

The Tale of Wind and Water

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Between buildings that look like casually erected matchboxes of different sizes, not too tall but stretching upward while precariously leaning, the sea wind rolls and rolls as it advances. It brushes upward against the pointed corners of many anchored ships such as large-size passenger boats, cargoes, and small-size fishing boats. It brushes the deserted wharf and passes by the roofs of the dark warehouses standing side by side. It moves toward the busy streets, now fast asleep but still enclosing the stuffy human air that thickly covered the steamy ground during the day.

Having reached there, the wind slowly makes its way into the town's residential area, which stands with its back rounded. At times, the wind does so for the purpose of rubbing the people's peaceful, deep sleep the wrong way.

In response to this moist feeler from the sea that carries the smell of the tide, a midnight awakening comes as if premeditated. Automatically I sit up in one heavy motion and, my consciousness still vacant, start to take off what I have on me. After twisting what I have taken off and tossing it to the side of my pillow, my hands stretch toward the wall of the small room and pull down jeans and a thin polo shirt from hangers.

About the time that I push my feet through the jeans and finish dressing, the action I am following finally surfaces to my consciousness.

As I left the bed, Sato, who was curled up by my side, quivered once. It was not the physical reaction of one awake. It was more like the unconscious instinct within the woman taking the form of a spasm to criticize me. Sato was breathing like one who had just fallen asleep. Leaving her curled body

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tangled in the sheet, and enticed by the moist whispers of the wind outdoors, I was on my way to town past midnight.

Saturday night. Or more precisely, the time when the next day had already begun two hours earlier.

It takes only twelve or thirteen minutes on foot to get out of the urban area. The entrance to the bridge appears before the wharf is reached. It is the largest bridge in this area, over half a mile long, known for the use of the latest technology in its construction.¹ The steel object across the bay that eats into the land looms in the dark, empty sky, and, mingling with the fog, disappears into darkness halfway across. The view of the unobstructed, boundless space twisted and bulged in an odd manner.

The wind raged high in the sky over the town. The stretch of a pale-blue fog shook like silk thread.

It was the wind's wild dance. *Saa, saa, saa, soh, soh, soh*—as it reaches me, the dance turns into sounds that tickle the ears. I felt that the wind's voice passing overhead resembled the melody of *shimauta*² that Sato sometimes hums. Just like a refrain uttered in a muffled way and cast up afar: *saa, suurii*.

I continued to walk along a night road now devoid of cars. I was on the bridge that looked out to the open sea on one side and to the town lights on the other. When I stopped moving my legs, the wind's voice that had continued without a break till then scattered into the empty sky, and all fell into silence around me.

The soundless night sank in the dark.

Turning my back against the transient town lights that began to disappear, I looked down at the dark sea. What seemed to curl upward like torn intestines were rolling waves on the surface of the water in the fluttering wind. Standing above the deep, black water, I rested my jaw on the guardrail, which was sticky with seawater.

Suddenly the wind slackened. I was pulled into a pit within the warm wind that formed behind my back. Turning my head, I saw a woman drifting this way on the wind. I had no idea when she had approached; it was as if she had landed softly from somewhere unknown. Turning her eyes toward me with a slight smile, she approached as if nestling up little by little. Red lips showed clearly on her roundish, white face. The hair, casually let down, fluttered in the wind, lending an abnormal swell to the head. Sato—I barely held myself back before voicing the name. It could not be. I shook my head. Deserted by me, Sato should now be in the sea of deep sleep.

The woman halted. Her purpose came through clearly. Stepping back quietly, I shook my head once again, this time with a big gesture. The woman continued to smile, extending her swaying, slender white arms. I pressed my back tight to the railing. The moment I did so, the woman's smile became

contorted. Looking down, she quietly turned her back toward me. The form of her body, thin at the waist, mingled with the dark.

Suddenly I became aware of a bottomless hollow by my feet. The sea Sato had watched at that time was this color too. The way she had stood had made me think she was gazing at the dark water endlessly pouring into the hollow that had opened within her.

I saw the form of a woman looking down at the sea from the dimly lit deck of a night boat that I had taken on the spur of the moment. Fighting against the streaming hair blown upward by the wind, the woman's upper body swayed as if falling forward from the railing. "Stop," I shouted loudly, and abruptly held the form tightly from behind. The woman's body momentarily stiffened, then reeled, and, as it were, thawed in my arms, which were more forceful than necessary. She collapsed just like that, and before I knew it I was caressing her hair, which was permeated with the smell of seawater. It was my turn to nearly fall onto the resistless, soft flesh of the woman, when she, still crouched, spat out words to me: "What an odd person you are." The young, cheerful voice made me realize I had guessed wrong. Confused, as I quickly let go of her, she laughed softly. "I wasn't thinking of dying," she said. The face she lifted then gave me a start. Her eyes were blue. The feline eyes wet in the dark shot out at me. That her face and the back of her neck loomed white in the dark, I realized, was not only because of the night lights. *Ainoko*.³ This occurred to me, an expression that accompanies a damp, dull pain within me. It referred to children, frequently seen here, of white or black men and women of the island.

"You're Yamatu,⁴ aren't you?" she asked abruptly. Not that there was a thorn in her tone, but despite myself I felt that what she had said pushed me, a Yamatu, off to a distance.

"How do you know?"

"There you go, that *munui*, the way you talk."⁵ Nasal and smooth."

I was reminded of the fact that islanders here speak as if pelting the breath out at something. The exhaled breath itself brushes the listener's ear. I felt that this woman's aspirates were particularly strong.

"Going back to the island?" I asked.

"Yes. Or rather, Anna's⁶ dying, so I'm going to see her for the last time. When things are finished, I mean to go back to town."

I later learned that her *anna*, grandma, was her only close blood relative and a foster mother for her. And that *anna* was the one who had named her blue-eyed granddaughter Sato. After giving birth to this child of an unidentifiable father, the mother had abandoned her.

"You always go to the island by night boat like this?" I asked. The woman laughed again, this time silently.

“People nowadays don’t go anywhere by boat, but I don’t have much money. Besides, the night boat keeps me from taking an extra day off from my daytime job.” Her voice sounded friendly. The form of the woman looking down at the water surface with a smiling profile appeared to me somewhat sad, but I felt that this was just because of my sentimental view and that she was not particularly conscious of it. Her voice was straight and cheerful. I had an illusion that her voice reflected her entire heart, that its strange cheerfulness also connected somehow to the deepness of the sea.

It has been five years since I settled down in a city of the southwestern islands, which is called the Japanese archipelago’s tail; if looked at, in fact they dot the sea that way. Originally I had nothing whatsoever to do with this area. The reason I am here is no more than that my job happened to post me here. I came as a reporter dispatched to a local area by a central newspaper with an information network throughout the country. Given the nature of my work, I was buried under overflowing information; but when I received the letter appointing me to this southern land, which was not necessarily where I had hoped to go, I held an image of these sun-scorched islands as an unknown, alien place, and this depressed me. But then I lacked the courage to decline the offer, and I came over, dragging, somewhere around me, a sentiment like that of an exile sent to an undeveloped land out at sea.

When I looked down from the descending aircraft at these islands between clouds, I was overwhelmed by the mass and expanse of the whirlpools that surrounded them. The forms I saw in a light state of hallucination floated on the water in swaying motions, faint and flat, in distorted ovals or zigzagging triangles and squares.

On landing, I found that the interior of the island was far from undeveloped. There were two or three small cities, no different from the heart of a mainland city, and perhaps to balance with the appearance of those cities, the residents looked quite sophisticated as they acted the roles of Japanese in general. Or perhaps they behaved as if the only way to live on this island was to turn their eyes away from the difficult questions of their unreasonable history. Seeing the carefree, unexpectedly refined expressions on their faces, my melancholy about the southern islands dissipated. At the same time the exoticism that I had secretly harbored was betrayed, and I began my island life with a sense of exhaustion from feeling bypassed.

Amid the rush of miscellaneous work at the branch office, where I had several roles to play by myself, occasionally I felt irritated by the rhythm of island life, somewhat slow in tempo and relaxed. But the two impulses found a place of compromise by the time a year had passed. The sweltering heat of midsummer that slowed down thinking was now like a piece of poetry conveying local color. The violent typhoons that raged in season, brilliantly

colorful flowers, the expanse of the absolutely limpid sky and sea: all began to pass my eyes and body like daily life matters.

I frequently went out for drinks with local reporters I felt comfortable with, and most of my evening hours went to that. At the beginning, there was a purpose on my side, which was to exchange information, but that too eventually became a habit that made my heart heavy. Sometimes, without my so intending, conversations with reporter friends in the usual corner of a drinking place developed into arguments, and those intoxicated would distance me saying, "*Ittā, Yamatunchun, nūnu wakai ga*, you mainlanders, what do you know?." And that was the end of it. Their gaze seemed crushed under the weight of history, their words becoming locked up deep within.

There were times when, between reportage trips, I walked around along the main streets or back alleys of the city, or just dropped in on a small, remote island. I thought of this as part of my job. During those casual excursions, the islands began to shed their outer garments layer by layer. Eventually, I felt, they would bare their jet-black surface of the ground, exposing their original form. It was not that any special change had occurred to my gaze at the islands. The islanders' intonation, which seemed to adhere to my ears, dark eyebrows, and large, black eyes; the air that held heat all through the year; the diverse, odd annual events that were tirelessly repeated. It was not that these things made me feel what I felt either.

What happened is that the standpoints were reversed: the seeing and being seen. The island's eye had caught me. With an expression of a silent rock cave, the island stared at me. I was unable to escape this feeling.

Had I wished, I should have been able to return to the main office by the spring of the following year. In the summer of my second year, when I started to think that it was slowly coming to the limit for a man over forty to live alone in a local area away from family, Sato entered my heart as if to set up a stake in it.

It was at the end of that summer. Relieved by the sun, which had finally begun to soften, I set out for an overnight visit to a remote island. I chose M. Island,⁷ relatively easily accessible, with four regular flights a day, as well as some passenger-boat services.

I wasn't aiming to cover anything in particular as a reporter. Nor was I, at this late point, planning to enjoy a sightseeing mood. The fact was that the continuous holiday time I spent alone, void of any plans, turned into a white space that stretched before my eyes and suddenly started to threaten me. Urged by something I didn't know, I hit upon the idea of going to the island. I had no guide for this first trip there, but I could get whatever information I wanted, so I carried out my idea immediately. Another thing that made me do so was that, all the various main events and festivals having ended, it was a good time for going on a trip alone with no fixed schedule.

Somehow I felt like seeing the ocean rather than the sky. I was fortunate enough to catch the evening boat at 8:00 on the day I thought of taking this trip. The boat would cross the sea during the night, arriving at the island port by dawn the following day.

Thinking of using the night wind to divert the seasickness from the unfamiliar sound of the engine that kept shaking at the bottom of the boat, I went up to the deck. It was then that I saw the swaying form of the woman with her body bent, leaning out over the dark sea.

The wind, which had slackened, souged again: *saa saa saa, soh soh soh*.

When I happened to lower my eyes, I saw a pale image that swiftly drifted over the water. It abruptly swelled large, wriggled into a narrow, long shape, and rapidly sank to the water. "Hey." Startled, I let out a cry before thinking, my throat twitching with tension. My body moved back. I slowly exhaled. Must be an illusion, this thing, I thought. The motion of an immense form sliding down to the other side of the bridge cannot belong to a real human being. Without trying to see it, I saw it again. Saw the spirit, perhaps, of Sato wandering over the night sea.

The body that I had held tightly on the boat was an empty shell. The real Sato, after all, had fallen into that dark sea. On an evening like tonight when a tepid wind blows, this other Sato lures me. Taking the place of the physical Sato, who had fallen asleep after a deep embrace, the Sato wandering over the night sea, I thought, comes to wake me. I cannot get away from this idea. My postmidnight wandering too was a bad habit that I formed soon after I began seeing Sato.

The wind's singing overlapped Sato's voice.

It was an early evening in town three years ago.

I heard Sato's bursting voice in the downtown area. When I entered a *shimauta* folk song club with my usual group, a blue-eyed young woman was swinging a pair of drumsticks. *Saassa, saassa, ha, iya, ha, iyaiya*, she interjected crisp chants between the rhythms of the drum. Somehow I found something painful in the bottomless brightness of her raised voice. Sato's eyes, momentarily lit up, pierced my expression, which must have revealed such a thought. It was a chance reencounter. But somehow I was unable to brush it away as simply coincidental, and even as I felt something unmanageable about such a feeling, I approached Sato. During the day she worked part-time at a coffee shop, she explained during the intermission, and she performed here on weekday nights because her skills in traditional drumming, which she had begun for diversion's sake, came to be appreciated.

"The audience finds the colors of my eyes and my skin curious, and that's a factor too."

She added this in a carefree manner, and taking a look at a business card I offered, she said without hesitation, "You're a Yamatu reporter. No wonder."

What did she mean by no wonder, I asked. Sato pursed her lips slightly and lowered her eyes, which glistened again. No wonder what, I thought. Her lowered eyes caused me to ask again at a later moment during the chat. Looking annoyed by my persistent tone, she said in a low voice, "There's no special meaning." But then she continued, with her clear, blue eyes wide open, "You, you have eyes that stare at everything on the island. Eyes that defile islanders, who try to live quietly by themselves. Lately they've increased, those eyes. Here and there on the island, only eyeballs are hanging around, by day and by night."

I must have once again looked steadily with those staring eyes at Sato's powdered face with its clear-cut features. She was plainly aware of having hurt me, but sent back a faint, deep smile from across the table.

I was unable to leave just like that. I parted from my company of three and waited for Sato at the back entrance of the shop, which was nearing its closing time. It was past 2:00 AM. With a large, black bag hanging from her shoulder, she hurried out the door, tall, the makeup washed away, and ponytailed. I drew toward her so as to block her way. "Ai, you,"⁸ she said surprised, but immediately softened her face, and, without saying anything, she fell in step with me. When I saw her up close, the woman's body that had seemed to thaw in my arms on the night boat two months earlier turned into the swell of a surging billow and swallowed me. This was a southern winter night, when cooler winds had finally started to blow.

After this, I habitually joined Sato at her small apartment on weekend nights. I repeatedly postponed my return to the main office, and, while being looked at with suspicion by people around me, I had broken a record by staying at the place of my new assignment for a fifth year. I had no excuse for my wife and two children, whom I had left at a newly bought mansion in the heart of the city, and my relationship with them had completely cooled. Perhaps I would no longer find any living space there.

It wasn't that Sato wanted to keep me on the island. She never demanded anything from me except for my company on weekend nights. She didn't even visit my room. So a commuting marriage, in which a man commutes to a woman's place, had already lasted three years. "A Yamatu," she said, "I think can better attain nirvana if he goes back to Yamato." Sato said this in a voice that contained a smile. "For one thing, though the colors of my skin and eyes are what they are, I'm a *shimanchu*,⁹ so it's best for me to live on the island, and I won't chase after you either. By and by you should go back to where you'll eventually go back."

She didn't sound as if she forced herself to speak this way out of thought-

fulness for me, nor did she sound as if she had become tired of me. From the beginning she had something like resignation about men. When she said, “I won’t do such a thing as follow you to Yamato,” her words hinted at a hidden complex feeling about her mother, who had followed to the States the man who was a U.S. soldier stationed on the island. Something like a resolution not to repeat what her mother had done, I felt, supported the heart of this twenty-six-year-old woman who was trying to live by herself on this island, bereft of her grandmother and with nobody there to rely on or to be relied upon. Even so, it was hard to guess what she felt deep down, she who sometimes casually mentioned how free of care she felt for the reason, rather than despite, that she was all alone in the world. How would Sato, without leaning on a man, continue to shoulder the sense of emptiness that must spread in her heart?

“This is something like a keepsake that Anna left for me.” With this introduction, Sato sometimes softly hums a *shimauta*. She told me it’s called “Hana nu Kajimayā,” flowery pinwheel. “*Hana nu kajimayā, ya, suri, kaji chiriti miguru, chintuntentun, manchintan . . .*, a lovely pinwheel is twirling in the wind, twirling around and around, it beckons the wind.”¹⁰ It’s an old local song everyone knows here. Sato tells me that when she cried and cried without knowing what she cried for, her grandmother took the little granddaughter to the beach and sang this song while turning a pinwheel she had made of pandanus leaves from which the thorns had been removed.

“Anna was a little tone-deaf, and she wasn’t at all good at *shimauta*. That was clear even to a child’s ear. But when she sang this song, the wind really came and turned the pinwheel around and around. Really.”

As if to tease herself about telling such a childish story, she burst into exaggerated laughter.

“It’s okay to laugh at me, saying I’m like a *warabā*, a child.”¹¹

Invited by her rollicking laughter, I laughed back, but I wasn’t laughing. I thought I saw at that moment the roots of what was innocent that was left within her. I felt that the bright southern wind that travels from a distant sea to the beach on a summer afternoon was always blowing within Sato. Why did I involuntarily superimpose it on the tepid wind howling over the dark sea that earlier night?

That person. This was how she sometimes started talking about her on the spur of something. “That person too wasn’t able to manage her life over there and seems to have come back here right away, but never came to see me, her daughter with different-colored eyes whom she had abandoned at home in a state of sheer poverty. Oh, I’m not wanting to say I resent it, really, really,” Sato said and added, “that person was desperate too, I’m sure, about living.” Even when the topic turned to this sort of thing, Sato was almost unexpectedly innocent, with no gloom in her voice, while her facial expression turned oddly wise.

“At my age,” this woman in her mid-twenties would start to say with her arms folded. “No matter what people say,” she would go on, “sometimes I think that person’s approach is impressive, though I know it’s a little odd that an abandoned daughter say something like that.” I hesitated to ask how she found a mother who had abandoned her daughter impressive. Looking up at me, Sato seemed to recall the face of the person whom she said she had never met, or perhaps some image occurred in her mind’s eye, for her gaze suggested she thought of her mother living in a distant place; but then at the next moment her eyes were devoid of sentiment, as if having wiped off that image.

Without even clarifying who had fathered it, she thrust a child she had born upon her mother, a weakening war widow who’d had nothing but hardships throughout her life; and she continued to live without reflecting on what she had done: a southern woman with red flames of emotion burning straight upward. I imagined something like that. Sato might perhaps see within herself too the fire her mother carried. There were times when I felt that this was the source of energy with which Sato led her life. Unable to hold back the movement of my staring eyes, I once asked Sato about her thoughts of her foreign father, about whom she had been told nothing. It was a stupid question. “Someone not there’s not there,” she snapped at me, “it’s as simple as that. Going after something that was not there from the very start,” she added, “meant walking around looking for a lie. There’re times when lies are important, but if I look for only things like that, I feel I’ll lose something more important. That’s even more painful for me. So, I don’t do that.” Sato’s words came back at me with the resounding rhythm of the drum she beat.

Could it perhaps be that a sense of absence itself sometimes supported a human heart? Sato’s articulate words allowed no space for my sentiment to squeeze in.

Hearing whispers, I turned around to find a few couples, shoulders close, here and there near the railing of the bridge. Lovers’ cars were parked some distance from one another in the wind, which went *soh, soh, soh*. Quiet voices floated on the wind. Merry laughter also mingled with the voices. They belonged to those young couples. To the extent I could make this out, it was tranquil on the bridge. My vision swayed unsteadily, and the forms around me gradually receded into faint shadows. It was then.

“Hey, you.”

I was stopped by a sugary voice with vibrato in it. I looked and saw that it was the woman I had seen just a while ago. Stretching her neck as much as possible, she was looking up at me. Although I hadn’t thought much of it a few minutes ago, I was surprised by how petite she was. As a man, I am just slightly taller than average, so the woman whose head was way below my eyes looked like a young girl still waiting to mature rather than a grown

woman. Indifferent to my confusion, she was looking up as if to cling to me, her deep-red lips just slightly parted. She would not change that posture. I was forced to look at her too, straining my eyes, which had begun to be dim. When I took a good look at her, I realized that she had appeared young just because of her height. Neither the chest, which was so rich that it was out of proportion and gave a sense of resilience while hovering around the stable-looking lower torso, or the languid expression on her face belonged to a young girl. She had something that made me think she was at least older than Sato.

I was looking down at her without being able to respond in any way. However, I was held by a premonition that I would not be able to turn away from the light lodged in the deep-sculpted eyes that were clearly those of a southern islander. It was after starting life on the island that I came to let myself be drawn into an ambience itself in this way. When exposed to the strong ambience of a person who suddenly springs out from an invisible, warped hollow hidden in the interior of the island, my gaze at reality becomes inflected, and my body is lured in that direction.

The woman's small, sad-looking head swayed as if in the wind. The swaying motion seemed to plead: hey, hey. I nodded. She smiled softly.

"I'm glad, you know, if it's you, there may be a chance, I thought, you know."

She spoke alluringly though in a halting manner that was almost painful to the ear. The moment she spoke she erased the smile from her face, turned her eyes toward me, in a prompting, if not gripping, manner, and started ahead.

The woman walked swaying along the centerline of the bridge. As if coaxed by a gust of wind, I followed her across the bridge. Toward the beach on the outskirts of the city, that is, in the opposite direction from which I had come.

We were walking on a street that ran along the beach, with a view of the bridge girders above. Considering the length of the bridge, I must have walked for quite a while. But my sense of time was lost while traveling between clouds, which was what it felt like to me to be walking behind the narrow-waisted woman across the bridge in or on that misty night.

The woman led the way to a neighborhood where shops lined up over the water in a disorderly fashion. Boats were afloat on the swaying water, moored close to the shore. Most were sex parlors. The noise of individual electric generators suggested that some parlors were still open at this late hour. Passing by a number of boats showing glimpses of human forms under restrained lights, the woman entered one not lit at all. A precarious-looking wooden ladder stretched over the water and creaked when she crossed it. Not at such a place, I thought and stopped, flinching despite myself. She turned around slowly and waved her small, thin wrist. Beckoned to, I too crept across the

ladder, dragging my body, a floating substance no longer capable of declining the woman. A sliding door opened, and a light went on.

What the sooty, naked light bulb illuminated within the box was a closed room about the size of three tatami mats. Perhaps because of the way the light fell, the carpet looked dark orange. The woman pulled loose a spread that had been folded in one corner of the room. Lying on the unfolded spread as if having become part of it, she extended a hand toward me. I must have walked quite a long while after all. I was unable to feel anything like a center in my body. My feet slipped and I fell on my knees. The woman rose and stepped over to put her arm caringly around my shoulder. I pulled her arm away, which, though weightlessly soft, felt oddly sticky as it clung around my neck. Expressionless, she looked at me.

“To tell you the truth, I’m not much in need today. So, for a while I want to just sit like this.”

Nodding, the woman sidled back on her knees, which were placed together, and pulled herself away. Her steady eyes made her even more difficult to figure out. I couldn’t judge whether they expressed relief or pain. The simple outline of her thickly made-up, round, white face hinted some shade but no particular characteristics except for the eyes. It was hard to tell whether her expression belonged to one who was completely steeped in her line of work or was worn just temporarily. The discomfort of being in a small, closed room with a speechless woman increased the sense of confinement. The urgent expression on her face when she had addressed me was no longer visible; once she had picked me up, she was somewhat unfriendly. She didn’t do anything like try to chat to make me feel relaxed, offer a drink, or provide an electric or paper fan. A look across the room was enough to reveal that this was not a place where service items could be prepared, but I began to perspire a bit after having been exposed to the wind all along the way here.

“*Achisan ya*, hot, isn’t it?” the woman said apologetically. She rose and seemed to push part of the wall outward. When a prop was applied to the wooden door, I could see, while seated on the floor, the dark, swaying surface of the sea. I had thought of this as a floating structure when I saw it from the shore, but in fact the place was not apparently on a boat. It was only that the little hut, which let down its stays into the water, was itself eating into the water. The room never actually swayed.

The wind entering through the open sliding window caressed my perspiring skin. Little by little an expression surfaced on the woman’s face, and she even grinned when her eyes met mine. From so close a distance, I still could not tell her age. I wondered to what age a woman could do this sort of work. On closer inspection, I noticed that the wrinkles that had collected on her

neck were fairly deep. As if to smooth those wrinkles, she cocked her chin and steadily looked at me.

“Why did you follow me, when you weren’t even in need.”

“Why? But you approached me.”

The woman’s relatively large eyes moistened childishly, at odds with her tired face.

“You’re right, I was persistent, but you could’ve turned me down.”

“I could, but didn’t. I suppose that isn’t an acceptable explanation?”

“Acceptable or not, I’m not in a position to say so, you know.”

I felt that her tone, now softened, somehow resembled Sato’s. I even thought she might be from the same island as Sato; yet my inquisitive eyes, which tended to stare, didn’t work on this woman any more than that.

It suffices just to sense the air, I’ve been thinking recently. As I live this way, cornered by no destination yet struggling to see the future, the rich ambience of the island suddenly comes wafting before my eyes. If I were to stay crouched inside that air, never turning my head, I would be able to perceive what flows into, and fills, my empty body. If so, could I not thaw in the fog, the island air, Sato’s words that Yamatu could better attain nirvana by returning to Yamato? I try thinking this sort of thing. How a woman is here before me in this manner and what history she shoulders. I’ll stop bringing up my consciousness, which had become part of my habit, and asking such questions to a woman. That should not be a story she would wish to tell. The presence of the woman, unfriendly and nonchalant after having been declined by a man she had managed to pick up, seemed to me at this moment to represent the history of the island itself.

As if watching the distant shade of a rocky stretch by the seashore where the sun had started to set, I was vacantly looking at the woman. Perhaps she was made uncomfortable even by such a pointless gaze, for she swayed, nearly twisting her body.

“I’m taking this off, it’s hot.”

So saying, the woman slipped out of the flared skirt that wrapped her lower body. Despite her petite build, the fullness of her resilient-looking thighs was obvious through her thin slip. She kept her sleeveless top on. Not that she was enticing me; she seemed indeed hot. After exhaling a long breath, she moved to the window side, her ankles thin and tight in proportion to her full hips and thighs. Then, with a twist of her waist, she said to me, “So you’re okay, in such a place, doing nothing, just sitting still.”

I suppressed a laugh that was about to burst. I couldn’t quite say, you’re the one who brought me to such a place.

“Yeah, it’s really hot,” I said instead as I rose to move toward the window. When I stood straight up, the top of my head almost went through the ceiling

of the room. I walked slightly bending forward. Walk, I say, but it was a matter of three steps. I sat again, and peered through the window, hollowed out, so to speak, from the wall and provided with a sliding shade. I faced the swaying of the water, which contained black darkness. My face felt as if it had been smoothly brushed with a sticky, black liquid, so I lifted it, and to the side of my eye was the waist of the woman, who stood near me.

“There’re many winds outside,” she said.

A strange look drifted on the face of the woman as she, eyes relaxed, looked down at me. I still could not guess her age. The tone of her clumsy speech sounded quite young, but her languid face and the slow movement of her body suggested an age one or two dozen years older than mine. Trying to cut off my gaze, which once again started to pry, I extended my arms toward her waist. “*Ai*,” she shouted, bending. Her petite body fit inside my crossed legs. Her torso leaned toward the windowsill, with her chin resting on it. It was no different from a young woman’s pose. Because I had absolutely no intention of forcing anything on her, I decided to just slowly stroke her permed, reddish hair. Seeming to respond to the motion of my hand, the woman’s torso began to sway. The fragrance of cheap shampoo wafted from her dry hair. Oddly, I began to have a feeling that I held Sato, whose build was far stronger than that of the woman on my lap.

“On a night like this, afterwards some jumped into the water from here.”

The woman’s muffled laugh fell to the water. That made me put out my head and look toward the water’s surface. Crests of flickering reflections of the city lights far and near delicately showing the undulation, the curling water surface looked alluring, like a woman’s belly.

Suddenly I heard a voice from that belly. “*Chin, tun, ten, tun . . . manchintan . . .*” I looked at the woman. She was just vacantly looking down at the water’s surface; her mouth did not seem to be moving. But I certainly heard the tune. “*Chintuntentun . . .*” It was the refrain from the song “Flowery Kajimayā,” which Anna used to sing for Sato. The lingering reverberation of the voice was not that of Sato’s. Unmistakably, the voice came from underwater. If it was not Sato’s voice, I sensed, it must be Anna’s: the hesitant swaying of the water had carried toward me the song that she sang to comfort Sato. Why did I think that I heard just now the song that was sung long ago?

I was rocked by a certain thought. I shifted my legs from the woman, who crouched on my lap. Removing my hands, which were holding her, I started taking off what I wore. Jeans, shirt, underclothing, all. Twisting just her neck, the woman watched me. She seemed puzzled, because I looked as if possessed by something, but she didn’t say anything. Perhaps she felt she had to do the same, for she took off what was left on her. Blocking each other’s eyes, she and I tangled for a brief moment, after which I picked her up as if I were

holding a pillow, bent myself, and took a large step out from the windowsill. There was a precarious verandah of one wooden board immersed in water. While still holding the woman, who seemed ready to fall from my hands if I loosened my hold even a little, I entered the water.

The woman slipped away from me. She was disappearing underwater. I followed her toward the bottom. It was too deep for my feet to reach. I couldn't stop the motion of my limbs. In the water, to which a light that shone from somewhere lent unexpected visibility, the woman's small body looked like a large jellyfish. As her limbs swayed this way and that, kicking the water, she was like a tremendously large mollusk. I drew near her. The moment I did, she pushed her torso upward. Even with her face above the water's surface, she did not look human. After shaking her wet hair once, she began swimming away from the shore. She was surprisingly fast. In haste I followed her. No consciousness functioned in me to make me think of anything. The reflexes alone, of my naked body kicking the water as I followed the jellyfish-woman, controlled me and pushed me forward. But my limbs felt the weight of layers of water encircling and oppressing me, and would not, no matter how I tried, reproduce her swiftness. She rode the current, as she liked, like a creature that had long inhabited the sea. I could not recognize anything in the dark sea in the direction she was heading. I felt that the single-minded swimming of the woman, who had instantly transformed into a fish in water, might have some hidden meaning. Distanced little by little, I continued to kick the water, trying not to lose sight of her.

Suddenly the woman was completely out of sight. Feeling a light numbness in my arms and lower body that I had been thrashing about in chase of her, I stopped moving forward to become aware of myself floating alone on the open sea. Where did she go? I made a circle, treading water, but there was no form like hers within the scope of my vision. It was as if the woman had not been there to begin with. Did she dive to the bottom of the sea again? It couldn't be that something had happened to her and she had drowned. Even if it were the case that she had hidden somewhere in the sea, motionlessly waiting to be found, no energy sprung up from within me to look around for her in this dark sea.

Once I stopped moving, the night sea became unusually smooth, forming a dark blue expanse around me. There certainly was wind, but over the water that held thick darkness, it was completely calm all the way into the distance. Farther out, the water slowly swelled, showing the white bellies of undulating waves. When I looked around again, my eyes caught, on the left, a large black boulder planted in the sea, and, on the right, the hazy flickering lights of the city.

I was by myself amid the silence, floating with my head out of the water.

I was neither scared nor lonely, but sudden sorrow filled me, welling up from somewhere I didn't know. As if the sea's liquid were made of the essence of sorrow, the sentiment seeped into all corners of my body. The weight of the sorrow that filled me, I thought, was going to drag me to the bottom of the dark water. Right then, a willpower started up, making me resist the water's lure from down below. Adding strength to my abdomen and bending backward, I slowly turned over on my back. Only the center of my abdomen and front half of my head were above the water. The seawater had enough buoyancy to keep me afloat. Gently spreading my limbs so as not to lose the delicate balance, I calmly opened my closed eyelids. It was an odd view. Or rather, nothing entered my view. The moon and even fragments of stars had disappeared from the sky, which had, before I knew it, become thickly covered by clouds. It was a dark night oppressed by a dull heaviness. There was no sound either. Immersed in the water, my ears caught no discernible sound. I had a feeling that, while I seemed to hear something, in fact I was not hearing anything. Where did it go, the voice of the wind that had beaten me so hard on the bridge?

But then, like the Sirens' song, something became audible: *chin, tun, tentun*. . . . The singing voice, hoarse like an old woman's yet carrying something pure and cheerful, reached my ears, which were still kept underwater. The refrain continued: *chintun . . . manchintan, unitarisunumee, umikakiree*. Was it Sato's, or Anna's? Between phrases of the refrain, strange sounds entered, which I could only call the sea's voice: *byurrr . . . kyurrr . . . hyurrr*. . . . The way those sounds reached me was as if they were blowing through the drift of sorrow that filled me. Just then, something grabbed my ankle. I sank underwater. The woman, I thought. She must have grown impatient since I didn't catch up with her however long she waited and returned to play a trick. My right ankle was in the grip of a soft-fleshed hand. After dragging me underwater, the hand suddenly twisted its wrist with great strength. It was terrifyingly powerful. I was swung around with force, and the seawater I instinctively swallowed choked my chest. I was in pain. Foaming, bending back, being swung around in the water, I writhed with suffocation, thrashed my legs about, and finally surfaced. The moment I took a breath, I was grabbed again around an ankle. The sound of the whirling water, which went *byuryuryu, kyuryuryu*, resembled the woman's giggle. Was it the woman's doing, or a water demon's prank? Probably this was a staged initiation rite, one for entering the perfect island community. The moment I thought so, my back, which bent backward from the tormenting play, trembled with an odd sense of pleasure. Pain alternating with pleasure, I was drawn to a wriggling sensation that made me wish to voluntarily enter the enigmatic world. Abruptly, I heard Sato's voice: *saassa, ha, iya iya iya*. In response to the rhythm, my legs kicked the water upward.

Upon surfacing, I found that the heavy, thick darkness had begun to fade, making the field of vision above the water somewhat lighter. Far and near, thin and thick mounting waves demonstrated an expanse of many layers. Calming my breath, I decided to wait a while for the woman to appear.

But she did not show herself no matter how long I waited. Possibly she had turned into a water creature, having lost her way for returning to human womanhood. This time, I was the one to be impatient. Physical exhaustion worried me. I suddenly feared the water. If I stayed in the water as I was, I would be at the mercy of the water demon.

Looking around, I was able to recognize the box-shaped hut on the water by the faint light leaking from its open window. I had felt that I had gone quite a long way from that area, but it wasn't perhaps so great a distance. I could see quite clearly the form of the box structure, which seemed about to float away yet sat still, as if clinging to the shore. In that direction, I moved my body.

The tide seemed full. The amount of water had increased before I had realized it, and it pushed me toward the window of the box room.

When I reached it, the woman, all wet, showed her white face from the window, though I had no idea when she had returned. I caught hold of the hands she extended. The strength with which she had swung me around in the water was nowhere to be seen, and the soft flesh of her hands caringly pressed against my hands. Had that really been the woman's act? Her face, lipstick now gone, was uniformly pale, the lingering hint of an aquatic animal still hovering. Because she pressed her wet body against me, we once again tangled around by way of, so to speak, parting words. Between those motions, she wiped the water from my hair and my back with the sheet she had pulled off the spread.

Even after I had put on all my clothes, she remained as she was. Exposing her white body of a plucked bird, she sat absentmindedly with no expression whatsoever. Aware of the awkwardness of doing so, yet out of a sense of duty, I pulled out my wallet from my jeans pocket, opened it, and placed all the bills I found there by the woman's side. I felt that she smiled faintly.

I thought I had to clarify something with the woman. But I wasn't myself sure what that was. The woman made no move. Since I had offered payment, I knew I should no longer stay by her side. I started to leave the hut, my back still bent.

"Hey, you."

So addressed, I was going to turn around. At that moment, something stuck to my back. Suddenly it rose to the back of my neck, gaining weight. My upper body felt stiff. I had no idea what was happening. It was not as if the muscles of my back, which had stayed bent to match the ceiling of the boxy

room, had suddenly cramped. There was a deep sense that something had unexpectedly possessed my back. I tried to turn around but could not move my neck. I simply heard the woman's voice.

"Trusting you, I have something I want you to hear."

What directly leaned on my back did not necessarily seem to be the woman's spirit. Her voice reached me from the direction of a wall of the room, a little distance away. At any rate, the thing was heavy. What a sense of pressure. I waited for her next words, leaning further forward. Why was I forced to take this posture? And what did she wish to tell me at this moment just as I was leaving? But the woman did not easily continue. A murky interval of time surrounded me from behind. Then I was gripped by an oddly mysterious rumbling. It was a dissonance conveying a sense of disintegration. The sound stretched, shrank, and exploded in a discordant tone. She's breaking apart, I thought. The woman who started talking to me was shrieking, I felt, under attack. I thought I had to clarify the identity of the sound. While still bending my neck deeply downward, I thought of turning around just with the use of my legs, and tried to do so.

"Do-o-n't turn around."

The woman chantingly shouted with a fiercely vibrating voice. I stopped moving my legs.

"If you don't want to become a bubble."

Perhaps she was still the woman. Even as she spoke like that, her words sounded enticingly sad. I did not wish to become anything like a bubble, but I might become a bump on a rock or some other if I didn't do something. Besides, I also thought I needed to hear the story she wished to convey to me while she was still able to utter words that I could understand.

I bent my bent back further. I gradually moved my feet sideways until my legs were fully spread, and I looked through the space. Momentarily, the floor and the ceiling swayed and exchanged places. I wasn't sure if what turned upside down was the boxlike room or myself. A dissonant sound that exploded again made me spring up. I bumped against the wooden door. As it opened, I tumbled out onto the wooden ladder.

I raised my body from a crouching position on the cool ground. My feet were wobbly but the weight on my back had gone, and I was able without effort to turn around to see the shore. No light was lit any longer on any of the many waterborne shops clinging to the shore. They had blended into the night sea, and not even the outline of their forms came into sight.

The wind traveled through the sky above the sea.

The big bridge, over the sea at full tide, was clearly visible ahead of me. I wondered how much time there was before dawn. Wishing to arrive before Sato woke, I turned my feet to the entrance to the bridge.

Notes

1. A reference to the Tomari bridge in Naha, 3,668 feet long and Okinawa's fifth longest.

2. Traditional, local folk songs of the southwestern islands, particularly of Amami but more broadly including the Okinawan islands.

3. A Japanese expression, now considered derogatory, meaning a person of mixed ancestry.

4. An Okinawan word referring to Yamato, or mainland Japan, here meaning mainland Japanese.

5. *Munui* corresponds to the Japanese expression *monoi*, which means "the way one speaks" or "objection."

6. Anna means "grandma" in the Miyako dialect; *obā*, the main island's form, is now more common everywhere in Okinawa.

7. As the use of the word *anna* suggests, the author has Miyako in mind, approximately 200 miles southwest of Okinawa's main island.

8. *Ai* is an Okinawan interjection expressing surprise, annoyance, anger, and so forth in response to something counter to the speaker's expectation.

9. An islander, Okinawan, local person.

10. This is a children's song sung while twirling pinwheels, also used in celebrating the longevity of a ninety-seven-year-old. At that age, one is thought to return to childhood.

11. *Warabā* corresponds to Japanese *warawa*, an archaic expression meaning "child."