝手につづけていた。

「思い出の場所に行けばらまくとか」

「そんな夢のある発想はしないひとだ」

それなら極端なことを言ってみよう。

「ひょっとして、ゴミの袋に入れて運搬車に渡してしまうとか」

「そこまではやらないよ」

「じゃあ、どうするの」

「バスルームの便器にばらまいて、水洗のコックを引いて流したんだそうだ」

「水葬にしたわけね」

頷きながら、彼は安堵したのかゆっくりと息を吐いた。

「なんでエイチは許したの。ご主人のこと、勝本さんのこと」

話がこちらに向けられた。胃の痛みは治まっていた。

「三年も家に帰ってこなかったって、ヴェトナム戦争が終わったころかなあ、人伝てに聞いたよ」

「二年と少しですよ、ほんとうは」

アメリカに届いた話は少しだけ違っていたので訂正した。

流れ山、それは始め噴火によって傷ついて散った山の残骸だった。それが今は冷たい沼を暖かく見せるほどの緑を湛えている。あのころの栄子は山の残骸のようなものだった。今は娘も大きくなり、それが希望だと思えるようになっている。

沼のうえを飛び交っていた鳥の声が、まだ耳に残っていた。空を切り裂くような鮮やかな声だった。余韻は長く緒を引いた。家で毎朝聞く鳥の声は小刻みでせわしなかった。それも、早朝から国道を走る大型車の騒音に消されることもあった。

「いまは忘れたことにして暮していますよ。和風レストランも代が替わって主人が経営者に」

「ほう」

「でも競争が激しいから大変みたいよ」

「店はいまでも手伝うの」

「病気するまえは、ときどき手伝っていたわ。でも、いまはもう」

三年まえ、肺がんになった。胸腔鏡を使った手術に成功し、回復も早かった。しかし、再発の恐れはまだ残っていた。

「エイチが、裏切った男を許すなんて、想像できなかったなあ。子供のころぼくが約束を破ったりすると、なかなか許してくれなかった」

「そうだったかしら」

とぼけて見せたが、それは当っていた。

「父につづいて母も亡くなって、逃げて行くところがなかったのよ。いまの家で、娘を育てながら、洋裁の賃仕事をして頑張ったの。でも生活費は毎月送られてきた。あのひと若いころから料理屋でアルバイトしていたから、そういう店で働いていたのだと思う」

二年三ヶ月後の春、ふらりと家に帰ってきたときの勝本の顔はまだ目に残っている。頬の肉は落ち、かつて三崎から城ヶ島まで軽く泳いだ若さはもう全身から消えていた。海で釣った魚を包丁で巧みにさばいた器用な手は、放浪生活の役に立っていたらしい。許せないという心の固さはそのままつづいていたが、すぐに台所で包丁を研ぎはじめた姿には、微かにだが懐かしさを覚えた。いつのまにか床を共にするようになっていた。男の安則にそのときの思いを話しても仕方がないという気がした。しかし、夫の不在は、二年のあいだに親戚中に知れ渡っていた。

「ねえ、セクシュアル、ハラスメントってアメリカで生れた言葉でしょう」

「そうだよ。最近では当たりまえになって職場でもことさら言わないがね」

「日本語では、セクハラという言葉になって。もう定着しているわ。外見をあれこれとあげつらうのも、同じ意味に使われているわ」

「日本では何でも縮めて言う。ぼくが最初に覚えたのはエノケンかな。榎本なんて言ったか」

「健一よ」

「お猿のような顔をしていた」

「よく覚えているわね」

「小学生のとき、映画を観たんだ。真面目くさったおやじの顔に比べて、なんて面白い顔かと大声で笑った」

「そんなことまで」

二人ぶんの笑い声が狭い店のなかに満ちた。

「それで、なんなの」

「むかしの日本語に、ちょうちょうはっし、という言葉があったの、知っている？」

「サムライが刀などで打ちあう、あの打打発止だろう。知ってるさ、これでも男だからね」

「いま、胸に溜まっているもやもやをひとことと言おうとすると、この言葉が浮かぶの。相手を容赦しない毒舌。心臓を突き刺すような言葉。歯に絹を着せない本音の連発。いちど言われるとまた言われる、と思い、長兄のまえではよく吃ったわ。するとまた吃ったと攻撃されたり、顔色が変わったとひやかされたり……」

「人間の尊厳を傷つけられるわけだ」

「親代りの長兄には世話になったけれど、その分毒舌もきつかったわ。東京下町ふうの遠慮のない言葉遣いをする一族だから」

「そうだったな」

「アメリカ人のような、齒の浮くようなお世辞は、まず言わない」

「それも空しいときもあるが」

安則の声の調子が少し下がったように感じられる。こちらの話が退屈なのか、と案じるが、止めずにつづける。

「勝本のごことは夫婦の問題なの。戻ってきたときに話しあいしたわ。でも、曖昧のまま残したことのほうがずっと多い。はっきりさせてどうなるものでもなし。怖々と暮し始めているうちに、若さも消えて、いままで持っていたはずの毒舌に対する免疫力が、低下してしまったの。聞くのも、言うのもすべて駄目に。親戚もうまく付きあえば得になる、とわかっていても免疫力がなくなったものは、どうしようもない」

「なるほど」

声にはエコーのような残響も加わっている。

「もともとわたしには、老いた両親から生れたというハンデキャップがあるの。大学受験だって、父親が死にかけている時期とぶつかって」

「聞いたよ。中年になってコレスポネンス・コースで大学を卒業したって」

「そう。これも平均寿命が延びた時代のお陰かしら。若いとき乗り損ねた大学というバスのなかを、いちどこの目で見てみたかったのよ。見れば失ったものがなにかわかんと思った。もちろん学習意欲も残っていた。それから叔母の面目も少々……」

「本家の叔父さんのところは、みんな大学に行ったの？」

「長兄のところの甥や姪は、全員大学に行ったわ、家庭教師をつけたりして。漏れ聞くところに寄ると、わたしは、あのひとたちの、反面教師的存在だったらしい。あんなふうになってはいけないという……。そのせいか、わたしはいまでも、叔母、呼ばれていないわ。あなたから言えば、カズンズの、みなさんから」

「アイ・シー、了解しましたよ。エイチの気持」

「ありがとう」

「ぼくもそんな日本が嫌で逃げ出した人間なんだから、聞く役ぐらひは引き受けるさ」

「大学のことは、それほど気にしているわけでもないの。中年になって、中味は少しだけわかったけれど、十八才のときに受けた傷を癒すには至らなかったわ。単位を半分ほど取ったとき、ばかばかしくなって、卒業しなくてもいいと思った。でもあれこれ考えずに鈍感になって卒業しようと思ひ直して……」

「良かったじゃないか。それで」

「あとのことは自分で片を付けて行くしかないの。そう言えば面白いことがあったのよ。夏の授業を受けに行く、暑いキャンパスへの道で」

「サマー・スクーリングに通ったんだね」

「あの家を見つけたのよ、小さな板金工場だったあの家を。あのころ、比佐子姉さんは二階を住いにして新しいひとと暮していた。わたしが高校をでてしばらく働いていた場所、でもあるわ」
「そう言えば、あの町に大学があったな」

安則は記憶を呼び戻しているのか、ほんの一瞬黙った。声は微かな響きを持ったままである。構わずに栄子はつづけた。

「三十年経っても、家は残っていた。空き家らしかったわ。角の小さなお稲荷さんも、路地裏の商店街もあった。家や道が残っているくらいですもの、進学が夢が残っていてもおかしくないでしょう」

「確かいちど、あの家に用事があっていったとき、エイチに会った」

「わたしも覚えているわ。仕事が終わって、いっしょに駅まで歩いて帰ったわ」

「あそこで事務の仕事に就きたいきさつは、なんだったの」

「母に連れて行かれたのよ。長兄の会社で働くのは嫌だとゴネたら、それじゃあこっちにしなさいと言われて……。簡単な話だったわ。わたしには一生の問題がかかっているというのに。でも結局半年で辞めてしまったわ」

「なるほど」

「それであの家の話だけれど、卒業間近になって、しばらくぶりであの道を通ってみたの。そうしたらなんとあの一带が、大きなビルの裏口と駐車場になっていたの。もちろん家は跡形もなく、角のお稲荷さんだけがぽつんと」

「それでいやな思いも消えたわけだ」

「壊すとわかっていれば、花でも投げて叩いてあげたのに」

「ぼくの受験の直前、エイチからお守りが届いた。湯島天神だったかな」

大学にまだ強い未練があったころだ。

「クリスチャンなのに、教会でお祈りします、合格を、というようなことが書いてなかったの、記憶に残った」

「皮肉をこめたのかしら」

あのころはもう勝本道生に夢中だった。誘われて冬の寺や神社を歩いた。仏像を眺め、庭園を回った。おみくじを引いた。そのとき合格祈願のお守りを買ったかもしれない。

「それにしても長い年月会わなかったわね」

「ほんとうだ。みんな変るのも不思議でない」

栄子のラーメンは半分残っていたが、立ち上がって勘定をした、早く宿に行き、暖まりたくなっていた。

「濃いコーヒーが飲みたいな。蔵屋敷の応接間が喫茶室になっていたと思うが」

ドライバーの要求を聞かないわけにもいかなかった。考えてみると朝からコーヒーを飲んでいなかった。

喫茶室の天井には、昔からの電灯の色を放つシャンデリアが取り付けられていた。旧式なストーヴの炎の反射もあって、部屋の薄茶色の壁紙は、半端な橙色に変っていた。飾り棚、椅子

やテーブルには懐かしい色調と落ち着きが見られた。安則が椅子に腰掛けると、ふたりが良く遊んだ東京の家の応接間と重なった。コーヒーは少し濃かったが、水が良いのか喉には優しく香りも満ちていた。不安が少しあったが、カップ半分ほど飲んでも胃は痛くならなかった。飲物などではない。アメリカの匂いがする安則との再会に胃が騒いでいる、と思えた。

こんな感じの反応は以前に一度経験していた。夫と、その同業者と韓国旅行をしたときだった。慶州の郊外で小高い丘のような墓地を観光し、暗い埋葬所にはいった。外にでて眩しい太陽を手で避けながら敷地内を歩いているうちに、その胃痛は起きた。胃の壁を針が刺しているとしたか思えない痛みだった。

肺がんの手術から僅か半年という時期だった。昼食に石焼ビビンバを少し食べたが、胃の痛みは起きなかった。飛行時間も短く、軽く考えて参加した旅行だったが、韓国は赤い色彩を、たとえば門や玄関に、日本人とは異なる場所で使う国だった。文化の違う国に心の準備もなくてしまった。その心細さ意外に思い当たるふしはなかった。

「ヤッチャン、東京の家でよく女の子の寝巻きを着せられた」

ラーメン屋の光線に溢れていたくすんだ緋色が、やっと同じ色の記憶に繋がった。

「そうだったな」

青々としたいがぐり坊主に赤と白の市松模様の着物はどう見ても似あわなかった。裾回しはもちろん緋色だった。照れた表情と裾を蹴散らす動作がたまらなく可愛かった。抱き締めると泣きそうな顔をした。それならこうしてあげる、と言って結んである赤い腰紐を掴んで放り投げた。そうしたら半泣きのまま、また組みついてきた。あのころは栄子のほうがなにもかも勝れていた。確かに坊主頭のヤッチャンはエイチの言うことをなんでも聞いた。

「見せっこしようよ」

客の居ない時の応接間は静かだった。川向こうに海軍兵学校があり、窓の外を制服姿の青年が通ることもあった。マントルピースの陰にふたりの体はすっぽりと隠れた。栄子は足を大きくあげてズロースを脱いだ。

「まだなにも生えていないわ」

白い内股を見せながら言った。

「ぼくもだよ」

ズボンを脱ぐ動作はのろかったが、声は落ち着いているように聞こえた。最初の関心はまだ無毛の地を確認しあうだけだったが、栄子の目はすぐに別のものを捉えた。

「そこ触ってもいい？」

中心の小さな突起物が皮のようなものに包まれているのが気になった。そっと指を触れ、肌色の薄皮を寄せるように動かした。彼はすぐに「痛いよ」と体を逸らした。

栄子は驚いて「ごめんなさい」と言った。

それきり指は動かさなかった。彼も栄子の中心の陰りに興味を覚えたはずだが、なにも言わずもちろん触れもしなかった。

いまの彼の体はアメリカ人女性、しかも父親の違う子供をふたりも連れてきた女、と結婚し

てどう変ってしまったのか、そのことは考えたくなかった。ひとつだけ言えるのは、彼が母親をずっと慕っていたということだ。弟妹たちがほとんどこなかったあの板金工場にも足を運び、母と息子の接触は保っていた。悦子が死なずに居て結婚したとしても、その思いは変らなかつたに違いない。

「どこか似ているところがあったのかしら。あなたのおかあさんと。もちろん、外見は日本人と違うでしょうけれど」

「ワイフのこと？ あるよ。男に縋って生きる場所。それと多産系の血筋かな」

彼は淡々とそう言った。コーヒーで喉を潤したからか、声が透明に変わっていた。

「それでいて怠け者さ。白人のプライドは捨てないがね。サクセスしたアメリカ人の陰にはそういうのがたくさん居るんだよ」

「なるほどねえ」

「プロダクティブな人間でないところは嫌いだがね。男はそういうのに弱いところもある。ぼくが居なきゃ生きていけないのに、連れ子をしてきたとき、あなたはわたしに感謝するべきだ。アメリカ人のビューティフル・ガールをコントリビュートしてきてあげたのだから、と言うんだよ。日本人よりよほど上等な人種だと思っているんだろう」

アメリカ語混じりになると、微妙な意味はわかりにくかったが、彼が苦勞して成長していることだけは確かに思えた。

母の話では、若いころの長姉、つまり彼の母親は子供を五人生んだにも拘らず、性的には不満のある生活をしていたと言う。しかし、その夫は敬虔なカトリック信者であるところを見込んで、母が見合いをさせた古美術商の二代目であった。離婚調停のときも、子供の数から性的不和の訴えは取り上げられなかった、と聞いた。

「入り口なんだそうだよ」

母は泣き笑いの表情で、そう言った。ほんの子供のうちからその言葉を耳にしていた。長女の身を案ずるあまりに、末の子供の年齢に配慮が及ばなくなっていたのだろうか。

母の複雑な表情と、平素ほとんど笑わない二代目の顔を重ねて、栄子はその意味を、結婚している男として、不手際なこと、だと解釈した。やがてその解釈はカトリック教徒とは結婚するまい、という気持へと移行した。

実母に去られ、骨董品ばかり眺めている父親の機嫌を取り、弟妹の面倒を見たあげく、恋人に死なれた安則が一番可哀そうだったことだけは確かだ。

「うまかったな、コーヒー」

安則の声の透明度はさらに増していた。

「暖まったわ」

夕闇のなかを庭づたいに駐車場まで歩いた。安則はまた当然のようにハンドルを握った。車はライトを点して走りだした。町外れからは黒々とした山に向う道になった。

「裏磐梯の、標高七百五十メートルの温泉宿よ。部屋はふたつ取ってあるわ」

「山奥の秘湯なんて、遠い夢だったなあ。日本人の温泉好きばかりは、シャワー専用のアメリカ人には理解されないよ」

「喜ぶまえに表示を良く見てよ。日本語だから読めるでしょう。道を間違えると大変」

山に向っている一本道のようにだったが、走るにつれ右左にそして斜めにも曲がる道が現れた。すでに最初の十字路は直進してしまっている。

「この道でよかったのかしら。スカイラインにはいるのよ」

不安を抱えたまま車は走りつづけた。やがて視界は遮られ、道は急勾配になった。

「きのうの夜、地図を丁寧に見てきたんだが」

「あたり一面紅葉に包まれて、巨大なキルトの布に囲まれたような気持ちになる、そんな有料道路だと聞いていたけれど」

「こう暗くては紅葉も見えないな」

ごろ土のうえを走る振動や、路肩の傾き、曲がり角の不安定な感じから目差していた道路とは違うような気がした。念のため、車内灯を点けて宿から送ってきたパンフを見る。しかしいとも簡単な地図が載っているだけで役に立たない。

「道が狭いから、路肩に気をつけて」

「すぐにショルダーと言うのだな。ぼくたちはなによりも先に、オンカミング・カーだよ」

「アメリカでは、もしものときの事故の大きさを考えて、路肩の溝よりも対向車に注意しろ、というのでしょうか。でも、日本の山道の場合は、路肩が死の谷底に繋がっていることもあるのよ」

怖さのせいか、彼の声が気にならなくなっていた。前方はヘッドライトに照らされているだけで、それ以外はほとんど闇に見えた。

恐怖心から祈りたくなっていた。彼への質問が生れた。

「あちらでは、日曜のミサに行っているの」

「プレゼビテリアン・チャーチに行っている。キャソリックではない」

「プレゼ？」

「長老派教会、という」

「ああ、プロテスタント教会の一派ね」

「家から近いところにある」

「わたしも病気をしてから、ミサには良く行くようになったわ。勝手なものね」

車の振動もあって、ふたりはいったん口を閉じた。体は大きな振動とともに跳ねあがり、元に戻っても小さな震動はつづいていた。しかしスピードと揺れに、軽い興奮も覚えていた。新婚時代、日々の買い物にはいつも自転車を使っていた。スーパーに行く途中、電車の踏切をひとつ越えなければならず、線路にタイヤがバウンドする際の強い振動に性的な快感を覚え、密かに楽しんだ。いまもまた密かな快樂を思い出しながら、キリスト教の祈りを手繰り寄せている。考えてみると、神の意識は性の意識にいつも密着していた。

「娘時代、クリスチャンとは結婚しない、と本気で思っていたわ」

「先入観で、対象から外してしまったのだろう。それとも勝本さんに魅力があったのかな」

「若いのに、黙々と包丁を研いでいる姿が新鮮に見えたの。ふたつ年下で干支はあなたと同じだっ

た。恋愛も自由だった。比佐子姉さんの若いころとは時代も違って」

と言ってから慌てて口をつぐんだ。彼はその様子に気づいたのか、

「いいよ。何を言ったって。おふくろもおやじも、おばあちゃんも死んだし、もうその話をするひとは、ぼくくらいしか居なくなったのだから」

と言った。

「ありがとう。でも、無口なひとは怖いよ。黙って家をでることも、裏切ることもできる。良く喋る実家の人間も存外良かった、と一時はひどく混乱した」

「無理もない」

「でも、離婚については早くから学んでいた。板金工場時代のお姉さん、前より少しだけ活発になったけれど、いつも戸惑っているように見えた。ときおり寂しそうな顔もしていた。幸せを勝ち取ったようにも見えなかった」

「ぼくも実はそう思っていた」

「でもだれだって、他に良い場所があれば行きたくなるわ。だからお姉さんを責めてはいないの。参考にしただけよ。わたしの場合は他に好きな男も居なかったし、兄の家に泣いて帰るくらいなら、運命に妥協するほうがずっとましという状況だった」

「自立は考えなかったの」

「考えたわ、洋裁の道でなんとかと。でも職人になりきれなかった。駄目な性分ね。娘も居たしふんぎれなかった。母が生きていたら反対すると思ったの。いまふうに言えば勇気がなかったのね」

「思いだす母親が居るだけで上等なんだよ。離婚社会のアメリカにはそれも無い人間が多い。だから心のコントロールができない」

アメリカの話がふたたびでた途端、引き留めたい気持が湧いた。

「まだ少し日本に居るのでしょう」

「おふくろの墓参りはするつもりだよ。男の家の墓に納まっているのでね、あまり行きたくないんだが」

「それでヤッチャン、定年後の暮しはどうするの」

「ランクを落とせば教師の仕事はまだあるよ。日本語も教えられる。稼ぎがあれば、孤独なアメリカ人の話し相手、ボランティアも引き受けられる。そういうグループもできている」

「それはいいわ」

「一種の挨拶になっているだろう。さっきのように、『ミサに行っているの?』と尋ねるのが、ぼくたち幼児受洗者同士では」

「悪い質問だったかしら」

「いやべつに」

「どうしてアメリカで教会に行くようになったの」

「家から近いと、ガス代がかからないのでね」

「でもそれだけ?」

大曲がりがつづく道になったので、ハンドルに神経を集中するように安則は黙った。

「飲めないアルコールを飲んで荒れていた、という話も聞いたけれど」

道が楽になると、彼は口を開いた。

「神も仏もない、と思っていた時期は確かにあったよ。きっかけかどうかはわからないが……子供たちに朝食を食べさせていたある日、ワイフは朝ゆつくりと寝ているのでね、ふと通勤途中にいつも見ている、ハイウェイ沿いの教会に行ってみようと思った。それから実際に行くまでには、少し時間がかかったが」

「肌の色の違う三人の子供に、父親が毎朝御飯を作って食べさせる家。その朝、その男になにが起こったか？」

最近のテレビミステリーの、やたらに長いタイトルみたいだわ。ところで、日本の新聞はすぐに読めるの？ テレビはどうなの？」

「アメリカでの日本の新聞購読や、NHKの受信は、若いころは大きな金銭的負担だったよ。月遅れの雑誌でも嬉しいときがあった」

気分でも害したのか、怒ったような口調になっている。

英会話教室の玄関ホールに張られているポスターが浮かぶ。肌の色が違う三つの顔が笑いあっている。国際交流協会ボランティアを募集しているのである。和風レストランにくる外国人客のために通い始めた英会話教室だが、素質がないのか、上達はしていない。ポスターならば退屈しのぎに眺めていられるが、現実となるとそうもいかないのだろう。

「ごめんなさい。わたしたち日本人は人種問題に鈍感なのよ」

これは国際交流協会でもよく話題にする問題だ。

「そのうちわかるときもくると思うがね。そのときはぼくの話を出してくれるといいよ。ところで、まだ小説は書いているの」

「書いていますよ」

今度はこちらが尋ねられていた。板金工場の事務をしていたころから、拙い小説を書いていた。駅までいっしょに帰った日もその話をしたように思う。

闇は深くなっていて、ヘッドライトに照らされた前方の視界だけが頼りになっていた。栄子は歳を取っても書く理由を、安則には話さなくてはならないと思った。それはかつて板金工場を辞めた理由、中年になって大学に行った理由、洋裁や英会話に身に付かない理由の説明にもなると思えた。少しのあいだ整理するように考えた。

「日本には、家族制度も無くなった。子供の少ないいまの時代には、歳の近い甥や姪を持つ若くて貫禄のない叔父さん、叔母さん……、そういう滑稽な人間も見掛けなくなった。こんな時代の話も、次の世代に残したいとは思ってはいけないかしら。二十世紀の家族の話は、まだ色々なひとの胸にたくさん溜まっている、と思う。……でも違うわ。こうして話していると、まだほんとうの理由からずっと遠い話をしている、気がする」

しばらくのあいだ、手術で小さくなった肺を休めるように黙った。

「鎮めたいのよ」

ぼつりそう言ってから、栄子は前方を指差し、光に照らされる暗い山道を追った。

「こんなふうに、ヘッドライトが光るの。心のなかのある場所が照らされる。時には細く青い炎が地を這うように見える。そうするとそこの土を掘ってみたいくなるの」

「なんだか怖いよ。でもエイチらしいよ。この話は、何年もつづくソープ・オペラというところかな」

「日本で言う、昼メロのことね。まあそれでもいいわ。でも正直に言うと、わたしの体にも毒舌の血は脈々と流れているの。べつのかたちで、べつの言葉で、つまり書くことで毒を放ちたいのね」

「そこまで考えるようになったわけだ」

「でも、作法はきちんと持つつもりよ」

「どんなふうに」

「弱いひとには毒を吹かない」

「なるほど」

「兄と違うところを見せたい、だけかもしれないけれど」

無駄話が加わって、時間ばかりが過ぎていた。車の振動も前方の闇も変らなかったが、目差す温泉地には辿り着かなかった。

「もしかすると、同じところをぐるぐると回っているのではないの。この大曲が三度つづく場所、まえにもあったわよ」

「そうかな。そういえばそんな気が」

「どこか道を聞くところはないの」

「この先にいくつか明かりが見えている。店も一軒ぐらいあるだろう、と思うが」

点在する明かりが少し下がった方向に確認できた。一瞬安堵が湧いたが、車は山を登っているはずだと思うと、それも消えてしまった。

会社勤めをしている娘の顔が浮かんだ。昔ならとっくに嫁に行っている年ごろだ。母親の気持になると、急に分別が湧いていた。

(ほんとうに、このひとはだいじょうぶなのだろうか)

アメリカで教師をやっていたと言っても、遠い国のことだ。実際に仕事場を見たわけでもないのに彼の言うことを頭から信用している。日本の道路に慣れていない甥の頼みなど、聞かなければ良かったと悔やむ。電話代がかさむと話していたから、宿に着いたら金を貸してくれと頼まれるのではないか。恐怖心とともに疑心が湧いていた。

明かりに近付くと、そこはロータリーになっていて、幸いその角にコンビニらしい店が光る看板を掲げていた。

「ひとが居る、居る」

先に悲鳴のような声をだしたのは栄子のほうだった。安則はほとんど無表情で、早くも駐車場に入れるべく車の向きを変えている。

「大きなコンビにねえ」

「夜だからそう思うのだろう」

「そうね、ここは紅葉の名所、裏磐梯ですものね」

会話もうまく噛みあわない。

この闇のなかに紅葉が眠っていることだけは確かなのだ。

「道を聞いてくるよ」

「夕、カ、ユ、温泉よ、行き先は」

固有名詞をはっきりと告げた。少し経って彼は戻ってきた。

「いまきた道に戻って、最初の角を左に曲がれば良いそうだ。すぐに料金所の明かりが見えるからわかる、と言われた」

「やっぱり道を一本間違えたのでしょうか」と言いたかったが咎めるような言葉はこのさい良くないと思い、口は閉じていた。

聞いたほどすぐではなかったが、行く手に料金所らしい小さな明かりが確認できた。冬には雪が積もるからなのか、堅固な造りの屋根とガラス戸がその橙色の明かりを包んでいた。車が近づくにつれそれは大きくなり、徐行すると年配の職員が窓を開いて首をだした。

「どちらまで行かれますか」

「タカユ温泉まで」

「この道でほんとうに良いのですか」

栄子も口ぞえをする。壁のボードには通行料金千五百円とある。迷って時間もガソリンも無駄にしたせいか、高いと思った。

「この道の出口が、もう温泉街になっています。でもお客さん少し待ってください」

「待つ、なぜですか」

宿に着く予定が大幅に遅れている。抗議するような口調になる。安則も少し不機嫌な表情を見せている。

「あと五分でこの料金所はクローズします。五十メートル戻ったところで少しお待ちください。ほらあの窪地ですよ。わたしが電気を消してここをでたら通ってください。そうすればお客さん、料金を払わずに済みます」

東北鈍りのある職員は、そう言って堅固な窓を閉めてしまった。ふたりとも反論の言葉を口にできなかったのも、ほとんど自動的にバックして言われた場所に停車した。

「融通がきかないなあ。後続の車もなし、五分まえに通したって良いだろうに」

「親切に言ってくれたのよ。日本人にもこんな良いところがあると思って欲しいわ」

「おばあちゃんなら、感謝の祈りを捧げなさい、というところかな」

素直さもまだ残っているらしい。しかし声は元の嗚れ声に戻っている。

「母を思い出してくれてありがとう。でもこういうときの五分は長いよねえ」

少し慰めるように呟いた。それきり会話が途切れた。男の影が硝子戸越しに微かに動くのが見える。帰り支度というよりなにか整理しているような手の動きである。木陰にはいったせいか、橙色が少し色落ちしたように眺められた。そのまま料金所全体が、暈を被った月のように霞んでくるのが感じられた。

安則の左手が栄子の右膝のうえに伸びてくるのがわかった。

「寒くないか」

「だいじょうぶ」

二三度暖めるように撫でさすりしていたが、少しずつスカートの内側に移動しはじめた。普通の手の動きではない。あと四分ほどの時間がある。いまさら急発進して料金を払うと言うのも不自然である。しかし、受け容れるわけにはいかない行為に栄子は困惑していた。子供のころ、ズロースを脱いだ栄子の陰りに触れることもできなかった可愛い坊主頭がよみがえってくる。あときはきつと触りたくてたまらなかったのだろう。車内のデジタル時計の点滅がいつもより遅いように感じられる。手が僅かでも奥に進むにつれ、闇に吸い込まれていくような心地よさが増していく。早く時間が過ぎれば良い。しかしこんなときは一秒だって長い。

しかし、開いている目は料金所の堅固な窓をまだ捉えていた。見ていさえすればなんとか落ち着きが保てる。ここで待っている理由も時間も確かめられる。

(いつも支配していた) という意識は、時と距離を越えても、やはり残っていた。どんなときでも主導権は握っていた。こちらが仕掛けるのならまだしも……。誇りと同時に、理性が戻ってきていた。

「いつもアメリカでドライブするとき、こうして若い奥さんの足を撫でているのね」

「見抜かれてしまうな、エイチには」

言葉と明るい笑い声が車中に流れ、栄子はほっとしていた。引っこめたまま軽くハンドルに乗せている大きな手が可愛らしく眺められた。その手を改めて自分から引っ張り、左の乳房のうえに乗せた。安則は異国風の発音で、ワウオと声を洩らした。

「このしたには、切除した肺の空洞があるの」

返事はなかった。彼の手は膨らんだ胸をしっかりと掴んでいたが、静止していた。

「いいのよ、供養なんだから」

しかし、指が動きだす気配もなかった。先手を取ったつもりだったが、時間の動きは遅く、一秒ごとの点滅も、行為も空しく感じられた。

料金所の男の動きが帰り支度のように、やや大きくなっていった。

「ご主人も、こうして肺の供養をしてくれているの」

「アメリカ人の夫婦じゃあるまいし」

突っ撥ねるようにそう言って、あとは少し笑った。中年の大学生になったころから、勉強部屋と称する道路沿いの小部屋にひとりで寝起きするようになっていた。大型車が通ると床が浮くように動いたが、独り寝もまた快適だった。夫と娘は南側のそれぞれの部屋を使っていた。

「ワイフの母親も可哀そうな生い立ちをしている。孤児院に預けられていたこともある。離婚は何回だったかな。情緒が安定しないのも無理はない」

「優しいのね、でも日本に居るときくらい、せいぜい文句を言って気を晴らしなさい」

叔母らしい口を利いて、彼の手をもとに戻した。

「勝本さんのお母さんは美人だったそうだね」

彼は不意にそう言った。

「そう、でもわたしが嫁いだときはもう……」

義母の明るい緋色の長襦袢が眼前を覆うように浮かんだ。

「やつれて、顔色も悪かったわ」

それでも夕食のまえには必ず鏡に向かい、髪のはつれを直し、紅を差し直していた。栄子は弱みを疲れたかのように動揺した。

「死んだのは、娘が二歳になったときよ」

若いころは雛人形のように美しかったと聞いていた。誂え品ばかりだった嫁入り道具も評判だったという。勝本が姿を消したのは、姑の一周忌が過ぎた冬だった。

「ときどき年寄りのような顔をする」

年下の夫にそう言われたことがある。

「お義母さんのように、まめにお化粧はできないわ。もう毎日着物を着る時代でもないし」「それはいいが、暗い話はしないでくれ」

父親を早く亡くし、母子だけでひっそりと育った夫に、争いの絶えなかった栄子の実家の人びとの話も、知らぬ間に身につけた独自の感じ方も、暗くなりがちな気持もなかなか理解してもらえなかった。

「戦争があったでしょう。姑の場合、人生の真ん中の三十代に。わたしたちには子供のころの戦争、だったけれど」

「それで生活が一変した」

安則は声に力を入れた。

「姑は、いつも一流料亭の娘だった昔を懐かしがっていた。誇りも捨てなかった。その意味では明るい表情をしていたわ」

そう言ったとき、料金所の電灯が消えた。先ほどの窓と反対がわの扉が開いたような気配があり、人影は見えなくなった。

「もう良いと思うけれど」

「そうだな」

彼はすぐに発進した。

「千五百円、得したな」

少し照れていたが、待ち時間を楽しんだのが微笑みに現れていた。道は先ほどと違い滑らかに整備されていた。安則は軽く口笛を吹き始めていた。軽快なリズムだったので、栄子は胸の芯をずっと湿っぽくしていた言葉をさらりと唇に乗せた。

「どうして許したの、と聞いてくれて、ありがとう」

「どういたしまして」

口笛は止まったが、返事も軽快に聞こえた。

大病も患った。そう遠くない日に、この人生が終ることはもうわかっている。しかし、(安則なら)本音が話せる。それも誇りを持って、という思いは諦めのなかにも不思議に残っていた。

放浪はくせになると言うひとも居たが、夫は二度と家をでなかった。後始末に一度だけ会ったあのときの女は、確かに美しかったが、姑のような品もなく、ただ派手な服装と化粧が目立つ女だった。

口笛のリズムに乗せられたのか、ほんの僅かな時間で、タカユ温泉入り口に到着した。

案内標識を右に折れると下り坂になり、その低地になった一帯が温泉街であるらしかった。囲炉裏端で夕食を囲むことで知られているという鄙びた宿も、明るい街灯に導かれてすぐに見つかった。

車を降りるとき、駐車場の片隅に、大学への道で見かけた小さな稲荷に似た鳥居と祠が、光の影に佇んでいるのが見えた。破れかけた緋色の幟が夜風に揺れていて、ラーメン店の暖簾の色の名残りが感じられた。

その色を目に残したまま、田舎家造りの玄関ロビーを通り、部屋に案内された。エレベーターはなく、長時間のドライブですっかり浮腫んだ足全体に、妙な違和感を覚えたが、まえに行く安則の足取りはひどく軽いように思えた。

二階に上ると建物は殺風景な廊下と、何の装飾もない扉の並列に変わった。

和室を二室予約していたが、この様子だとあまり期待はできない。女の案内人は、洗面所のまえを通り過ぎた左手の、三桁の番号の付いた扉を栄子の部屋と告げた。右手はもうその辺りからガラス窓になっていた。昼間なら山の景色が間近に見えるはずだ。

先隣の扉が当然安則の部屋と思っていたが、女の案内人は、次の部屋のまえを黙って通り過ぎた。ひとつ置いた部屋に彼は案内された。妙な寂しさが栄子の胸に湧いていた。

安則の部屋の扉にも三桁の番号が付けられていた。あいだの部屋は使用していない部屋なのか、なんの表示も見えなかった。

「腹も減っているが、やっぱり先に温泉だな」

彼は案内人にそう言った。

「露天風呂は、一階の廊下を抜けて、いったん外にでたところにございます」

「男女別になっていますか」

栄子が尋ねる。

「はい、脱衣所が左右に分れていますから、すぐにわかります」

「サンキュウ、ご親切に」

彼の声を背中に聞いて、栄子は自分の部屋にはいった。手早く浴衣と半纏に着替えて鍵を持って廊下にでたが、まだ安則の姿はなかった。あいだの部屋のまえを通り過ぎて、彼の部屋まで歩いた。

「先に行きますよ、早くしてね」

ラーメンを残したこともあって、空腹になっていた。扉を叩いて声をかけた。

「相変わらず仕度が早いなあ。ぼくは昔から愚図でのろまだからね。アメリカに電話を一本いれてから行くよ。脱衣所まで行ったら声をかけるよ。そのときは返事をしてくれよね」

子供のころのような甘えた声が返ってきたので、思わず微笑んだ。入浴後は囲炉裏端で楽しい食事が始まるだろう。胃の痛みも治まっている。このぶんなら借金を申し込まれることは先ずあるまい。まだ積もる話は残っている。ワインで乾杯をして、いや日本酒がいいかもしれない……。こんどはもっと明るい話をしよう。階段を降りるときの足は軽かった。露天風呂でピーピング・トムになって、ちょっとくらい覗いてもいいわよ。深夜になったら、子供のころのように優しく子守唄を歌ってあげてもいいわよ。

山の夜気は冷たかった。宿のサンダルを鳴らして歩くあいだは肩をすぼめたが、岩造りの露天風呂に身を沈めるとすぐに体が暖まった。街灯と同じような色あいの照明が、脱衣所と洗いの端にあったので、前方の黒い山並の位置が確認できる明るさになっていた。

湯はかなりの高温なのだろう。立ちのぼる湯気がその明るさを滲ませ、視界を遮っていた。なにかの具合でここに湯気が溜まるようになっているのだろう。そんなことを呑気に考える。そろそろ安則の声が聞えるだろう。他に相客は居なかったので、遠慮なく返事ができると思い、楽しい気分になっていた。

しかしその声はいつこうに聞えてこなかった。高温の湯にいつまでも浸かっていられないので、一度洗い場に上り石鹸を手にしてみたが、寒さに震えてふたたび湯に飛び込んだ。そのまま体をずらして行くと、幸い腰掛けられる石が見付かった。そこに座ると肩がかなり湯からでて、熱さと寒さのバランスが保てた。その姿勢で待機した。霧も加わり、視界はさらに悪くなっていた。

はじめに、女の息遣いが聞えた、

「おば、さま」

脱衣所からではなく、湯気の向う、それもかなり近い距離からの声に思えた。

「栄子、叔母さま」

高く澄んだ声だった。草陰で鈴虫が鳴いているようにも聞き取れた。

「だれなの」

尋ねたものの、だれの声かももうわかっていた。

「栄子叔母さま、悦子です。篠塚悦子」

「あなた、まさか」

姿は見えてこなかった。一瞬安則の顔を思い浮かべたが、思考が働かず、手足も固くなってはしまっていた。

「叔母さま」

声はさらに接近してきていた。

「あのとき、あの夏。長崎の坂道で事故にあったのは、安則さんですよ。叔母さまは教会での葬儀の折、わたしの肩をやさしく抱いて、いっしょに泣いてくださったではありませんか」

黒いヴェールの人びとだけでなく、涙に濡れた悦子の顔も浮かび、母比佐子の号泣、弟妹の啜り泣きも耳によみがえる。話しかけてくる声はあのことより落ち着いていて、中年の力強さを感じさせる。きょうの午後に訪れた墓の風景が頭のなかを忙しく回り始める。米沢牛のステッキと掲げた看板をいくつも越えて行った。確かにあれは米沢市郊外だった。墓には悦子の名が刻まれていた。姓も変っていなかった。

「墓標をご覧になったのですね。まちがいなくあれはわたしの、墓です。でも新しいものです。わたしは去年の秋、あそこに移りました。大学の理工学部で働いていましたが」

息苦しくなっていた。心臓とともに、肺も他の内臓も、硬直して動かないように思える。

「叔母さま、遠くからお参りにきてくださって、ほんとうにありがとうございました」

語尾が消えるように遠くなっていた。

「悦子さん、待って」

声の主はまだ辛うじてそこに居るように思えた。

「安則には会えたのね。良かったわ。この温泉であなたたち巡りあえたのね」

叔母という意識が急に湧いていた。

「違います、叔母さま」

ふたたび近づいてきた声は、穏やかだが鮮明に聞えた。

「安則さんは、叔母さまに会いにいらしたのですよ。お話をたくさんさりたいと、いつも叔母さまは願っていらしたでしょう」

(なぜそれを)

問い掛けたくても、唇が凍ってしまっていた。

「叔母さまは、もうだれが見ても立派な叔母さまです。安則さんはそれを告げにいらしたのではないか、と思います」

論すような口調は凜としていたが、優しさにも満ちていた。必ずしもそうではない。あのひとはわたしの体に触りたかったのだ。べつの思いもあったが、彼女の言葉には説得力があり、胸の奥に染みだした。羞しさが冷や汗の内側から火照りとなって湧いていた。どこかで乗り越えて行かなくてはならなかった多産の家の宿命を、いつまでも引き摺っていたのは、自分自身に他ならない。

ひとに勇気を与える、素晴らしい女性だったのではないか。安則の目に狂いはなかった。感嘆と愛惜が入り混じる。礼を言うことも忘れていた。

そのうちに、霧は湯気と混じってさらに濃くなり、ひとの気配は消えた。声もまったく聞えなくなっていた。

……気がつくと、無人の世界が闇とともに広がっていた。震える手をなんども岩の縁に置き、やっと脱衣所に辿り着いた。

もうどこにも、あの胸がときめくような緋色は見えなかった。ともかく部屋に戻ってみよう。安則があ部屋に居なければ諦めもつく。しかし宿の庭道も廊下も先程よりずっと長く、歩みにくく変っていた。遠くに気忙しい小鳥のさえずりと、ダンプカーの走る地響きが聞えている。スーパーマーケットの大売出しの声も混じっている。あれはきょう一日忘れていた日常の雑音のひとつだ。

背筋のあたりから、祈りが粟粒のように湧いていた。

(おばあちゃんなら、感謝の祈りを捧げなさい、というところかな)

彼の囁れ声もよみがえる。

確かに栄子は彼と秋の旅をしていた。車の振動も、率直に話のできた喜びも、胃の痛みも、内股の感触も、いや、すべての事柄を記憶している。そして悦子の澄んだ声も、告げられた内容も忘れていない。

まえに進もうとする足は、もうほとんど動かなくなっていた。

Autumn of the Aunt

Pale-golden light of the setting sun come into the ramen shop. It came through a scarlet-dyed noren curtain, producing a purple-like weird color. It is only a dark and dull color but has a hidden amorous air once given by Japanese red kimono slips of old days.

"Everything's incredible!" murmured Yasunori, using disposable chopsticks to eat ramen. His hair is grayed in the course of long period of time. He wears a brown, yellow and green checkered American shirt. But Eiko reckoned his potato-shaped head, his small elephant eyes and his big nose were not change as it was when he was only a little child. "It's really awful to see people who cannot pay for burial of their relative, even in a public cemetery let alone a grave plot. Anyway burial is not so expensive in such a big country than in Japan. Moreover, it's not the story for blacks in the past but also today for some whites. Still they have pride. That makes the situation worse."

Eiko is listening to him attentively and curiously rejoicing the reunion with him.

"It's really tasty, the Kitagata ramen!" said Yasunori in a little hoarse voice. Eiko admired his visage that performs incessant act of chewing.

'How long am I facing him today?' Eiko questioned to herself. She reminded that in the morning they were heading Sakuragicho from home in Kanazawaku, Yokohama. They were going to a bookstore in the Landmark tower. But they took a wrong way at some point on a highway after ran through the circled underground tunnel at Kariba. 'I know toll fare ticket will tell us which highway we entered.' But, the ticket is left in the car. She does not have it at hand.

'Anyway we are at some place around Kitagata city in Tohoku district' thought Eiko, 'because the ramen shop looks very much like a restaurant in the country side, and, what is more, both outlined character by resist dyeing on the noren curtain and the printed character on the chopstick cover are telling Kitagata specialty.'

Yasunori was talking all time about how were the lives of his wife and her poor American peers, even when they were doing the sights of an old residence and its rice granary before coming to this ramen shop.

For example, an old lady who makes one-sided long distance calls everyday regardless of her paying capacity; a wife who always calls her husband in office to seek decision for her own affairs; lives of problem drinkers and so on; and so on to the point how poor Americans bury the dead, by the time when the two pilgrims got here Kitagata city.

It was an autumn evening but not a bit cold. Rather, Eiko felt the cold in his story. 'That must be the reason why I said to him to have ramen or something hot.' thought Eiko. Eiko shook pepper only one time on ramen but it affected her throat and made her coughing. Her tracheal system got too sensitive after she had an operation for early lung cancer.

"Are you OK?" Yasunori gave her the accustomed tender look on his face.

Memories in the afternoon suddenly flashed back to Eiko. They had lunch at a drive-in restaurant with a nice view of Goshikinuma Lake after putting flowers on Etsuko's grave. Etsuko was his first love. And for Yasunori it was the first visit to her grave in thirty years. And what is more, he came from the US. He was talking too little about Etsuko and complaining too much about his wife and her relatives. He said his wife had kids by former marriages.

Eiko believed he has not changed even though he talked little about Etsuko. Instead, he complained much about sloppy life of American poor to Eiko, his aunt. She thought it very natural, reckoning that he is abandoned by fortune to meet good girls after Etsuko. Eiko is the aunt of Yasunori. It is true. But she is only a year and nine months older than him. When they were little, they made good playmate each other, playing hide-and-seek and keeping-house. Eiko paused a moment to eat ramen. She felt a little pain in the stomach because of the driving fatigue.

"It really tastes good. I could take a second if I am not to have dinner tonight." said Yasunori sipping the last soup of ramen. She wanted him not to see her giving up eating ramen.

She tried to treat him as she used to do, but her body caught his unacceptable change. It was his driving manner.

He said, "If I didn't have a car, I could not even call on my neighborhood friends. A school bus is provided for kids, though." Eastern towns where he lives are so sparsely habited that small animals like foxes come into individual back yards.

"Once I have visited Washington DC with my fellow classmates of an English conversation school." said Eiko. She remembered the conversation teacher, an American lady, who gave her the pile of homework. She thought 'Meeting the nephew will make a good topic for the free talking session in the next class.'

"Your visit must be a sight seeing around the Whitehouse and the Smithsonian's Museum. What have you found in the museum?" asked Yasunori.

"I saw airplanes in the Air and Space Museum; the Wright brothers' airplane and others. Then a native conversation teacher conducted us to another place in Maryland by bus." It was a male teacher who guided her in the Museum.

"He showed us a Zero fighter of the former Japanese Navy stored in a hangar." said Eiko. "Zero fighter. I remember it by my childhood memory. How was that?" asked Yasunori. "There was a lot of graffiti on its body. It is a pity to see it exposed to public. I wanted it to be disposed without delay." she answered.

"My home is located only a little more than two hours ride afar from that custody hangar." said he.

Eiko thought 'I know he is accustomed to the speed on a highway. But I don't like his steering manner. Manipulation is precise but not delicate enough.' It is her Japanese car with a right-hand steering wheel. No doubt Eiko trusted him as she offered the driver's seat to him, knowing that he is accustomed to drive with left-hand steering. The true owner of the car is her husband Michio who doesn't have a driver's license. Michio said, when young he could not afford to go to a driving school because his family was poor and fatherless. However, he didn't go to a driving school after he got a job in a Japanese restaurant.

'I don't like his steering.' An uneasy feeling came up into her mind after some point around Goshikinuma Lake. 'Is that because I have not experienced to sit in the front passenger's seat of a car driven by my husband?' She asked to herself. She cannot help but feel uneasy to his rough steering.

The floor of ramen shop glared blue-white by the reflection of some light. Another memory came up to her. Yasunori's letter came to her from the US in mid-August when she was preparing for the Bon Festival to welcome spirits of ancestors. She opened his letter at the side of Bonfire that glows in reddish yellow, the color of well ripe Chinese lantern plant, against dull and dark Ogara, de-fibered hemp cane.

"I want you to join me to visit Etsuko's grave. I'd like to go by car to Yamagata, if possible. Of course I'll be the driver." said his letter,

She replied, "It will be good for Etsuko's soul. And on the way back, we could go on an overnight trip to a nearby hot spring." Yasunori was a teacher of science in a junior high school but by now he retired because he reached sixty.

Her husband Michio set fire to the Ogara with a skilful hand. Blue flames of chemical ink came out when he lit the twisted flyers to make them fire source. Yasunori liked science when he was only a school boy. He knew a term "imperfect combustion" and understood its meaning.

"Have you been teaching science all the while?" asked Eiko.

"Yes, because I had no other way than that. But the last five years I taught Japanese conversation additionally. I made a study program with my colleagues for international exchange. There is a boom in Japanese conversation in the US."

"I saw a poster of International Exchange Association on the wall of my English conversation class." Eiko reminded again of the home works handed to her.

Yasunori graduated from Japanese college of science. Deceased Etsuko was also the student of the same college and has once come to Eiko's home in Yokosuka accompanied by Yasunori. Eiko's mother moved to that home after the bombing of Tokyo in 1945.

Eiko had a prejudiced image to girls wanting to acquire knowledge of science. But Etsuko looked much womanly girl with soft expression and lithe movement than is expected.

After introduced by Yasunori, the first words given by Etsuko were "How do you do aunt Eiko. I am Shinozuka Etsuko." The title word 'aunt' made an amiable impression on Eiko.

"Yasunori call me plainly Eichi as I am a tomboy and only one year older than him." replied Eiko in a little embarrassment.

A productive family contains many coevals of different generation. Honorific expressions are easily disregarded among contemporaries.

Yasunori's mother Hisako is a sister to Eiko by blood, but twenty one years older than Eiko. And there are six brothers and sisters between them. The fertility of the family inherited to every sibling, therefore babies were born one after another despite the gap of generation. Eiko is nominally the aunt of the babies of her siblings, but born just as one of those babies.

Eiko and Yasunori were great friends to each other among many of the relatives as they lived near by. Generation difference was easily broken and Yasunori came to call Eiko plainly Eichi. Then, so did the Yasunori's brothers and sisters. They were far from courteous at all; sometime their talk to Eiko was rough and rude. The parents of Eiko were not exact in holding Japanese good manners. The father was a very practical man and was running a wholesale company of building materials in Tokyo. The mother was a pious Catholic.

On the occasion of visiting Eiko's mother in Yokosuka, Yasunori said he would marry Etsuko and they would go into a dual-income life when both obtained teacher's licenses. "Yasunori's mother is not heard of this good news. Poor Hisako!" Hisako had already left the married family and was living with a new guy.

In the year next, Etsuko was killed in a turnover accident on a downhill road. She had a collision with a taxi on her way to a bakery on a bike.

"Anyway, I am happy for you. You could visit Etsuko's grave." said Eiko to Yasunori.

"Right on." replied Yasunori.

"It was a beautiful cemetery, wasn't it? Grave markers were maintained so well that we could clearly read them. Flowers were renewed and the yard was cleaned. Country temples have a feeling of quiet and calm atmosphere." commented Eiko.

"It is true." said he.

"I'm happy you are here. It's been a long thirty years." she murmured and dared not speak further because this time they came here to hold a service for Etsuko.

Lights from setting sun through scarlet-dyed noren curtain are diminishing. However, the air in the ramen shop still holds a tincture of reddish shade, or dull scarlet.

"How many kids do you have in all?" asked Eiko.

"My wife already had two when I married her. One is a white girl and the other, whom she was carrying, was a black. After marriage, she had the third, an Asian boy, my son. We have three in all." replied Yasunori.

Eiko had no word to answer. She wanted to say, 'You need not to marry such a woman.' But he lives in the US. He must be following one of the ways they have. He continued, "But I equally loved them all. By now I have squeezed through to bring up every one." He said the trouble is the wife's mother.

"She is only seventy years old. She had my wife at the age of twenty." He said the mother lives near his home, only thirty minutes by car. Two years ago, cohabiter of the mother died. He is of course not the father of Yasunori's wife.

"After his death, what shall she do when she has no money to pay for tomb and burial?" asked Yasunori.

"Of course she cannot leave him as a dead body." said Eiko.

"The body can be cremated for free at some public crematorium. The trouble lies after that." said he. Eiko got no idea about what the mother of his wife did after cremation of her cohabiter.

Eiko remembered the splendid scenery of Goshikinuma Lake on the way here. The tour guide raised her voice to explain the view to a lot of visitors.

"You can see scattered islands in the lake. Every one on them holds trees. We name them 'Swept mountain bits'. A massive mountain was broken into bits and swept away by the great eruption of Bandaisan Mountain. The volcano's fury happened a hundred years ago. And after that, many greens came out and now made beautiful forests on the islands. Everything was made by the Mother Nature." The scenery was made and shaped across the years longer than a man's life.

"Can you figure out how did she treat his ash?" Yasunori continued his story by himself.

"She scattered it at some place of their memory, didn't she?" asked Eiko.

"No, she is not such a romantic being."

"Did she happen to put it in a bag and dispose it to the trash collector?" Eiko tried one of the extremities.

"She hasn't thought that far." again denied he.

"Then what did she do?" Eiko gave up guessing.

"She said to me that she disposed the ash into the toilet bowl and flushed it away." he

explained it all at last.

"So, she let it go to the sea, didn't she?" Eiko made a confirmative question. Yasunori fetched a deep breath of relief with an affirmative nod.

"Eichi, by the way, how could you forgive your husband, Michio?" The brunt of question has now turned to Eiko. Fortunately, her stomachache has already gone away. "I heard that he left you for three years, though it was second hand news I got around the end of the Vietnam war." continued Yasunori.

"Not exactly three, but only two years a little plus." Eiko corrected the vacant period of her husband.

Swept mountain bits... They were at first nothing but the strewn debris of an erupted and broken mountain. And now they brim with greens to inspire the cold lake water. "At that time," thought Eiko, "I was debris of a broken mountain. But now, my daughter has grown up. That is the ray of hope for me."

Birdcalls over the lake came back to Eiko's conscious mind. They sounded as clear and sharp as to cut through the air. Their resonance lasted with no end but merged into atmosphere. On the contrary, birds in home garden twitter busy. Sometimes their songs are drawn out by traffic noise on the road.

"I am trying to forget it all. He has now succeeded the executive manager of that Japanese restaurant." Eiko replied.

"That's good." nodded Yasunori.

"But the business is very tough because competition is very keen." added Eiko.

"Are you working with him?" asked Yasunori.

"I helped him before got sick. But now, no more." replied Eiko.

Three years ago, Eiko got cancer, but recovered early after a surgery using a thoracoscope into the pleural space. Still, there remains a possibility of second stroke.

"I could hardly believe that you had excused a guy who betrayed you. When you were a little girl, you would not forgive me when I broke my promise." said Yasunori.

"Well, is that true?" Eiko played innocent, but it was absolutely true.

"At that time, I lost my mother after losing my father. I had nowhere else to go. I lived in the present house and brought up my daughter by getting money by dressmaking paid work. And, what is more, Michio sent me living expense every month. He must have got a job at some restaurant or another because he has got career in cooking when young."

Eiko remembered how Michio looked like when he came back home after two years and three months absence. His sunken cheeks showed the loss of his youth that once enabled him to swim across from Misaki Shore to Jogashima Island. His excellent knife skill might have well helped him to lead that vagabond life. He could slickly cut and clean a whole fish that he caught in the sea. Eiko's stiffened heart that she cannot forgive him showed

no sign of going away. But she felt a sort of familiarity when she saw him in the kitchen preparing for cooking without putting a pose after coming back. So she found herself sharing the bed with him as before. 'It would be useless to tell Yasunori how I got back with Michio.' thought Eiko. Anyway, two years and a little plus were long enough to let whole family know she was abandoned.

"You know, the word 'sexual harassment' was made in the US, don't you?" asked Eiko.

"You're right about that. The word became so commonplace today that it's already out of use in the office." replied Yasunori.

"The word is called 'Sekuhara' in Japanese and its use is also established in Japan. Too much criticizing somebody's appearance also falls under the same category." said Eiko.

"Well, Japanese are good at shortening long word. For example, one of the first abbreviations I remember is 'Enoken', shortened from somebody's name, Mr. Certain Enomoto." Yasunori could not remind of the given name of the person in question.

"It's Ken-ichi. Ken-ichi Enomoto." Eiko helped him.

"Yes, he had a monkey face." He reminded the face of 'Enoken'.

"You know very well." said Eiko.

"I know him by the movie when I was a school boy. I was delighted and laughed at his face contrasting my father's deadpan face."

"You remember such folly!" Their laughter filled the ramen shop.

"Well, what do you have in your head, then?" asked he.

"Do you know an old Japanese word 'chouchou hasshi'?" asked Eiko.

"Oh yes, I know it. I am a boy. It is a word to describe a dogfight situation of samurai battle, picturing fierce clashing of swords." Yasunori replied.

"That word came into my head when I try to describe what lie on my chest about my sibling. A fierce clashing of words like that of swords. Merciless poisonous tongue, heart stabbing bad language, straightforward pouring out of the heart... Facing to my eldest brother, I easily stammered with tension, fearing his backlash to my harsh words. He poked fun at me every time I stammer, saying 'You swallowed your words!' or 'Your expression has changed!'"

"Ah, your human dignity was affected." said Yasunori.

"He took care of me in place of my deceased parents. But his straight words sometimes impinged too sharp on my heart. All of my family used rough and straight language because our family is rooted in old town in Tokyo."

"Yes, it is true." Yasunori agreed.

"We can hardly use American flattering words that may put me on edge."

"Occasionally, they make me feel hollowed out." He rang flat. Eiko worried if he is bored

of her story but she continued.

"Michio's leaving home is a matter of husband and wife. When he came back, we talked to each other a little. But the larger part of my complaint was left unsaid. I knew straightforward reproach helps nothing. And after spending restless days in fear and dread, I lost my youth and also my aggressive attitude both offensive and defensive to others. I have no more guts to clash with others with wicked tongue. I know holding good relation with relatives will be of great benefit to me but I cannot do so since I lost my drive."

"I see how things really are." His words had some echoing afterglow.

"I had a disadvantage that I was born of aged parents. And when I prepared to enter university my dad was going to die."

"I know. I heard you graduated from a university through a correspondence course in your middle age."

"Yes, I could do it thanks to the increase in life expectancy. I wanted to see the inside of a university to know what I could not have when I was young. Of course, I also wanted to study there and to win a bit of honor for me."

"Did young people of your eldest brother all go to college?"

"Oh yes, every nephew and niece at the eldest brother went to college, some aided by a home teacher. I heard I was said to be a negative model to them. They said 'Don't be that kind of person.' That must be one of the reasons why I am named without honorific prefix 'aunt' by your dear cousins."

"Oh I see how you are feeling."

"Thank you."

"OK. I will take the role of the listener as I am one of the fugitives who cannot stay in such Japan as you described."

"I was not so much greedy for going to university. After entered a university, I knew a little what it is to study there but it did not heal the wounds I got when I was eighteen years old. When I earned almost half of the required number of credits, I was bored with studying and thought I didn't have to graduate. For all that, I made myself numb with looking back the past, and made up my mind to graduate the university "

"That was good for you."

"I knew I had to pick up what I scattered behind me. Ah, I remembered an interesting thing. On the way to the campus to attend a class at the summer school.... "

"You attended a class in summer school!"

"I found that house, the one once was a small sheet metal shop, and on the second floor lived your mother Hisako with the new partner. The house was also my first workplace after high school."

"Oh, I remembered. There was a university in that district." Yasunori kept silent for a while as if he were trying to recall remote experiences. He looked like he was absorbed in his memory. Eiko continued.

"Even after thirty years, the house stood there but looked like vacant. What is more, I found the little Oinarisan shrine at the corner and the old back street shopping mall. Even houses and malls survived as a living place of local residents, studying at university remained me a dream for thirty years."

"I remembered that I found you in that house when I visited there on some occasion."

"So I also remembered. We walked together to the station after day's work."

"How could you find the clerical job at that sheet metal shop?"

"My mother arranged everything about my job. When I refused to work in my eldest brother's company, she decided I should go to that sheet metal company and work there as a clerical worker. It was not a difficult issue for her to decide my job even if it concerned my life long work. But anyway I quit there after six months."

"I see."

"What is more surprising is that the old house, when I took that path after a long time and before my graduation, completely disappeared with everything around there. I found a large building and parking lot instead. Only the Oinarisan shrine was left on the corner all alone."

"So went out your unpleasant memories related to that house."

"I would have offered flowers if only I knew the house will be pulled down."

"You sent me a lucky charm of Yushimatenjin shrine. I was just before the day I take an entrance examination." Yasunori's words evoked another memory to Eiko. It was when she really wanted to go to university.

"I remember it because your message to the lucky charm did not have a Christian expression like 'I pray for your success in the examination' or so."

"I must have said something tongue in cheek." At that time she was crazy about Michio. She visited temples and shrines with him as he proposed to go. She enjoyed the view of Japanese gardens and admired Buddha statues. On that occasion she bought a lucky charm for Yasunori.

"We haven't seen each other really for a long time."

"It's true. There is no wonder every thing has changed." Yasunori has already finished his ramen. Eiko left the table letting her ramen unfinished and paid the bill. She wanted to get to the inn as soon as possible to warm herself.

"I want to have a strong coffee. We will be served drinks in the parlor, the reception room of the old residence with rice granary." She cannot help but grant driver's request. Come to think of it, they have not had coffee since this morning.

Chandelier on the ceiling illuminated the coffee room with soft and warm light of electric bulbs. Pale brown wall paper changed its color into odd orange lit by the flame of an old-fashioned stove. Tables and chairs, and an ornament shelves are colored in an old-familiar comfortable tone. Sitting figure of Yasunori in a chair reminded her of the reception room of the house in Tokyo where they used to play together. Coffee was strong but it had good flavor and was smooth to the throat. 'It must be made of good water.' she thought. After taking a half cup of coffee with precaution, her stomach seemed not to ache. She thought it is not the foods and drinks that made her stomach unease but the reunion with Yasunori who came back to Japan with American way of thinking.

Once she had the same type of experience. That was when she visited Korea with Michio and his colleagues. One day they went to a cemetery on a hill near Gyeongju city. After came out of the cool and dark repository, she walked around the cemetery shading the glare of sunlight with her hand, when the stomachache attacked her.

It was only six months after the recovery from the operation for lung cancer. When she ate Bibimbap bowl at lunch, she caught no sign of stomachache. 'Physical strain would not be so serious as to affect my body because it is only a short flight from Japan to Korea.' thought she before having decided to join the tour. But, instead, she got an impact blow of a different culture on her conscience that had not mental preparedness. In Korea they use red color in different situations than are used in Japan. For example, gates and entrances were painted red. She thought this cultural impact must have made her too much sensitive and caused stomachache.

"Yasunori, you used to be outfitted with girl's kimono sleeper when you were only a little boy in that house in Tokyo." The dull scarlet color filled in the ramen shop has connected at last with one shot of her memories.

"Oh yeah, that did happen." said Yasunori. Bluish close-cropped headed little Yasunori in red and white checkered kimono sleeper was ill-fitted from every viewpoint. Color of lining at the bottom of sleeper was the same old scarlet. His foot action to kick up the bottom of sleeper in embarrassment was indescribably cute. He was close to tears when she embraced him. Then she, saying "I'll give you another one." rolled him over playfully. And he, half-crying, barreled into her again. At that time Eiko surpassed him everything. And close-cropped headed Yasunori really did everything she said.

"Let's play show-it." She said to him. The reception room was quiet when they had no visitors. The house faced a river and there was a naval academy on the opposite side of the river. Out of the window of the reception room, uniformed young men were seen walking by every now and then. Behind the mantelpiece they hide themselves

completely. Eiko took off her drawers.

"I've not yet got hairs here." Eiko said to him showing her white inner thighs.

"I've not yet, too." Yasunori replied in a calm voice though his actions were slow to take off his pants. In the beginning, their interests were focused on whether hairs came out or not on the area between the thighs. Occasionally her eyes caught other thing than hairs.

"May I touch it?" She was anxious that a small projection was covered with skin. She touched it softly and hauled the skin to pull it down....

"Ouch!" He said, and dodged himself.

"Oh, sorry." She said in surprise and no more tried to reach for it. She thought Yasunori must have been interested in her recessed part. But he said nothing about that, let alone touching it.

He now married an American woman with two children by former marriages between two other guys. Eiko closed her mind not to think over how much his body changed by now. One thing remains unchanged that he always attached himself to his mother. Among other brothers and sisters, Yasunori had particular attachment to his mother and often went to see his mother in that house of the sheet metal shop. Even if Etsuko did not die and Yasunori married her, his attitude to his mother would not be changed.

"Had she anything resembled your mother Hisako? Of course, her appearance may differ much from that of Japanese."

"My wife? Well, yes, she wants to live on my arm and she is from a fertile family."

He said so with no hesitation. His voice sounded clear after having coffee.

"In addition she is lazy and for all that too proud to admit she is lazy. In the US, there are many such people behind the winners."

"Well, I see."

"I really hate good-for-nothing women but uncertainty and fragility somehow give irresistible charms to a woman. When she came to marry me with her little girl, she boasted, knowing that they cannot survive without me, she contributed to the development of my family by adding a beautiful American girl. She surely deems herself to be a higher ranked person than I."

Eiko could not exactly understand what he was saying when English words were inlaid in his conversation but heard his maturity as a human being.

Eiko has heard from her mother that Yasunori's mother Hisako spent her days with sexual dissatisfaction in spite of bearing five children. Hisako's husband was a son of an antique dealer, whom Eiko's mother introduced to Hisako because she was pleased the young man was a pious Catholic. At the negotiation of divorce meditation, claim on sexual discord was rejected because of the number of children.

"She said he does not come in but at the portal." Her mother said with a half-smiling and half-tearing look. Eiko heard that when she was a little girl. 'Did she forget to pay attention to the age of the youngest daughter, as she was too much occupied with taking care of the eldest?' thought Eiko.

Little Eiko took her words, imagining his straight face, for something clumsy made by the husband in married life. And her understanding gradually made up her mind not to marry a Catholic.

There is no question that Yasunori was the least lucky of all, he was abandoned by his real mother, had to pay his respect to his father who admires nothing but antiques, had to take care of younger brothers and sisters, and at last lost his sweetheart by death.

"We had a good coffee." His voice got clearer.

"Yes, and I am feeling warmer." said Eiko.

The two travelers went out of the parlor and walked out to the parking lot through a garden. Yasunori sat at the wheel as a matter of course. The car started with the headlights on. The car headed to the mountain after got off the town.

"Now we are going to a hot spring at seven hundred fifty meters up on the back of Bandaisan Mountain. I reserved two rooms." said she.

"For me, remote unpopular hot spring was a faraway dream. Americans never understand Japanese enthusiasm for hot spring. They take only showers."

"Watch carefully road indications. They are Japanese. You can read them. It will be a lot of trouble if you took a wrong way."

Contrary to her expectation, the road to the mountain was not one track. As they drive on, the road was branched right, left, even slant. They had already went strait some of the junctions.

"Are we going right way? We shall come to a gate of the toll road." said she. The car went on and on with anxiety over the destination. Before long, views were blocked by mountains and the road became a steep upslope.

"Well, I have carefully consulted the road maps last night."

"I heard the toll road is full of autumn leaves and visitors will surely feel like surrounded by huge kilt pieces."

"No, I cannot see autumn leaves in such a dark night." Rattling by the rough road, sense of unease provoked by low shoulders and gouge ruts at corners made her feel they must have taken a wrong road. Eiko turned on the courtesy light on the ceiling and reviewed the map on the inn's pamphlet. But it was too much simplified to be consulted.

"Be careful of the shoulder!"

"You're quick to say 'shoulder!'. We say 'on-coming cars!' at first."

"That will be the case in the US. On Japanese mountain road, shoulders invite you to death on the valley bottom." She was too scared to hesitate talking him back. Only anterior views came into the glare of head light. Other views dispersed into the posterior darkness.

She felt like praying out of scare. Then she asked another question.

"Do you attend church services on Sunday?"

"I attend the Presbyterian Church, not Catholic."

"Pres- what?"

"Presbyterian Church, they say."

"Oh, I see. One of the Protestant Churches."

"It stands not far from my home."

"I'm also attending church services after having got back from my disease. It's well said; Man's extremity is God's opportunity." said she.

They went silent because of the bouncing of the car. Her body was tossed up and down again. The bouncing went off but the car was still rattling along the road. She sexually excited a little by the velocity and the rattling of the car. In her newly-married days, she used to ride a bike to do daily shopping. On the way to a super market, she had to cross a railroad crossing. She enjoyed herself in secret by obtaining sexual stimulation by the hard rattling of the bike when tires dropped in the gaps between rails and the sill plates. And now remembering old secret pleasure in the rattling of the car, she tries to say her prayer. When things considered, to her, the sense of God was always close to the sense of sex.

"In my girlhood, I sincerely determined not to marry a Christian."

"You must have got them off from your marriage candidates by prejudice. Or else, Michio must have had an outstanding appeal."

"A young guy sharpening cocking knives with no word looked fresh to me. He was two years younger than I, the same age as you are. Time has changed. Unlike the time of Hisako, I was free to fall in love with him..." Eiko held her tongue in haste. Yasunori noticed the change in her voice.

"It's OK. Your words will hurt nobody. Since my parents and my grand mother have gone, there is no body but I who could have interest in that story." said Yasunori.

"Thank you to say so. Well, a man of few words is a scary person. He could abandon or even betray his family. In addition, he is not good at apologizing himself. So I had to spare his feelings. I was even confused to think the over-talkative family of my side is not so bad."

"It's very natural."

"But I have learned what it means to be divorced. Hisako in the house of sheet metal

shop looked a little bit better but seemed mostly perplexed, sometimes even sad and lonely. By no means can she be said to be happy and contented. "

"To be honest, I was feeling the same."

"Everybody is tempted to move to a better place when such a place was found at hand. So I don't blame Hisako. I only drew upon her situation. For me, I had no other guy than Michio. What is more, I thought it much better to compromise with the fate than to return to my eldest brother's home in tears."

"Why didn't you think to live an independent life?"

"I did. I sought for the ways to live on dressmaking but I couldn't make myself an artisan. I must have some kind of defect in my character. I could not dare to split up with my husband, for I had a daughter. I thought my mother wouldn't have agreed with me if she were alive. I didn't have the courage, in today's words."

"You're happy that you have a mother to remind of. The US is a divorce society. Considerable number of people cannot image how their mother was. So it is difficult for them to control their mind."

The introduction of another subject of the US made her feel like to hold him back in Japan.

"You will stay in Japan a little longer, right?"

"I will go to put flowers on my mother's grave, though not willingly because it's in the husband's family tomb."

"And how will you go on after your retirement?"

"I can keep on working as a teacher with degraded income. I can also teach Japanese conversation. If paid, I will even take the role of conversation partner with some lonely old person, or I can do some assistance activities. There are several groups to do such works."

"That's good."

"Isn't it one of our greetings between us born-Christians to ask whether attending church services or not, just you asked me a little while ago?"

"Did I offend you?"

"No, not at all."

"Why have you come to attend church in the US?"

"I can save gas money if I can find a church in the neighborhood."

"Is that all?"

The road became winding. Yasunori went silent to concentrate his attention on steering.

"I heard you, being a lightweight drinker, got drunk and disorderly for a period of time."

When the road became straight, he answered.

"Sometimes I felt there is no justice in this world. I don't remember what the reason was."

One morning, I made my kids eat breakfast. My wife was still in bed and suddenly I was tempted to go to the church near the highway, which I pass everyday on my way to work. It took little more minutes before I really go there."

"What happened to the father who prepares breakfast every morning for his three kids of different colors? It sounds like a too long title of a mystery TV drama. By the way, can you have Japanese newspapers at any time? And how about Japanese TV programs?"

"When I was young, Japanese newspaper subscription fees and Japanese TV viewing fees were a considerable amount of money burden. Even a few month old magazines were welcomed." He said in an offended tone of voice.

Eiko reminded of a poster on the wall in the entrance hall of her English conversation class. In that, three different colored children were smiling at each other. It was an advertisement to seek volunteers for the International Exchange Association. She started studying English conversation because she had to accommodate foreign guests visiting her Japanese restaurant. But she could not make progress in acquiring practical conversation ability. Three kids of different colors in the poster is a good picture for diversion. But real-life three kids of different colors would make another story.

"I'm sorry if you are offended. We Japanese are said to be insensitive to racial problems." Racial problem is also a popular topic of the conversation class in the International Exchange Association.

"Someday, you'll see and remember what I said. By the way, are you still writing fiction stories?"

"Yes, I am." Now it's her turn to be questioned. Either well-made or poor-made she has been writing novels since she was a clerical worker at the sheet metal shop. She remembered she had told him about her novels on the way to the station on that day.

Darkness has thickened outside. There was no other help but the front vision caught in the headlight to steer the car. Eiko fell into a brown study for a while. She wanted to tell Yasunori why she writes even in her old age. The reason would also tell her why she resigned the sheet metal shop, why she went to university in her middle age, why she cannot acquire dressmaking skill and English conversation skill.

"The conventional Japanese family system is in its autumn years. Today, owing to the declining birth rate, we seldom see a large family that has complexity of relations between relatives. Undependable-looking young uncles and aunts who are close in age with nephews and nieces are becoming rare species. But, will it be a sin against hospitality to coming generations to leave such cases of preceding days? A variety of family stories in the twenty century are still living in the hearts of many people.... No, something is different. The story I just told seems far from the true reason...." Eiko went

silent as if she wanted to ease her surgically reduced lungs.

"In a word, I want to calm down myself." said she and posed again. Then she pointed ahead with her finger and trailed the dark mountain road lit in the headlight.

"So the headlight in my heart put the light on certain areas. Sometimes thin and blue flames come out of the area in the light. Then I am tempted to dig there."

"Oh, I'm a little scared. But it's very much like you. It is so to say a decades-long soap opera."

"Soap opera? Ah, 'Hiru-mero' in Japanese. OK, you are pretty close. But, to be honest with you, in my veins I still have the family blood to use poisonous bad language. So I want to discharge venom out of my tongue under the guise of other means, other words, to be more precise under the guise of writing."

"You have thought that far."

"But I am well aware of the rules."

"What rules do you mean?"

"Do not use poisonous language to weak-minded characters."

"Oh, I see."

"Possibly I just wanted to perform it in another way than that of my eldest brother's."

Time goes by in idling small talks. The car rattles consistently. The on-coming front view was as dark as ever. The destination, hot spring inn was not found as of yet.

"I'm afraid we are making a circle in a returning route. Here, I remember this large curving passage three times."

"You think? Yeah, I came to get the same feeling."

"If only we could find somebody to ask." said she.

"I can see some lights ahead. There must be a store, I expect."

Dotted lights were found a little down ahead. She was contented with the sign of human habitation but her relief went out instantly reckoning that their road should trail up a mountain.

She reminded of her daughter who works at a company. She is old enough to get married in the former days. She became prudent when maternal affection came to her. 'Is he really trustworthy?' She thought. 'He said he was a teacher in America. But it is a story in a country faraway from Japan. Nobody knows how he is going in the US. But I trusted him and swallowed his story wholly.' She regretted she did her nephew a favor and came here by car traveling on Japanese road which he is neither familiar nor accustomed to. 'When we got to the inn, he would even ask me for money because he said about enormous phone bills.' Suspicions arose in her mind together with fears.

There was a roundabout intersection when they reached one of the well-lighted places.

They instantly found a convenience-store with a lighted billboard at a corner.

"I can see somebody there inside." cried Eiko. Yasunori, without expression, turned the car around to get into the parking lot.

"It's a big convenience store!"

"You think so because it is dark outside."

"Oh, yeah. We are standing at the back of Bandaisan Mountain famous for the beautiful colored leaves." Their conversation failed proper comebacks one another. However, colored autumn leaves stay in this darkness without fail.

"I'll go and ask which way to go."

"Remember it is Ta-Ka-Yu hot spring we are going to." She clearly pronounced the name of the hot spring.

After a while, he came back and told her, "We shall go back the road we took and turn left at the first corner. Then we'll find the toll gate of a highway at once. So the guy said." "There you are. We were on the wrong road.' She said the words only in her mind. There is no need to reproach him, thought her.

It was a longer 'at once' but they found a little light ahead seemingly that of the toll gate. The toll booth was a small but firm building with a solid roof to withstand the load of winter snow. A soft orange light came through a glass door. The booth appeared larger in sight as they approached. When the car slowed down, an aged staff popped his head out of the window.

"Where are you to go?"

"We are going to Takayu hot spring."

"Is this the right road to there?" Eiko added. The tariff on the wall said the toll fare is a thousand and five hundred yen. But she reckoned it expensive as she was a little nervous on account of the loss of time and gas by getting strayed.

"The other end of this road is Takayu hot spring. But you'd better wait a little."

"Wait? Why do we need to wait?" She lifted up her voice. They were far behind the time to get to the inn. Yasunori was also looked a little displeased.

"In five minutes, the booth will be closed. After that, you can get on the highway for free. Please go back fifty meters the way you came and wait at the depression there. After I turned off the light and left here, you can go toll-free." After having said so in Tohoku dialect, the staff closed the staunch window abruptly. They could do nothing but go back the way they came as they were told.

"What a hardhead he is! He could let us go five minutes earlier, since there is no other car."

"No, he did us a favor. You'd better understand that Japanese has such good aspect. "

"Hum, Grandma would say give a prayer of thanks." His voice got back in a hoarse again.

'He still has childish-innocence.' She thought.

"Thanks for reminding my mother. Well, waiting five minutes is longer than usual, you know." She mumbled in a tone of consolation without further conversation. The shadow of the toll staff popped up on the glass door and showed a gesture of looking at papers instead of getting ready to go home. The orange color of leaves looked a little faded as the car has retreated into the shade of a tree. The toll both looked hazy like the moon surrounded by halo.

Eiko felt his left hand crept up on her right knee.

"Aren't you cold?" He asked her.

"Oh no, I'm OK."

His hand stroked to warm her knee and gradually moved into inside her skirt. She felt another intention in the movement of his hand. They have still four minutes to wait. She cannot say 'Let's go right now!' because the toll staff would feel suspicious if they couldn't wait and started moving after waiting one minute. Neither can she let his hand come further. She was at a loss. Then she reminded of the close-cropped headed little Yasunori. At that time, he must have really wanted to touch her recessed part when she took off her drawers. Blinking interval of the second lamp on the digital clock lapsed slower than usual. Every inch his fingers crept she felt bliss of being sucked into an abyss of darkness. 'Let the time pass faster, this one second is too long for me.' She cried in her mind.

But she kept her eyes open, which are still locked on the staunch window of the toll office. 'While eyes are open, I can keep my composure anyhow. And I can also watch the clock to retain the reason why I am waiting here.'

The sense that she had always been the ruler still survived in her mind throughout the ages. She always took the initiative. It was nobody to start the game but she. She recovered her pride as well as her reason.

"Are you always so considerate to rub tight of young wives when you drive in the US?"

"Yeah, you know all about me, Eichi." Laughter filled the car and Eiko was relieved.

His large right hand, withdrawn and put on the wheel, looked lovable to her. She put her hand on that hand and led it to her left breast. "Wow!" He uttered a cry in foreign tongue.

"Hereunder, there is a cavity made by the lung resection." He gave her no answer. His hand firmly hold her breast, but with no movement.

"It's OK. It will be a memorial service for the lung." said she. But his fingers stayed still.

Time went by slowly as ever. She took the initiative but blinking interval of the lamp was slow and their posture seemed useless.

Shade of the toll staff heaved up and down on the glass door. He got ready to go home.

"Does your husband give you such a memorial service for the lung?"

"No, We are not an American couple." She said strongly and laughed a little. She reminded of a room that she made her sleeping room when she entered the university in her middle age. She named it her "study room". It faced a main road and was often shaken when a big vehicle passed by. Still sleeping alone in her exclusive room was very much comfortable. Her husband and her daughter occupied their own south-facing rooms respectively.

"The mother of my wife had a disadvantaged upbringing. She has once lived in an orphanage and experienced several divorces. No wonder why she had an emotional disorder. "

"You are so sweet. Well, you can find great satisfaction in pouring out all sorts of complaints while you are in Japan." She said in her capacity as an aunt and returned his hand on the wheel.

"I heard the mother of Michio was a beautiful woman." He said abruptly.

"Yes, but when I married him, " She reminded of her clear red kimono slips and continued. "She was already pined away and had a bad complexion."

Nevertheless, she used to adjust her makeup in the mirror before dinner, fussing with her hair and rouge her lips. Eiko felt agitated as if she were hit on a sensitive point.

"She died when our daughter was two years old." Eiko has heard that the mother of Michio was, in her young days, as beautiful as a hina doll, a doll for Girls' Festival. In addition, people reputed and praised her marriage set of household goods, every item was order made. It was a winter day after the first anniversary of his mother's death when Michio disappeared.

"From time to time you make an aged face." Her younger husband Michio said so to Eiko.

"No, I cannot have enough time to make me up as frequently as your mother had.

Moreover, kimono is not so popular clothing nowadays." "OK, but I want to ask you not to make gloomy stories."

Michio was brought up almost solely by his mother because his father died young. As his fatherless family was very quiet, he could hardly understand her bustling family, her outstanding way-of-thinking or her gloomy feeling that she unknowingly acquired.

"There was a war thirty years ago. For the mother-in-law it was in her thirties and for us in our childhood."

"It made our lives change completely." He said forcefully.

"My mother-in-law was a daughter of a renowned Japanese restaurant. She always cherished her girlhood days and felt pride in that. On that reason, she had a cheerful face."

At that time, light in the toll booth went out. There was a sign of the staff getting out of another door. The toll booth had a deserted feel.

"We can go by now."

"Yeah, we can." He started at once.

"We have saved a thousand and five hundred yen." He said in a bashful smile that also told they had a pleasure while waiting. The road was beautifully paved. The car ran smoother and faster. Yasunori began to whistle a song. On its swinging rhythm Eiko put her words that lay heavy on her stomach.

"Thank you for asking me why I forgave Michio."

"You're welcome!" He replied in swinging tune thou his song came to an end.

Having survived from a severe illness, Eiko knew her life will be over before long. In this resignation, however, somehow she had a confidence that she could tell him the truth, what is more, with pride.

Somebody said vagabondage comes to a habit but her husband never left home again. The girl she once met to deal with the aftermath was indeed beautiful but not as modest as his mother. Only her showy dress and blatant makeup left the impression to Eiko.

They reached to the other end of the highway in a short time as if the car was carried by the tune of his whistling. They passed through the gate of Takayu hot spring.

Following the signpost, they turned right and got on a downgrade road. The hot spring resort area stretched around the lowland. Their destination, a rustic inn is famous for its dinner by the fireside. It was also easily found in an array of luminous street lamps.

When they left the car, Eiko found a Torii gate and a small shrine standing in a shadow at a remote corner of the parking lot. A half-torn red labarum was swaying in the wind, which reminded her of the scarlet-dyed noren curtain of the ramen shop.

Holding that red color before her eyes, she entered the inn. After check-in at the cottage-like front lobby she was shown to her room. Elevators were not equipped. She felt an uncomfortable feeling in her swollen legs in walking because of a long drive. But Yasunori's footsteps looked unnaturally aerial.

On the second floor there was a long plain hallway and opposing unadorned room doors. Eiko reserved two rooms. Judging from the artless appearance of room doors, she thought the inside of the room must be far from luxurious ones. Her room had a three digits number. It was located on the left side of the hallway, a little apart from the washroom. On the opposing side of her room or on the right side of the hallway, there were no guest rooms but windows. She thought she could have a beautiful view of mountain in the daytime through these windows.

She expected Yasunori's room must be the next door to her room. But the staff passed over the adjacent room and showed him a neighboring room but one. She felt a sort of loneliness in her mind.

His room had also a three digits number. But the room between them has no number. She thought the room was not a guest room.

"Though hungry, I take the hot spring bath first." He said to the staff.

"Go outside at the end of the hallway on the ground floor, and after a short walk through the garden you will find an open-air hot spring bath." said the staff.

"Is it separated by gender?" asked Eiko.

"Yes, it is a gender-separated hot spring bath. The changing rooms are separated by their doors. You can't miss it."

"Thank you for your kindness." said he.

Eiko entered her room with her back to his voice. After quickly changed into Yukata bathrobe and Hanten short coat, she went back out into the hallway with her room key in hand. But Yasunori was not found there. She walked to the door of his room across the numberless room.

"I'm going to go on ahead. Hurry up!" said she after knocked the door of his room. She was a little hungry because she didn't finish her ramen.

"You're quick in getting ready as usual. I'm always slow and gawky. I'll come soon after making a call to the US. I will say something to you when I got to the changing room. So call me back to get in touch with me."

Eiko smiled with satisfaction with his childish begging voice. A chain of thoughts raced through her mind. 'After hot spring bath, we will have a lovely dinner.' 'Fortunately my stomachache has gone away.' 'He would not ask me a loan.' 'We have a great deal to talk about.' 'We shall toast with some good wine... No, Japanese Sake would be better.' 'We shall have a pleasant talk, this time.' She walked down the stairs with merry steps. 'I would not be upset if you dared peep into my bathing.' 'At night I'd even sing you a lullaby like I did when you were a little boy.'

Night air in the mountain was cold. She hunched her shoulders when she rattled along the path in wooden sandals. But when she settled back into a rock bath of open-air hot spring, she shortly got warm. Near the changing room and washing stands an outdoor lamp stood and lighted the open-air hot spring bath. She saw a dark mountain range through darkness.

The bath was hot enough to give off steam, which caused her vision blur and blocked her sight. 'Somehow steam is to stagnate around here.' She took things easy and thought 'It's time to get Yasunori's voice. We could talk to each other freely because there is no other fellow guest.' She felt she had found her way to make things interesting and happy. So she waited and waited again but never got his voice. The bath was too hot to be settled in for a long time. She got out of the bath, moved to the wash stand and took

soap in her hand to get clean. But the air was so cold to make her shiver that she got into the bath again. She moved around in the bath and found a stone appropriate for sitting on. Her shoulders poked through the bath and the cold night air cooled her body comfortably. She sat on the stone and waited his voice. The night fog enveloped the bath and hindered her vision.

Eiko heard a woman's breathy voice.

"Dear aunt..." It came not from the changing room but from inside the steam not afar.

"Aunt Eiko..." It was a clear and pure voice somewhat like *suzumushi*, bell cricket singing by the grass.

"Who are you?" She questioned, though she knew who it is.

"Aunt Eiko, it's me Etsuko, Shinozuka Etsuko."

"Are you, really?" Eiko could not see her face. For a moment, she imagined Yasunori's face before her eyes. Her thought froze, neither did her four limbs.

"Dear aunt." The voice moved closer.

"It was not me but Yasunori who died in the accident on the slope in Nagasaki in that summer. You gently held my shoulder and wept together with me at the funeral in the church, didn't you?"

Eiko reminded of the attendants in mourning veil. There were tearing Etsuko, crying Hisako, weeping family members. The voice speaking to her was calm and had a midlife power. The view of the Etsuko's tomb where she visited this afternoon busily flashed through her mind. On the way to the cemetery, she saw many billboards advertising for Yonezawa beefsteak restaurants. Surely the cemetery was in the Yonezawa suburb. On the tombstone the name of Etsuko was inscribed with her surname which was not changed.

"You saw my tomb inscription. It is my tomb without doubt. But it was only recently made. I moved there last autumn. Before moving, I was working at science and engineering department of a university."

Eiko had difficulty breathing. Her heart, her lungs and other internal organs seemed stiffened and numbed.

"Dear aunt. Thank you very much for coming to visit my grave from a far." The ending of her words was fading away.

"Etsuko wait a moment, please!" Eiko felt the speaker still stays around her.

"You met Yasunori, didn't you? That's good. You two had a good time here." The awareness that she is his aunt was awakened in her mind.

"No, that's not true." The returning voice was quiet but clear.

"Yasunori wanted to meet you, not me, because you were always wanted to talk with him."

'How could you know it?' Eiko wondered but her mouth was frozen....

"You are a respectable aunt to any eye. Yasunori must have wanted to tell it to you."

Etsuko said so in a dignified but gentle voice.

Eiko said in her mind 'That's not the only reason. He wanted to touch my body,' but she accepted her words which were overwhelmingly persuasive. Burning shame came out to her behind her embarrassment.... It was Eiko who clung to and shackled to the fate of productive family that must have been overcome and thrown away at some stage of life. Etsuko was a splendid woman that encourages other person. Yasunori had clear-sighted eyes. No small amount of admiration was led into the pity for Etsuko. Eiko was so moved that she forgot to say 'I'm much obliged to you' to Etsuko.

Steam from the hot spring was mixed with the incoming night fog and became thicker.

Sign of her presence disappeared completely together with her voice.

Eiko came to herself and found that she was in an empty world stretching to the limitless darkness. She managed to get back to the changing room after stumbling over stones and grabbing rocks to support herself.

The heart beating color, scarlet was no more found in her sight. She wanted to get back to her room. She thought if she could not find Yasunori in his room, she would believe that it was all over. But the garden path of the inn became longer and more difficult for her to get through, neither was the hallway. Then she felt she vaguely heard busy twittering of some birds, rumble of a heavy vehicle, and the bustle of a neighborhood shopping center. 'Were they not the day's uproar I forgot today?'

The prayer was sputtered out of her from the shivering spine. 'Grandma would say give a prayer of thanks.' His hoarse voice was returned in her mind.

Eiko was in fact making an autumn travel with Yasunori. She can remember every experience she had while traveling; bouncing of the car, contentment through straightforward dialogue, her stomachache and sense of his touch to her inner thigh. She also remembers clear voice of Etsuko and her message.

Her legs were tied down and could not move forward against her will.

English translation by INADA Minoru.

ANBARA Takako

日本ペンクラブ 電子文藝館編輯室

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