

Chapter 12

“Red Palm Leaves” (Akai yashi no ha), by Medoruma Shun (1992)

Translated by Davinder L. Bhowmik

Biography and Introduction

Medoruma Shun (1960–) is an Okinawa-born writer-activist who was not known nationally until 1997, when he won the prestigious Akutagawa Prize for “Droplets” (*Suiteki*), though he had been receiving regional literary prizes since the early 1980s. He hails from Nakijin, a northern Okinawan castle town located on Motobu Peninsula. Verdant Nakijin abounds in various crops such as sugarcane, watermelon, leaf tobacco, greens, and pineapple, and is part of Yanbaru, the largest surviving parcel of subtropical forest in Okinawa. The remains of Nakijin Castle, awash every January in Japan’s earliest-blooming cherry blossoms, mark what was once the hub of cultural and economic activity in northern Okinawa during the Ryūkyū Kingdom. Yanbaru, whose forests are home to endangered species of flora and fauna, lies at the heart of Medoruma’s fiction.

Nakijin was a world apart from the life Medoruma would go on to live in Shuri, where he attended the University of the Ryukyus. There, Medoruma had to forgo use of his native Nakijin speech and use standard Japanese. He studied Japanese literature with Professors Nakahodo Masanori and Okamoto Keitoku, two of Okinawa’s foremost literary critics. For a decade after graduating Medoruma took a number of jobs throughout Japan in order to gain experience as a writer. The author’s keen attention to the language his characters speak arises from the gulf he experienced not only between his own speech and that in the southern city of Shuri, but also from the foreign standard Japanese he would go on to teach.

At age thirty-four, a year shy of the deadline to do so, Medoruma applied for teaching credentials, after which he taught Japanese in various high schools in Okinawa while continuing to write fiction. In spite of a self-imposed seclusion from local literary circles and public events,

the Futenma Replacement Base controversy, which erupted in the late 1990s due to impending construction of a military base in Henoko, just south of the author's beloved Yanbaru National Forest, forced Medoruma out of obscurity. Thereafter, the author immersed himself in local politics, writing weekly essays on Henoko for several national magazines. Medoruma continues to write a daily blog, "From a Roiling Island" (*Uminari no shima kara*), in which he describes his everyday activities as part of a canoe brigade that monitors and attempts to intervene in base construction.

Medoruma's literary style might be described as earthy, given its rootedness in Okinawan terrain. Surreal, and sometimes magical realist, the stories for which he is best known center on the ongoing effects of wartime trauma, specifically that incurred in the Battle of Okinawa, which raged for eighty-two days, decimating the island and killing nearly half its population. Medoruma did not experience the war firsthand, but several close family members had. The resonance of their stories together with detailed descriptions gained from the author's geographic proximity to war relics and memorials make Medoruma's fiction eerily like that of a wartime participant. "Droplets" (1997), "Spirit Stuffing" (1999), and "Tree of Butterflies" (2000) form a loose trilogy of the author's most critically acclaimed fiction. Also of note are three novels, *Sound of the Wind* (*Fûon*, 2004), *Rainbow Bird* (*Niji no tori*, 2006), and *In the Woods of Memory* (*Me no oku no mori*, 2009).

Red Palm Leaves

That winter day, I was sitting in front of the TV with my younger brother. It was early afternoon, and slightly cloudy. Our parents were at work. When the man we had been waiting to see finally appeared on the black-and-white TV screen, we burst out laughing. He looked comical in his baggy white shorts.

We had first heard the name Cassius Clay a few days earlier. His match against Joe Frazier was coming up, and my father couldn't stop telling me what an incredible boxer he was. I was in sixth grade at the time. "He floats like a butterfly, and stings like a bee," my father said, describing Clay's light footwork and sharp punches. He added that Clay took the odd name, "A Mouth that Roars," for his bravado, and he was the youngest heavyweight champion in the history of boxing. But when he refused to be drafted for the war in Vietnam, he was stripped of his title. My father talked about Clay like he was a hero among heroes.

After hearing my father praise the man to no end, I was sure the match would be terrific. My brother and I gazed at the TV screen in eager anticipation. But when the bell rang, one round followed the next, and our anticipation turned to disappointment. The boxer's movements lacked animation. We saw nothing of his famed elegant footwork and sharp punches. That Clay went down in the fourteenth round, ending the match, confirmed to us that our father was wrong.

Back then, Okinawa was still occupied by the U.S. military. Like the teeth of a saw, the black tails of B-52s preparing to go bomb Vietnam were lined up on the other side of the barbed wire fence surrounding Kadena Air Base.

The day after watching the match on TV, I told my friends at school about it, making clear my disappointment. S must have overheard, because he approached me suddenly, as everyone was preparing to go home. S was one of the shy, reticent boys you see one or two of in every class. He had transferred to our school the previous summer and had no real friends. We'd never spoken one on one before.

"Do you like boxing?" S asked, flashing me a bashful smile. I nodded ever so slightly, and he drew close, looking happy.

"Do you want to see a match?"

"A boxing match?" I asked.

S nodded and told me he knew of a place where we could see one. I didn't know of any boxing gyms in the area. As I gave him a suspicious look, S timidly took hold of my hand and led me to the bus stop.

He encouraged me to get on the bus, and after passing several stops, we got off at a town that had been built in front of the gate of a U.S. base. Roads jutted off from the government highway running along the fence, and sloped gently downhill toward the coastline. The narrow sidewalks were lined with short palm trees and bars with faded signs written in foreign lettering. S led me down one of those roads. It was early afternoon so not many people were out. Peering into the barber shops and pawn shops along the road, I saw that most of them were still closed. Narrow alleys branched off here and there, many of them extending barely 300 feet before turning into vacant areas overgrown with grass and weeds. Beyond a forest of pines, I could see the ocean, faintly glittering as it reflected the sun that slightly cloudy afternoon. The wind smelled of rust as it coursed through the street, gently swaying the reddish leaves of the malnourished palm trees. The leaves swayed languidly in the breeze. S walked ahead of me, occasionally turning his head to give me a bashful smile. He stopped suddenly, pointed to a narrow alley lined with gas cylinders, and then walked toward it.

It was more a narrow space between two buildings than an alley. When we slipped through the cool shade of the passageway we could hear the faint echoes of people cheering, even though we were outside. We had reached a square space formed out of the walls of surrounding buildings. Arranged on the concrete ground were a worn-out sofa and wooden boxes on which sat men whose backs shook whenever they shouted and whistled. A blond young man wearing a dark-green jacket raised a brown bottle up high and yelled something, then turned around and looked at us. I was petrified. The cramped courtyard was filled with about twenty men, most of whom were American soldiers from the military base. S grabbed my hand more boldly than before, wending us behind the soldiers, and then climbed on top of some wooden boxes stacked against a wall. I climbed on top of the wobbly, empty boxes to sit beside S. Beyond the heads of the American soldiers, I saw two men facing each other in the middle of the courtyard.

It was a true boxing match. The soldiers had put on black gloves and, on top, wore only an undershirt. The two breathed heavily as they pitched forward, glaring at each other. It seemed they'd been at it for a while already, since one had blood dripping from his nose. The other men egged them on loudly, but neither attempted to throw a punch. A man who appeared to be the referee said something to the two boxers, and one

of them finally threw a reckless punch at the other, and they wound up tangled in an embrace. When they staggered to the sides the men watching pushed the boxers back into the center. Finally, they threw three or four more sloppy punches before taking off their gloves and collapsing onto the sofa, exhausted. The other men laughed derisively at the two who just sat, so worn out they couldn't even bring to their lips the beers they were offered. Some of the soldiers eyed the boxers with what seemed like contempt, but I was enormously excited to see with my own eyes, for the first time in my life, not just two men exchanging blows, but two American soldiers nearly twice the size of the average Okinawan man.

The circle of boisterous men quieted down for a while. Then, the next two boxers took off their jackets and put on gloves. One was a frighteningly tall black man. It looked like the Okinawan man going around to collect money from the soldiers could have strode through his legs. The boxer bent his overly long arms, sinewy like an insect's legs, and used his teeth to tie the glove strings. His opponent had a big build, too. Sporting curly blond hair, long enough to cover his back, he was chewing gum at an astonishing pace. At the referee's signal the two faced off. The man collecting money hit the oxygen-cylinder-cum-bell, and the match began. Clearly, this was a different level than the previous match. The black soldier circled with light steps, extending his long arms to throw sharp jabs at his approaching opponent, and then retreated. For his size he moved with unbelievable speed. If it had been a real boxing ring, he'd probably have easily won, but the uneven circle made by the American soldiers in the tiny courtyard was too small. What's more, what they were hoping for was a flashy brawl. Instead of a rope, the fighters were surrounded by the other men's hands pushing them back into the center of the courtyard. The instant the black soldier lost his balance from being pushed by the surrounding men, his opponent jumped on him and began throwing continuous punches at his body and face. A fierce battle began. The sound of the fighters hitting flesh reverberated through the excited cheers of the men, vibrating deep in my chest, making it hard to breathe. I didn't know which punch was the winning one. Several men stood up, shouting, and raised their arms up. The black soldier appeared to have a look of fear in his eyes as he gazed down at his opponent, who had fallen between two chairs. His opponent couldn't get up. At that moment, the black soldier seemed to me like the Cassius Clay my father spoke of. I looked over at S from on top of the dangerously tottering wooden boxes. His face flushed, S stared at the black soldier, who was talking loudly to the men next to him as he removed his gloves.

I told S my thoughts about the fight after the excitement following the match had settled, and before the next match began. S smiled as he listened, and the short responses he worked in to our conversation, which revealed the depth of his knowledge about boxing, surprised me.

Match after match followed. All ended quickly, but none of the fighters came anywhere close to that amazing black soldier. Gradually I got so I could view the matches calmly, but then became aware of something going on in the courtyard. I couldn't tell if the courtyard had always been a vacant lot, or if a building had been demolished leaving the space empty, but it was a communal courtyard for the four buildings, the backs of which joined together. Sometimes, the back door of a building would open, and American soldiers endlessly came in and out, replacing both fighters and spectators.

The number of American soldiers kept increasing, until it reached around forty. When it grew dark, two streetlights in the corners of the courtyard flickered on. Knowing I should head home, I became concerned, but I also felt like I wanted to watch more fights. I stayed seated there, even though my mind was unsettled. Just then I spied a woman looking across the courtyard from the shadow of an open back door. It looked like she was wearing thick makeup, as her face was strangely pale. She seemed young, and when her eyes met mine, her face broke into a smile. Inadvertently, my heartbeat raced and I averted my eyes, then all of a sudden the wooden boxes shifted as S jumped down and walked over to her. She put her arm around S as if to protect him from the rowdy crowd, and drew her ear to his lips to hear what he was saying. She smiled with the same exact bashful smile as S, then beckoned for me to join them. Despite being flustered and feeling self-conscious, driven by curiosity, I made my way through the crowd of American soldiers and went to stand behind S. The woman bent down slightly and said something, but I couldn't hear her over the raucous cheers of the soldiers. When I saw her close up, she was older than I had thought. Even so, when I thought about my dark, stout mother who everyday briskly set off for work at the pineapple factory bearing no trace of makeup, this woman was incomparably beautiful. She beckoned me to come closer and opened the paper packet she was holding. She took out a piece of candy that looked like a deep-red ruby and handed it to me. Then she removed another piece of the same candy from her own mouth and placed it between S's slightly opened lips. I swallowed as I watched a fine string of saliva attached to the candy extend from the woman's mouth, and then disappear into S's mouth.

"Go on home before it gets dark," she said.

The woman looked back and forth from S to me, smiling. Then she disappeared into the building. The two of us came out into the alleyway and walked to the bus stop. The street glowed with neon signs, making it unrecognizable as the same street we had walked down that afternoon. Suddenly my interest in the boxing matches cooled.

"Was that your mother?" I asked.

"Yeah," said S, nodding slightly. I hesitated to question him further.

"Aren't you going to eat it?" he asked.

S's question made me realize I'd been clutching the candy in my right fist. It had melted a bit and made my hand sticky. I wanted to say something, but no words came to me, so I just put the candy into my mouth silently. I rubbed my red-smeared hand on the trunk of one of the palm trees along the road. A strong mint flavor filled the air.

Standing next to each other, we waited for the bus. One after the next, American soldiers came through the base gate, crossed the highway, and sallied forth into town. When the bus came, I got on first, and waited for S to follow me, but he didn't get on. I sat down and looked out the window. As the bus took off, S kept waving to me, and smiled that same bashful smile.

Remembering images from the courtyard got me so excited I couldn't sleep that night. The loud cheers of the drunk American soldiers. The scent emanating from their muscular torsos. The frightened look in the black boxer's eyes. The color of the blood dripping from the soldiers' faces onto the ground as they bent down. What captured my eyes most was S's mother, who had opened the back door and beckoned me. I recalled again and again how her vaguely pale face became young like a [girl's] and how she took the candy from her mouth and put it into S's. My heartbeat quickened and it became hard

to breathe. Before I knew it I stopped imagining her putting candy into S's mouth and started imagining she was putting candy into my mouth.

When I saw S the next day, he broke into a smile like we were close friends. I had barely even noticed him until the day before, so seeing him smile like that felt like the first time. I couldn't concentrate in any of my classes that day. I felt like S wouldn't stop staring at me from the seat behind me, and time and again I wanted to turn around and check. But when it was time for recess, I lost my nerve and couldn't talk to him, so I went outside and ran around the schoolyard with other boys in my class. **The whole time I couldn't get S out of my mind.** He'd probably been waiting all day. After we finished cleaning the classroom and school wrapped up for the day, even though people started leaving the classroom, S, alone, remained seated, flipping open a book and peering inside his backpack on occasion. I had stayed in the classroom to talk with my friends, but I still couldn't approach him. It was time to go but no one talked to S. Eventually, S and a few girls were the only ones left in the classroom. One of the girls made fun of S on her way out the door, and everyone laughed, mocking him, but S just smiled timidly in return.

On my way back home, I was filled with remorse for not talking to S. Halfway home, **I told my friends a lie, saying I had forgotten something at school, then ran back to the classroom.** No one was in the room. I was frustrated and angry, but at the same time I felt like I had been betrayed. I shouldn't have come back. As I headed in the direction of the school gate muttering to myself, **I saw S standing under a bare cherry tree. The instant I caught sight of that bashful smile of his, my anger went away, and my heart raced.** I felt kind of embarrassed. Without saying a word, S just started to walk beside me. All along I'd been wanting to take S to my very own secret spot. I thought that the place he had taken me to the day before was a special place S hadn't shown anyone else, and I wanted to return the favor.

We deviated from the road that led to school, a new road that had been cleared by the U.S. military after the war, and headed down an old road that cut right through the woods. The old road had stone steps leading down to it here and there, and since it was a shortcut that led to the village's northern coast, it was well travelled but neatly maintained. The forests that **encircled** the village were 150 feet high, and the road wended its way through the trees, sometimes cutting through stone or dirt walls; **the road continued to the northern coast.** Along the way, the road passed through a small basin in which rice paddies still remained. Nearly all the rice paddies in the village had been converted into sugarcane fields. But only in that one area, a small amount of rice was cultivated by installing narrow irrigation canals that used water seeping from beneath the forest. It was our favorite place to play back then. **My friends' and my favorite pastime was catching the tilapia and betta fish that swam in the mouth of the spring and the canals.** S and I made our way down a path that glittered with specks of limestone, then crouched at the edge of the spring and used both our hands to scoop and drink the cold water spurting from behind the rocks. As it gushed forth, the water shook the roots of white trees. S squealed when he saw freshwater prawns and betta fish, which would vanish if a person got too close. Happily, he said it was his first time seeing these kinds of fish. His words surprised me. There were always a few betta fish swimming in the big mayo jar I had on my desk. S also said it was his first time drinking water from a spring. He gazed longingly at the spring and the irrigation canal, so I promised him we'd come

Commented [D01]: Who is he lying to, or saying the lie to? Is the point that he came up with a lie that he would later tell his mother, about why he was late?

Commented [D02]: Could we just say "encircled"?

Commented [D03]: The road extended to the coast, correct? Perhaps "walls; the road continued to the northern coast."

fishing together on Saturday, then hurried him along. The place I wanted to show him was further ahead.

We cut across the old road to enter the village and made our way to a sacred garden on the southern edge of the castle forest. Religious ceremonies were held in one corner of the garden, where a prayer house stood. S came to a standstill and gazed at that prayer house, clueless. Six stone pillars built from rock cut and brought from the coast held up a thatched roof so low that even a child would have to bend over to get below it. The low roof smelled of dried trees and kept the space within cool. During festivals, *kaminchu*, women who served as conduits to the spirit world would come dressed in white, sit in a row, and pray here. S said he knew absolutely nothing of such things. While I told him about the festivals, I wondered where he'd been born. We left the garden and took a path that went downhill through a lush verdant area, before reaching the river that separated opposite sides of the village. Then we walked along the river toward the ocean. Once we got to the village S abruptly turned silent. Even when I spoke to him, he just showed me that bashful smile of his and gave only a brief response before ending the conversation. It was quiet but I didn't feel like it was an awkward silence. I don't think S found it awkward either. But as we walked along side by side, he would sometimes turn to check behind us, or look around nervously, as though he felt uneasy.

The water that flowed from the paddies settled in one spot and then coursed from south to east of the castle forest, before pouring into the river. After crossing a suspension bridge that hung where the channel flowed into the river, we came to a narrow dirt road with strips of grass growing between the ruts. Overhead, the branches of the forest lining the left side of the path mingled with the branches of the mangroves lining the river, forming a dim tunnel. Feeling the cool from the shade of the trees, we walked briskly toward the mouth of the river. Dug into a rocky crag at the edge of the forest was a row of graves. Here and there, the stones covering the entrances of the graves had crumbled, and we could see burial urns and bones inside some. Suddenly, S reached for my hand. His was a small, soft, moist hand. While long-tailed bulbuls chirped overhead and black butterflies fluttered about us, we walked through the woods, hands joined. Blue bottleflies buzzed as they took off from around our feet. Strewn across the grass were the remains of a tilapia. Its scales had dried up and turned white, and a fly had burrowed into the fish's sunken eye socket, not even attempting to break free. The waste and raw sewage flowing from the sugar-processing plant and the pig farm located upstream had completely polluted the river. People had almost all stopped fishing there after starting to catch fish that were deformed, with sunken-in noses or twisted spines. The people who still fished did so for fun, releasing fish back into the water or throwing them into the grass. The blue bottleflies circling around alighted on the tilapia. S turned his face away, looking ill.

After walking a bit further, we emerged from the densely wooded area into a small vacant lot. There we saw a storage room for the sugar-processing plant's supply water pump. The place I wanted to show S was ahead of the lot. S hesitated, but I urged him on as I climbed over the barbed-wire fence and entered a grove of white lead trees. These densely grown trees, the trunks of which were enveloped in a milky-white bark, completely covered the sandbar at the mouth of the river. The trees made it too difficult to keep walking hand in hand. Sometimes, I would stop and wait for S, who was having difficulty finding a way through the trees. When he saw me watching him, he smiled like

Commented [D04]: Okay?

he was embarrassed, and grabbed the trunk of one of the white lead trees, freeing his leg of the vines that had entwined it. When I looked at his feet, I saw that one of his shoes was covered in mud. Had he stepped in a puddle? Since his shoes were pretty new I felt awful. “Just a little farther,” I encouraged him. Finally, the raw smell of the delicate white lead tree leaves and the sound of the grass we trampled underfoot diminished, and the scent of the ocean, beyond the stand of tree trunks, began to waft.

“We’re here!” I said.

I grabbed S’s hand and we left the grove together. A loud sound of flapping wings filled the air as several dozen white herons, egrets, and plovers rose up in a boisterous flurry. We stopped and stood, watching the plovers screech as they skimmed the water’s surface, and the flock of white herons recede into the distant, darkening sky. When the herons stopped in a cluster of pine and acacia trees on the opposite shore, it looked as though Korean morning glories had bloomed. My heart wouldn’t stop racing.

“Surprised?” I asked.

S looked at me, face flushed, and nodded. We sat down on the dry sandy ground. Before our eyes, the river opened up and flowed into the inland sea. Mangroves grew thickly in the muddy water of the shallows. Below the cape that jutted out on either side of us, two large rocks with curved bases stood in the distance like pillars. There was a story about how traders would moor their ships to those rocks back in the days when there was brisk trade with *Yamatu* and China. Now, though, there were no more ships. Now and then an old man who lived alone in the neighboring village would take out his small boat to fish, but that’s about it.

“**That fish is poisoned!**” I had told the old man once, as he returned to shore, tilapia in hand.

The old man brushed aside my concern and said with a smile, “If I die of poisoning, I’ll just move on to the afterworld.”

The setting sun gave off a soft light from beyond the woods that reached all the way down to the end of the cape along the river. The silver light moved slowly across the pale blue sky. The sea was almost completely calm, and the gentle flow of the river created a swaying path of light across the water’s surface. We barely spoke. **When I asked where he was from, S replied he was from a fishing town in the central part of the island.** He had transferred from school to school, and now lived with his mother in an apartment in the town adjoining the base. That was about all he said. S didn’t seem to want to talk about himself. Nor did he ask about me, either. We just sat there, shoulder to shoulder, leaning against each other and gazing at the scene at the mouth of the river, which grew quieter. There were many things I wanted to ask him, but when I saw S squint his eyes at the flickering light reflecting off the sea, I refrained from asking anything else.

“Look!” S suddenly pointed up at the sky.

“What?”

“Up there!” I looked in the direction S was pointing. The wind rustled the fine leaves of the *mokumaō*, and a slender thread of light flickered, then disappeared. **A strand of spider silk was floating in the pale blue sky, which had started to take on a tinge of purple. The strand seemed to shimmer first green, then gold, and extended out from a tree branch and gently undulated out toward the sea. It was impossibly long and thin. Dispersing a clear fleeting light, the strand hovered between the ocean and the horizon,**

appearing and disappearing as it swayed in the breeze. We gazed at it, mesmerized. I felt S's shoulder move. His arm reached behind me to embrace my side, and then reached for my chest.

"Don't move." S rested his cheek behind my ear and whispered into it. My chest trembled beneath his soft palm, and the heat of his body pressed against mine made it hard for me to breathe. S's right hand traveled slowly from my chest down to below my abdomen. Finally his hand started to move in rhythm, and a sensation I had never felt before budded forth. My whole body became warm, and something began to flow forcefully inside me and then take form. Instinctively, I tried to stop S's hand. But he paid no attention and continued to move it around. Something close to fear or anxiety welled up and I wanted to run away, but I couldn't move. The sensation of S's hand movement made me at once afraid and consumed by desire. I closed my eyes and let my body lean against his, inhaling the scent emanating from S's neck and underarms.

My reverie broke abruptly when S began to reach for my belt buckle. I wrestled myself from him reflexively, pushing him as I jumped up. He caught himself from behind by thrusting out his hands, and stared up at me with that bashful look in his eyes. A serene smile even played upon his lips. I raced back into the grove of white lead trees. S ran after me, but I kept running without looking back. Inside the forest it had already started to become dark, and the sweat of my body made me cold in no time. The sound of branches being swept aside further heightened the turmoil in my chest. My pants had become too tight, making it difficult to walk.

S finally caught up to me when I reached the suspension bridge. I ran across, ignoring him, but as I headed down the road to the village, he grabbed my hand from behind. I shook him off. When I looked back, I could barely see his pale face in the dusky light. I couldn't make out his expression, but I thought he was afraid. Unconcerned, I pressed on. I was definitely not mad at S. I was just confused. I couldn't make sense of the unexpected change in my body, or my feelings toward S. I walked slowly through the path, which had become completely dark. S stayed a few steps behind me, no longer attempting to catch up. There was a girl in class who I had previously liked. But I felt a different sort of affection for S. Neither of us spoke as we walked to the bus stop on the prefectural highway, nor while we waited for the bus. Unlike the other day, when the bus came it was my turn to see S off.

"Tomorrow . . ." I said to S's back as he got on. He turned and gave me his bashful smile, nodding. Then he got on the bus and sat at the very front. As the bus departed he gave me a small wave.

I was exhausted that night and went to bed earlier than usual. I awoke just as dawn broke. A hazy light poured into the room, and I lay in bed half-awake, mulling over the dream I had just had. I was in a deserted town, wandering around, lost in a maze of alleyways. No matter how many corners I turned, there was no end to the concrete buildings. Their faded pink and blue walls had English graffiti scrawled on them. Every time I turned another corner, the alleys grew narrower. Not knowing where I'd end up made me so anxious that I wanted to scream. Suddenly, a door opened. S's mother was beckoning me. In spite of my shyness I approached her and she took a piece of bright red candy out of her mouth. A string of pale red saliva stretched from her lips to the candy. When I closed my eyes and opened my mouth, waiting for her to put the candy into it, someone grabbed me from behind and pushed me to the ground. I was lying face down

with S on top of me, holding me tightly and whispering something in my ear. His faint breath caressed my neck, and his right hand moved slowly from my chest down to my stomach. Just as his fingers touched me, something shot from my groin down to the tips of my toes. All the strength left my body, and a soft, sweet sensation drifted through my lower abdomen. I closed my eyes and luxuriated in that sensation. My younger brother, who was sleeping next to me, made a quiet noise. I quickly looked over, but he seemed to be asleep still. My wet underpants started to feel unpleasant. I wasn't sure what to do with my right palm, which was all sticky. As I brought it out from under the covers, I smelled something raw and organic. Suddenly overwhelmed by a sense of anxiety and shame, I realized I had done something I shouldn't have. Just lying there became intolerable, so I slipped out of bed and headed toward the bathroom as quietly as I could. The chill of my wet underpants that stuck to the skin of my lower abdomen and shrunken penis made me feel even guiltier. I knew I couldn't let anyone in my family discover what had happened. When I reached the bathroom, I took off my underpants and threw them down to the very bottom of the pit latrine.

When I had returned to my room and was about to reach for a pair of clean underpants, my mother caught sight of me.

"What are you doing?" she asked, peering at me from the hallway, about to go in to the door of our bedroom.

"Nothing!" My voice came out louder than I had expected. My mother looked taken aback.

"What's with this kid," she said, and headed to the kitchen. My brother had woken up, and looked at me from the bed, his eyes crusty with sleep.

"Go back to sleep, it's too early!" I snapped, and he quickly hid his face under the covers. I got back into bed and slipped on the clean pair of underpants, then turned onto my side and closed my eyes, but I couldn't fall back asleep. Light was streaming in through the shutters and the knotholes in the walls. Dust swirled in the beams of light. Something else was fluttering silently in my chest. I couldn't lie still, so I got up and washed my face. My mother saw me and gave me an odd look.

"It's my turn to be class leader today," I said. It was a feeble excuse for a lie, but my mother didn't say anything. By the time my younger brothers were washing their faces, I had already finished my breakfast and left the house.

There were only two girls in the classroom when I got there. I was never late to school, but I usually got there just in the nick of time, so my two classmates looked surprised to see me. I had never paid the slightest attention to those two girls before, but now, when they looked at me, I suddenly felt a subtle power in their gaze, as though they could see right through my secret. I threw my backpack on my desk and went out into the schoolyard.

The morning light had filled the partly cloudy sky. Reddish-brown dried needles were scattered over the ground, falling from the old pines that encircled the schoolyard. The shadows cast by the trees' narrow branches swayed on the schoolyard. I avoided the eyes of the teachers and students who were sweeping the schoolyard, and climbed over the low concrete wall on the eastern side of the school, entering a small wooded area. Filled with acacia and elaeocarpus trees, this area was one of my favorite places to play with my friends. Dried leaves were piled on the ground, making it springy underfoot. I pushed my way through a patch of dense shrubbery, and arrived at a clearing where about

ten of us could fit if we sat knees hugged to our chests. That was where we held our secret meetings. I stood in the middle of the parcel of well-trodden grass and looked up. The sky was hidden by the layers of tree branches that stretched overhead from all sides. The noises of the schoolyard sounded very far away. I closed my eyes, and could feel the plants all around me start to move silently, reaching their branches out to envelop me softly. Their lively tips entered me from the slightest opening in my body before spreading white roots. The branch tips pressed my soft flesh, making a hard bud emerge. The sensations of earlier that morning revived in me. I was tormented by strong feelings of guilt, but I couldn't fight against what had so vigorously started to bud in my body. I suddenly felt someone watching me. My eyes darted to an opening in the surrounding shrubbery, and I sensed something run away. Flustered, I quickly adjusted my clothes and leaped into the thicket, but no one was there. The ground was untrodden, but somehow, I knew I had been seen.

The bell that rang five minutes before homeroom sounded. I ran back toward the school, feeling more and more certain that I had been seen. My growing embarrassment and bitter anger made it hard to breathe. I jumped over the concrete wall and ran through the schoolyard, which by now was nearly empty. When I entered my classroom, I felt the eyes of all my classmates, who had been conversing animatedly, rest on me. Someone called my name. It was S. Everyone looked at the two of us with raised eyebrows. S got up from his seat and headed toward me, clutching something to his chest as though it were very dear to him. He had the same bashful smile on his face. When I saw that smile, and his gestures, which looked somehow girlish, I felt something akin to anger or revulsion well up inside of me. I suddenly remembered the movement of his fingers from the day before, and recalling the way my body had responded on its own, my face got hot. S knew what had happened that morning. In fact, it was he who had just been watching me through the trees. He could see right through me. He knew everything that I had done from the day before until right now, and he knew how I was feeling, too. That's what I thought right then.

"Here. . . ." S said in a low voice, handing me the notebook he had been holding. I knocked it out of his hand, and then, without thinking, struck S in the chest. The sensation of his small, bony chest remained in my palm. S fell, toppling over the desk of a girl in the front row. Somebody screamed. S hit his back on the corner of the desk as he fell over backward. Bent over, he groaned in pain. Some boys cheered and gathered around us. They looked at me with anticipation, egging me on in hopes of getting to see a real fight. As soon as I felt their eyes on me, my anger toward S dissipated. The notebook he had been holding had fallen open at my feet. It was a fat scrapbook full of articles cut from newspapers and magazines. From the pictures, I could tell they were articles he had collected about boxing. S grimaced as he leaned forward to pick up the notebook, then stood and tried to return the toppled desk to its upright position. Two girls jumped up to help S, gathering together fallen books and pencils from the floor. When S returned to his desk, he put the notebook back inside it without looking up. He wasn't crying. He was trying hard to remain expressionless, suppressing his pain and sadness. I suddenly realized what a terrible thing I had done, and was filled with remorse, but I couldn't apologize. I went to my seat and quietly emptied the contents of my backpack into my desk. The boys who had gathered around returned to their seats looking disappointed.

Soon after, our homeroom teacher arrived. He could tell from the atmosphere of the classroom that something had happened, and asked about it, but no one answered.

I didn't talk to anyone that day. During our recesses, I ducked out of the classroom without saying a word and passed the time in the empty landings of the staircase or at the edge of the pond. My friends kept coming over to ask me what had happened with S, but I just glared at them and said nothing, and they gave up. I couldn't stop thinking about apologizing to S. Even during class, it was all I could think about. But all day long, I wasn't able to apologize, and eventually it was time to go home.

The next day, S wasn't at school. He didn't come the following day, or the day after that, either. Our teacher said that he had a bad cold, but all I could think of is that he wasn't coming to school because he was hurt by what I had done. After he had been absent for four days straight, I decided to go visit him after school.

It was my first time going to the entertainment district in front of the base gate by myself. Just like the last time, there were hardly any people around when I arrived. **Walking along the road lined with malnourished palm trees,** I immediately found the side road lined with gas cylinders. It took courage to make my way down the narrow alley, dark from the shadows cast by the surrounding buildings. When I reached the concrete courtyard, it was so quiet I couldn't believe it had been the location of such a rowdy scene just days before. Looking around, **I finally realized the courtyard was not surrounded by the backs of apartments, but rather by the backs of small bars packed tightly together.** Flowerpots containing twisted aloe plants and scrawny bonsai trees lined the walls, next to piles of beer and whisky cases. Unlike the front of the bars, which may have been faded but were at least painted pink and blue, in the back, the concrete-block walls were exposed, and just looking at them gave me a desolate feeling. I walked over to the wooden boxes that S and I had sat on the last time. Looking around from there, the courtyard looked so small it was hard to believe that it had been filled with so many American soldiers. In the corner was a well, and a white cloth tied to the pump faucet was soiled. Next to the well, on top of a pile of blocks, was a washbasin. The half-used bar of soap on it glistened coldly. The back doors of all the bars were covered by slabs of corrugated metal, which were full of English graffiti scribbled in magic marker. I knocked on the door that S's mother had come out of the last time. I heard the door being unlocked from the inside, and when it opened, a very fat young woman peered out at me. I said S's last name and asked if a woman by that name was there. The young woman looked at me listlessly and, without saying anything, closed the door. I didn't know if I should wait there or go home. I felt like I had waited a long time before the door opened a crack and S's mother peered out. I was startled for a moment by how different she looked from when I had seen her in the twilight a few days before. **The afternoon sun mercilessly revealed every strand of disheveled hair and every wrinkle on her un-made-up face.**

"You were here the other day, right?" she asked me.

I nodded, and her suspicious look disappeared as her face relaxed. Her slightly bashful smile looked just like S's.

"Is his cold very bad?" I asked. S's mother looked like she wasn't sure how to answer.

"Hmm, he might be able to go back to school again soon, I suppose . . ." She looked down. I didn't know what to say.

"Where do you live?" She asked me.

I looked up and told her the name of the village I was from. She just said, “Oh,” and gazed at me.

“Wait here a second, okay?” I felt her soft hand on my shoulder, and then she disappeared behind the closing door. When the door opened again, S’s mother smiled and handed me a paper parcel.

“Eat it on your way home,” she said.

I thanked her and took the paper parcel, then went back down the dark, narrow alley toward the bus stop. I could feel something hard inside, which I had put inside my pocket. I knew it must be another one of those red candies. I recalled the harsh taste and scent of mint. As I waited for the bus I stroked the paper softly. I couldn’t bring myself to eat the candy. When I got home, I put the parcel in my desk drawer.

At the end of the next week, S still hadn’t come back to school. Every time I went into the classroom, it was unbearably painful to see S’s empty seat. At one point, our teacher and class representative went to pay S a visit, but they came back saying they hadn’t been able to see him. Suddenly, everyone was talking about S. Nobody said anything to my face, but I had a feeling they were criticizing me behind my back for pushing him, and I started to spend most of my time alone during recess. A few of my friends made fun of S and praised me, saying they were glad I had hit him. I said nothing, but the irritation showed on my face. Eventually people stopped talking to me. I didn’t really mind being alone. What hurt the most was the guilt I felt toward S, together with another sort of guilt. I had gotten to a point where I couldn’t stop masturbating in bed at night before going to sleep and in the morning after waking up. My fantasies changed from images of S and his mother to thoughts of a certain girl in my class. When I saw her at school, I felt guilt along with a fear that I had somehow defiled her, and I couldn’t bear to make eye contact. I felt like she was also angry at me for hitting S, which made me feel terrible, but also resentful toward S. That in turn made me hate myself even more. I wanted desperately to escape from all the pain.

I went back to the town by the base. It was a Saturday afternoon. I hadn’t been able to ask our teacher for the address of S’s apartment. I didn’t think I could answer if he asked me why I wanted to know. Anyway, for some reason, I felt like I would be more likely to find S if I went back to that courtyard than if I went to his apartment. When I got off the bus, I raced down the gently sloping hill. I hesitated for a moment when I got to the alley lined with gas cylinders, but cut between the buildings, taking care not to lose my footing on the wet concrete. The courtyard was deserted just like the previous time. My hopes of seeing S sitting on top of the pile of wooden boxes, swinging his feet and smiling his bashful smile at me, were dashed, and I stood in the middle of the courtyard looking around, not knowing what to do. The twisted aloe plants and the soap next to the water pump hadn’t moved. I stood in the center of that quiet space and looked up at the sky. A few clouds floated lazily across the pale blue sky, and the telephone wires running diagonally across the courtyard hummed softly. I knocked on the back door of the bar where S’s mother worked. The corrugated metal over the door felt cold against my knuckles. I waited a minute, then knocked a second, and a third time, but nobody answered. I tried turning the doorknob, but the door was locked from the inside. Just as I was wondering what to do, I sensed someone coming out from between the buildings. It was a tall, skinny American soldier. His long arms stretching out from under a gray T-shirt were covered in tattoos. He reeked of alcohol. He stroked his red freckled face, then

pressed his fingers against his eyes and muttered something. He looked only about twenty years old. He watched as I backed away, then raised his right arm, and stared at me with his gray eyes and said something. There was no way out except for the alleyway behind him. The young man kept muttering something as he approached me. I saw a gap and tried to run behind him and escape. His long spidery arms grabbed me by the scruff of my neck and drew me toward him. He was much too strong for me to resist. **He grabbed me from behind and drew me close, wrapping his long fingers around my neck.** When I writhed and struggled to break free, the fingers of his right hand dug harder into my throat, and his left hand punched me in the pit of my stomach. My voice lost its way in my strangled throat, disappearing in a gasp. Everything started to vanish as though it were being sucked deep down into my eyes. Darkness spread before me. **The American soldier's hands started stroking my motionless body roughly, and he touched my genitals from over my pants.**

Just then, a piercing yell came from behind me. The young man's fingers relaxed for a second, and I pushed away his arms, which were covered in blond hair. Slipping out of his grasp, I tumbled down onto the concrete ground. A door on the opposite side of the courtyard had opened and a hunched-over old lady shouted loudly, batting her arms in front of her face like a cat trying to intimidate a predator. The young man's figure looked warped as he strode away. The woman kept waving her arms and shouting curses after him. I held back my tears and tried to make my way toward her, but she started to scold me loudly.

"This is no place for a child! Get on home right now!" she yelled.

The woman kept repeating the same thing over and over, her eyes glittering in her dark, wrinkled face. Before I could make it to my feet, she had slammed the door, and I heard the lock click. I didn't even have the energy to wipe the blood off my scraped knees and hands. I just stared at the metal-covered door. I stood for a moment, imagining S and his mother standing there smiling at me. I knew it wasn't true, but I stood there for a while, just staring at their door. When I finally headed back toward the damp darkness of the narrow alley, I was hit with the fear that the young American soldier might be hiding in the shadows. I crossed my arms and hugged myself tightly as I slipped into the alley. My eyes darted around nervously, but there was no sign of the American soldier. I hurried toward the bus stop. The wind smelled of the ocean as it blew down the street lined with bars covered in faded paint. I quickened my pace as I passed behind a black soldier peering into the window display of a pawn shop, and tried to hide in the shade of the palm trees as I passed by four or five young American soldiers talking loudly to each other as they made their way down the street.

There was nobody sitting on the bench at the bus stop. Young soldiers made their way across the street, paying no heed to the stoplight. I turned my face away from them and fixed my gaze in the direction of my bus. I couldn't help shivering from the wind, which had become chilly. The light of the sun sinking toward the west was blocked by the buildings and didn't reach the bus stop. The bus still didn't come. I knew that I would never see S again. I didn't know if he had moved away, but I was sure that I would never see him again. I sat on the bench and rubbed my arms, covered in goosebumps. **The leaves of the palm trees, reddish from malnutrition, shook in the breeze.** I picked a leaf off one of the trees and held it to my lips, whispering S's name inside my head. I read the

letters on the rusty bus-stop sign, listened to the sound of the palm leaves rustling in the wind, and waited for the bus to come.