

## I am a Cat – Chapter 3a

Natsume Sōseki – 1905

Mikeko is no more. Kuro is not worth my time. Life is a bit lonely, but thanks to my human acquaintances, all is not tedium. The other day the master was requested, in a letter he received, to please send a photo of his cat. More recently, kibi dango arrived from Okayama, addressed to yours truly. Indulged so with human sympathies, I've begun to forget I'm a cat. I've set aside my cat nature and self-identify more and more as human. I've abandoned all thoughts of rallying my own kind to rise up and topple the two-leggeds. Not only that, but I now find comfort in having progressed to the point where, on occasion, I number myself among the society of humans. It's not to where I disdain my own kind. It's simply that I'm more at home among those of like disposition. Such being the case, I take issue with any who'd brand me fickle, shallow, or duplicitous. Men who spout such words are themselves, more often than not, hidebound also-rans. Having shed my felinity, it ill behooves me to burden my days with Mikeko, Kuro, and the like. I seek to meet humans, and to critique their thoughts, words, and actions, on an equal footing. This seems hardly unreasonable. Regrettably, though, despite my self-awakening, the master still deems me a common furball. He made short work of those kibi dango, without a word to me, as though they were rightfully his. My photo, too, is yet to be taken and sent. I can't say these slights don't grieve me, but the master is the master, and I am my own cat, and we can hardly expect to always see eye to eye. So human have I become that the actions of cats, with whom I keep little company, no longer flow from my pen. If the reader will indulge me, my subjects henceforth will by and large be Meitei, Kangetsu, and their ilk.

It's a fair weather Sunday, and the master ambles out of his study, lays out brush, inkstone, and paper, and plops down onto his belly beside me, intoning something all the while. These strange sounds, I imagine, are some prelude to creative writing, and sure enough, after a bit, he sets down the words "a single stick of incense." Well now, I wonder, is it a poem, or perhaps a haiku? Though for the master, "a single stick of incense" seems overly stylish. As I'm still pondering, he abandons his stick of incense and moves to a new line. "I've thought for some time now to write of Natural Man," he dashes out. His brush stops there and moves no further. He grasps it firmly and tilts his head, seemingly to no avail. Then he begins to lick the brush tip. Having blackened his lips, he moves back lower on the page and draws out a circle. He draws two dots in the circle - eyes. In the center comes a nose with flared nostrils, then one straight line pulled sideways for the mouth. This is neither prose nor haiku. Apparently done with his face, he hurriedly blots it out. Again to a new line. He seems to be drifting, hoping the fresh new line will inspire some poem or eulogy or phrase or record, or anything. Finally, reverting to colloquial form, he scrawls out, in a single flourish, the following muddled text. "Natural Man ponders the infinite, reads the Analects, gorges on roasted potatoes, and is not immune to a runny nose." The master reads his text out loud, is uncharacteristically amused, and enjoys a hearty laugh. "The runny nose is a bit unflattering. Best strike it out." So saying, he puts a line through the words. Where a single line should suffice, he draws a second,

then a third, neatly and in parallel. Not caring that he's encroaching into the next line, he keeps going. After eight lines, and still no inspiration, he sets aside the brush and twists at his mustache. Determined, it seems, to prove that he can wring prose from it, he twists and untwists intently. As he continues working his mustache, the wife comes out of the living room and seats herself in front of his nose.

"A word please," she addresses him. "Huh?" His voice whumps like a gong struck underwater. The wife is clearly not satisfied with this response. "A word please," she begins anew. "What is it then?" he replies. As he does so, he pushes his thumb and index finger into his nostril and yanks out several nose hairs. "We're a little short this month ..." "We shouldn't be short. Didn't we pay the bookseller and settle the doctor's fee last month? This month should be fine." Without further concern, he gazes in admiration at the extracted nose hairs, as though examining miniature marvels. "The problem is that you've taken to bread rather than rice, and you put so much jam on it." "How much jam did I use then?" "I bought eight jars this month." "Eight? I couldn't have eaten that much." "It's not just you. It's the children too." "However much we ate, it couldn't be more than five or six yen." With calm composure, the master carefully plants his extracted nose hairs, one by one, onto the upper margin of his page. There's flesh on one end, and they stick up straight like needles. Continuing his experiment, he blasts them with a puff of his breath. They hold strong to the paper. "Tenacious things." He blows again as hard as he can. "It's not just the jam. There are other things to buy." The wife's face is ripe with discontent. "I suppose there are." The master goes back in with his fingers and yanks out more hairs. Among various browns and blacks is a gray one. Seemingly shocked at the site of it, he stares intently for a moment. Then he presents the hairs, still held between his fingers, to his wife. "No thank you!" She pushes his hand away with revulsion. "Look, look! A gray nose hair!" The master is quite animated. The wife laughs, yields on the subject of finances, and retreats back to the living room. The master, for his part, returns his thoughts to Natural Man.

Satisfied in having vanquished the wife with nose hair, the master continues to groom his nostrils and jumps back to his drafting. His brush, however, seems not so willing. "I can do away with 'gorges on roasted potatoes' too. Gone." So saying, he wipes it out. "And 'a single stick of incense' is too cursory. That goes too." Without hesitation, he takes it out with the brush. "Natural Man ponders the infinite, reads the Analects" is all that remains. This now strikes the master as too simple. "Enough of that then. No more prose. We'll just do an inscription." With that, he wields his brush in a cruciform motion, setting down on the paper an orchid, in the literary artist's style, and a poor one at that. His efforts thus far are a smear of black ink. He flips his page and strings together the following obfuscation. "From infinity born, in infinity versed, to infinity lost. Alas, oh infinity, Natural Man." Just as he pens this, Meitei makes his usual entrance. Meitei, blurring the lines between another's house and his own, steps in unannounced and without asking. Furthermore, he's notorious for floating in through the side door. Concern, discretion, hesitation, and worry are notions he shed from the day of his birth.

"Giant Gravitation again?" he asks, still standing there. "I can't keep pouring time into Giant Gravitation. I'm composing an epitaph for Natural Man," the master answers with overblown bravado. "Natural Man? A posthumous title, then? In the same vein as Coincidental Child?" Meitei's nonsense is in fine form. "Someone took the title Coincidental Child?" "Not likely. But it seemed along the same line." "Coincidental Child is no one I'd know, but Natural Man is someone known to you." "Who on earth would bear a name like that?" "It's Sorosaki. After graduation, he went on to graduate school and took up the theory of space and time as his topic. Overwork led to peritonitis and death. We were close friends."

"Close friends are great. I'm all for that. But who on earth went and tagged Sorosaki as Natural Man?" "Me. I came up with it. Go to a priest and you'll just get something boorish." The master beams with pride at the superiority of his own creation. Meitei laughs. "Let's see this epitaph you've penned." He snatches up the draft. "What do we have ... From infinity born, in infinity versed, to infinity lost. Alas, oh infinity, Natural Man," he reads out in a loud voice. "I see. Splendid piece. Befitting indeed of Natural Man." "Not bad, is it?" the master echoes back with a pleased look. "An epitaph like this belongs on a large takuwan stone. Have it inscribed in stone, then set it out back of the temple, a challenge to wandering strongmen." "I may well do just that," the master replies in all seriousness. "You'll have to excuse me a moment. I'll be back shortly. In the meantime, amuse yourself with the cat." Without waiting for Meitei's response, he disappears like the wind.

Unexpectedly tasked with hosting Meitei, I'm forced to put on a sociable front. With a couple of friendly mews I crawl up onto his lap. Meitei reacts with, "Whoa, packed on some pounds, have we? Let's see." Grabbing me brusquely by the scruff of the neck, he hoists me into the air. "Look at those dangly legs. How can you catch a mouse with those? ... Tell me missus, does this cat ever catch mice?" Not content with my company alone, he calls out to the wife in the next room. "Never mind mice. That cat eats zōni and dances." The wife, out of the blue, divulges my past transgression. My awkward situation, suspended in the air, grows all the more awkward. Meitei seems loath to set me down. "Now that you mention it, he looks the prancer. Better watch him, he's a shifty one. A nekomata demon from those storybooks of yore." Pulling nonsense out of his ear, he again engages the wife, who sets aside her needlework and proceeds into the parlor, a hint of annoyance gracing her brow.

"You must be bored. I would hope he'll be back soon." The wife refills Meitei's teacup and sets it before him. "Where do you suppose he went?" "Hard to say. He comes and goes without a word. Perhaps he's at the doctor's." "Doctor Amaki? With a patient like that I pity the poor fellow." "Really?" Seemingly at loss for an answer, the wife responds only tersely. Meitei pays no heed. "How is he these days? Is his stomach any better?" "I'm not sure if he's better or worse. The way he wolfs down jam, though, I don't think Amaki can help." The wife airs her outstanding grievance to Meitei. "How much jam are we talking? Sounds like a child." "And it's not just jam. Now he's on to grated daikon, claiming it aids digestion." "Well, I'll be." Meitei expresses his astonishment. "Ever since he saw in the paper that daikon contains diastase." "I see.

He aims to offset the damage done by the jam. Masterful reckoning. Ha ha ha ha." Meitei revels in the wife's indictments. "The other day he fed some to the baby ..." "Jam?" "No, not jam ... grated daikon. 'Come child, dad has a treat for you,' he says. He's affectionate toward the children on occasion, which is fine, but it always ends in some foolish stunt. Several days back he scooped up the middle daughter and plonked her down on the dresser ..." "What was the aim in that?" Meitei, in all that he hears, seeks to assign some purpose. "No aim whatsoever. He tells her to try jumping down. A small girl of three or four does not cavort like a tomboy." "He clearly hadn't thought things through. But it wasn't ill will. In his heart of hearts he's a good man." "With all the grief he gives me, who needs ill will?" She fans the flames of her own resentment.

"You really mustn't complain so. Living here as you do, passing each day free from need, is the best of situations. Kushami is a simple and modest family man, forgoing indulgence and unconcerned with appearance." Breaking from character, Meitei cheerfully propounds his thoughts on the matter. "You don't know the half of it ..." "Up to something on the sly then, is he? It's a treacherous world we live in." Meitei's quick to backpedal and equivocate. "It's not any secret indulgence. It's this hoarding of books that he'll never read. I wouldn't mind if he showed some discretion and bought just a few, but he goes to Maruzen, forgets himself, and brings back armloads. At the end of the month he feigns ignorance. Just last year, the bills piled up at year's end, and I struggled to get us by." "That's all? Let him bring back his books. When the collector calls, just say you'll pay him soon and send him on his way." "Even so, I can't just keep dragging things out," the wife replies with a glum look. "Then level with him and reign in the expenses." "How? Do you think he ever listens? The other day, he complained that if I wanted to be the wife of a scholar I should learn to appreciate the value of books. 'I'll tell you a story from ancient Rome,' he said, and advised me to take it to heart." "Sounds interesting. What story did he tell?" Meitei is fully enthused. Much more than from sympathy for the wife, he's spurred by his own curiosity. "In ancient Rome, it seems, there was some king named Tarukin ..." "Tarukin? That sounds a bit odd." "Foreign names are hard. I can never keep them straight. In any case, he was said to be the seventh in his line." "I see. But Tarukin the 7th is odd. Okay, so what of this Tarukin?" "I won't have you mocking me. If you know something I don't then share it. You're horrible." The wife lashes back at Meitei.

"I'd never make sport at another's expense. It's just that 'Tarukin the 7th' has a certain ring to it ... Hold on a moment. A Roman king, seventh in his lineage. I can't say with certainty, but I believe that might be Tarquin the Proud. But anyway, what did this king, whomever he was, do?" "A woman, it's said, came to the king with nine books and asked if he wouldn't buy them." "I see." "The king asked her price, and in response she named an extraordinary sum. Thinking the price too high, the king asked that she reduce it. Without hesitation, she took three of the nine books and cast them onto the fire." "Regrettable indeed." "Within those pages were prophecies or some such writings, unique and irreplaceable." "Well, I'll be." "The king, reckoning that six books were of less value than nine, again asked her price. She stated the same sum as before, not a penny less. On objection from the king that this was unreasonable, the woman

cast another three onto the fire. The king, still wishing to have the books, asked her price for the remaining three. True to form, her price for three was the same as her price for nine. Though nine had become six, and six had become three, the sum was unchanged, not a single cent less. The king refrained from suggesting a lower price, lest the last three also be fed to the fire. In the end, he paid the full sum for the remaining books, sparing them from the flames ... 'Now do you see?' he asks me. 'Now can you see the value of books?' He asserts himself with pride, but I still don't see what he means." The wife, having stated her case and that of her husband, presses Meitei to weigh in. Even Meitei seems at a loss. He takes a handkerchief from his sleeve pocket and lets me chase it over his lap. Then, as though having suddenly thought of something, he addresses the wife in a spirited voice. "His obsession with books, on the other hand, seems to have lent him a scholarly air. I even saw, the other day, mention of his name in a literary journal." "Really?" The wife straightens her gaze.

As any good wife would, she takes a keen interest in her husband's reputation. "What did they write?" "It was nothing much, just two or three lines. They likened his prose to drifting clouds and flowing water." The wife floats a smile. "That was it?" "There was more -- almost within grasp, it suddenly disappears, and once having gone, forgets to ever return." The wife looks puzzled. "Would that be complimentary?" she asks with an air of concern. "I suppose one could see it so." Meitei, unconcerned, is dangling his handkerchief in front of my eyes. "I get that books are tools of the trade, but he's still quite eccentric." Meitei sees her coming at it from a new angle and reacts. "Granted he may be eccentric, but show me a scholar who isn't." It's unclear if he's agreeing with the wife or defending the master. "A while back he returned from the school with plans to go out again shortly, and couldn't be bothered to change his clothes. If you can imagine it, he sat at his desk and took dinner in his overcoat. He propped his tray on the kotatsu frame. I was seated at his side with the rice warmer, but the scene was almost surreal ..." "Like a warrior general tallying heads. But each man's entitled to his quirks -- At any rate, at least he's not mundane." Meitei twists critique into praise. "Far be it for a woman to say what's mundane or not mundane, but he's reckless to a fault." "Better reckless than mundane." Meitei's unbridled defense of the master only invites the wife's displeasure. "You all talk of mundane this or mundane that, but what on earth do you really mean?" She pushes back and demands that the term be explained. "Mundane? What one means by mundane is -- is not so easy to say." "If you can't even say what it is, then how can you knock it so?" The wife pins him down with top-notch feminine logic. "It's not that it's unclear. We know what it means. It's just that it's hard to explain." "What you probably mean is it's anything not to your liking." Decorum aside, she cuts to the chase. Meitei has no choice but to address the subject head on.

"I'll tell you what mundane is. Mundane is folks lolling about in reverie of fair maidens in the full bloom of youth and then, when the weather turns fine, strolling the banks of the Sumida at leisure, a nip at the flask ready at hand." "Are there really such folks as that?" The wife, not quite following what Meitei said, responds only vaguely. "Somehow I'm not sure I follow," she confesses. "Imagine, then, the bust of Bakin with the head of Major Pendennis, exposed, for a year or two, to the European elements." "That would be

mundane?" Meitei just chuckles. "Let's make it even simpler. Take any middle school student, add to him a head clerk from Shirokiya, and divide by two. There you have the epitome of mundane." "Is that so?" The wife cocks her head, a puzzled look on her face.

"You're still here?" The master, making a sudden entrance, seats himself at Meitei's side. "Isn't that a bit blunt? If I'm not mistaken, you asked me to wait." "See what I mean," the wife glances over at Meitei. "While you were gone, I received a full account of your exploits." "Women are given to gossip. If human beings could only hold their tongues like this cat does." As he spoke, the master patted my head. "You really gave grated daikon to the baby?" "Babies these days are clever. Ever since, when I ask where's spice-spice, he sticks out his tongue. It's a curious thing." "You're terrible! Training the lad like a dog. Incidentally, Kangetsu should be here soon." "Kangetsu's coming?" The master gives Meitei a questioning look.

"He's coming indeed. I sent a postcard instructing him to be here by one." "So you've planned this without even asking. For what purpose, if I may know, did you summon Kangetsu to my home?" "This isn't of my design. It's for Kangetsu's sake. He has a talk at the Society for Physical Sciences. He needs to practice, so he asked me to give a listen. Perfect, I thought, we'll get Kushami to listen too. So I invited him to your house. -- And why not? You're a man with time on his hands. -- There's no reason not to give him a listen." Meitei has it all worked out. "I know nothing of physics." The master sounds a bit peeved at Meitei and his arbitrary calling of shots. "But this is no dull or dry topic, no magnetic nozzles or the such. He's talking on the mechanics of hanging. It's a sensational choice of topic, absolutely worth hearing." "It was you who came so close to hanging himself, so you can listen. As for me ..." "Don't go getting the chills on me. We're not talking Kabuki-za here." Meitei's banter is in fine form. The wife allows herself a laugh and glances back at her husband while retreating to the next room. The master holds his tongue and strokes my head. His manner of stroking, for once, is gentle.

Seven minutes later, give or take one, Kangetsu appears just as prescribed. Owing to the evening's talk, he's dressed to the heels in a splendid frock coat. A freshly-laundered white collar protrudes from underneath. He cuts a dashing figure. "I'm running a bit late," he greets the others with full composure. "We've been eagerly awaiting your arrival. Let's hear what he's got, shall we?" Meitei turns to the master. "Sure." The master, left with no choice, offers up a lukewarm response. Kangetsu takes his time. "A cup of water first, if I might?" "He's not messing around. I suppose you'll want applause next." Meitei effuses enthusiasm. Kangetsu produces his notes from an inside pocket and prefaces his remarks in a measured tone before starting. "This is a rehearsal. As such, I hereby request your candid critique."

"The execution of wrongdoers by hanging was by and large a method applied among Anglo-Saxon societies. Looking back further to ancient times, hanging was limited, for the most part, to a means of taking one's own life. The jews put wrongdoers to death by stoning. Consulting the Old Testament, the term hanging signifies the hoisting of the wrongdoer's dead body, laying it up as fare for wild beasts or

carnivorous birds. According to the writings of Herodotus, it's believed that the Jews, even while still in Egypt, had an acute aversion to the exposure of their dead in the nighttime. The Egyptians would behead a wrongdoer, nail up the headless torso, and leave it exposed overnight. The Persians ..." "Kangetsu, you're straying further and further from the topic of hanging. Are you sure you're on track here?" Meitei interjects. "I'm about to engage in the main discourse. Bear with me just a bit longer. ... Back to the Persians. The Persians, it seems, also used crucifixion. However, whether they crucified the offender alive or drove the nails after death is an area of uncertainty, still to be resolved ..." "What does it matter?" The master expresses his disinterest with a yawn. "There's much more I'd like to convey, but if you're finding it a burden, ..." "Instead of 'a burden,' 'burdensome' is the better use of the word. Wouldn't you say, Kushami?" Meitei's fault-finding continues. "Either or," is the master's unenthused reply. "I'm ready at last now to talk on the main topic. 'Talk' is a storyteller's term. From a lecturer, I'd expect something more polished." Meitei butts in again. "If 'talk' is too coarse then what might you suggest?" Kangetsu asks back indignantly. "It's not clear at all that Meitei's here to listen and didn't just come to obstruct. Disregard his needling and carry on." The master is eager to end the standoff and move things forward. "Wield not contentious words, but yield as the willow. Is it not so?" Meitei, true to form, counters with an offhand quote.

Kangetsu couldn't help but laugh. "Based on my research, one instance of strangulation, truly in the form of an execution, does occur in Book 22 of the Odyssey. The specific passage describes the strangulation of twelve of Penelope's maids by Telemachus. To avoid the semblance of ostentation, I'll refrain from reading to you the original Greek text. If you'd like to refer to the passage in question, it starts on line 465 and continues to line 473." "I'd strike that bit about Greek. No need to tout the fact that you read it. Wouldn't you say so, Kushami?" "Completely agree. A cultivated speaker doesn't fish for praise." The master, uncharacteristically, is quick to back Meitei. Neither reads a word of Greek. "In that case, I'll strike those lines this evening and skip to what I talk on -- or speak on, next."

"Let's imagine for a moment this strangulation. There are two methods by which it might have been done. In the first case Telemachus, employing the assistance of Eumaeus and Philoetius, fastened one end of his rope to a pillar. He then knotted the rope at intervals along its length, inserted a maid's head through the opening of each knot, pulled tight on the other end, and hung up the lot." "So we can picture the maids, like shirts in a Western laundry, hung out in a line." "Exactly. In the second case, one end was fastened to the pillar as before, but the other end was first attached to a high point near the ceiling. From this upper rope, separate lengths were suspended, a noose fashioned on each lower end, and a maid's neck inserted. According to plan, then, the maids' foot stools were pulled away on cue." "So if we picture a rope curtain, with round paper lanterns dangling off the ends of the strands, then I suppose that's not far off?" "I've never actually seen a round paper lantern, so I can't say for sure, but I should think that's about right. -- I'll now prove to you, through application of the principles of mechanics, that the method described in the first case is fully unworkable." "Most intriguing," Meitei remarks. "Intriguing indeed," the master concurs.

"First of all, let's assume that the women were hung at equal intervals. Let's also assume that the segment of rope connecting the necks of the two women closest to the ground is horizontal. Let  $\alpha_1 \alpha_2 \dots \alpha_6$  be the angles formed by each rope segment with respect to the horizontal, and let  $T_1 T_2 \dots T_6$  be the tension in each segment, with  $T_7 = X$  as the tension in the bottom-most segment.  $W$ , please note, is the body weight of each woman. Do you follow so far?"

"For the most part." Meitei and the master reply after exchanging glances. However, their answer seems somewhat arbitrary, providing no real insight into the comprehension or incomprehension a general listener might experience. "Good then. As you know, in the case of polygons we can apply the principle of equilibrium, yielding the following twelve equations.  $T_1 \cos \alpha_1 = T_2 \cos \alpha_2 \dots$  (1)  $T_2 \cos \alpha_2 = T_3 \cos \alpha_3 \dots$  (2) ..." "Okay, okay. Enough already." The master pours cold water on Kangetsu's equations. "Actually, these equations are pivotal to my talk." Kangetsu appears crestfallen. "Why not just give us the conclusion?" Meitei, too, finds the equations a bit daunting. "If I gloss over the equations, then my work in mechanics will all be for naught ..." "Don't fret so. Be done with them and move on ..." "If that's what you wish, I'll leave them out, though it seems to break the flow." "That's the spirit!" Meitei, incongruously, claps his hands in approval.

"Let's return now to England. The hanging platform, expressed by the word 'gallows,' appears in Beowulf. There seems no doubt, then, that execution by hanging was carried out from early times. According to the views of Blackstone, a wrongdoer sentenced to hanging, on the off chance that the rope should break, is to be hung a second time in the same manner. On the other hand, oddly enough, a passage in Piers Plowman conveys how a wrongdoer, even a murderer, is not to be strung up twice. Whatever the rule may be, there were on occasion cases where things went wrong and the first try did not prove fatal. In 1786 they hung the renowned villain FitzGerald. In a curious turn of events, the rope broke on his first plunge from the stand. On the second try, the rope was too long, his feet found the ground, and again he survived. Finally on the third attempt, so the story goes, onlookers joined in and dispatched him to his grave." "Good grief!" Meitei seems suddenly reinvigorated. "Clung on for dear life." The master too is enthusiastic. "Here's another interesting bit. When hung by the neck, one's stature is said to increase by some three centimeters. This has been confirmed by physicians." "Sounds like you're on to something. What do you think, Kushami? Have them hang you. That'll put your height on par with average." Meitei turns to the master as he speaks. "Kangetsu, can one survive this three-centimeter stretch?" the master responds with surprising earnestness. "Absolutely not, I'm afraid. We're talking spinal cords here. Simply put, it's less of a stretch and more of a snap." "In that case, I'd better pass." The master abandons the thought.

There was much more to Kangetsu's speech. He'd intended to touch next on the physiological effects of hanging, but Meitei, acting the part of the unruly interloper, interrupted endlessly with offbeat remarks. The master, for his part, made no effort to suppress his yawns. Kangetsu gave up midway and took his

leave. What happened that evening, and in what manner and to what effect Kangetsu delivered his oratory, I cannot say. It was a far-removed event, and I've no report of what transpired.

Several quiet days passed. Then one afternoon, around two, Meitei, per habit, came fluttering vacantly in, like his own proverbial Coincidental Child. "Did you hear about Ochi Tōfū and the Takanawa incident?" he asked immediately upon seating himself. His enthusiasm for this news seemed no less than his enthusiasm for the fall of Port Arthur. "Haven't heard. Haven't seen him lately." The master was his usual dour self. "I'm quite busy today, but I must, I thought, find time to relate to you the tale of master Tōfū's misadventure." "Flattering yourself again. Your insolence knows no bounds." "Ha ha ha ha ha. Not insolence, mind you, but impudence. I'd like you to mark that distinction, given my honor's at stake." "Same difference," the master counters with swagger, the quintessential Natural Man reborn. "This past Sunday, so it seems, Tōfū went to Sengakuji in Takanawa. Why he went in this cold is beyond me -- first of all, the only visitors to Sengakuji anymore are bumpkins fresh from the country who know nothing of Tōkyō, wouldn't you say?" "If Tōfū wants to visit Sengakuji then what right have you to interfere?" "I certainly have no right to interfere. Rights aside, though, there's a hall within the temple grounds where they keep relics from the 47 Rōnin on display. I assume you've seen it?" "No." "You haven't? Well, I'll be. No wonder you're vouching for Tōfū. What respectable Edo man doesn't know Sengakuji?" "This Edo man doesn't know Sengakuji, yet he's functioned thus far as a teacher." The master, at long last, assumes the role of Natural Man. "Be that as it may then, as Tōfū was in the hall there viewing the exhibition, a German couple entered."

"At first, as he tells it, they posed some question in Japanese. However, Tōfū is ever the scholar, as you're aware, and was itching to try out his German. He rattled off a few words, which were surprisingly well received. -- In hindsight, the seeds of his failure were then and there sown." "What happened?" The master is hooked. "The Germans had their eyes on a gold-dust lacquered seal case that had once belonged to Ōtaka Gengo. They asked if one might purchase it. Tōfū's answer was quite compelling. All Japanese, he told them, were men of virtue and integrity, so purchase was out of the question. Up to that point, he found himself in finest form. From there, though, the Germans, convinced they'd secured a capable interpreter, unleashed a torrent of questions." "What did they ask?" "That's just it. If he'd understood then he would've been fine, but the questions came too fast and too thick. He had no idea. When he did finally grasp one, they were asking about a fire hook and oversized wooden mallet. He'd never learned of Western counterparts for fire hook or oversized wooden mallet, and his answers got lost in translation." "Naturally." The master, reflecting on his own experience as a teacher, expresses due sympathy. "In the meantime curious folks, with nothing better to do, had gathered round. Tōfū and the Germans were boxed in from all sides by onlookers. Tōfū blushed and stammered. His initial enthusiasm had turned, in the same measure, to great distress." "What did he do?" "Unable, it seems, to stand any more, he uttered 'sainara' in Japanese and beat a hasty retreat. 'Sainara' is a bit odd, so I asked if it was something from his home region. It wasn't, he told me. They always said sayonara, but for Westerners he thought he should

give it some flair. I'm impressed with that Tōfū. Tribulation aside, he still has a mind to exit in style." "I get the 'sainara,' but what of the Westerners?" "They just stood there, apparently, vacant and dumbfounded. Ha ha ha ha. Isn't that a riot?" "I wouldn't particularly have said so. What's a riot is you coming all the way over here with this story." With that, the master flicks the ash off his cigarette, letting it fall into the wooden brazier. Just then, the bell by the latticed door sounds loudly, startling both men. "Beg pardon!" comes a shrill female voice. Meitei and the master instinctively exchange glances. Neither speaks.

As they're thinking it rare for a woman to call at the master's, the owner of the shrill voice enters, trailing a double-layered silk crepe skirt over the tatami. She looks to be in her early forties. From a high hairline, her forelocks tower skyward like levee works, extending her face to half again its length, if not more. Her eyes are sloped like roadcuts, pulled up into opposing straight lines. Straight line is the operative word. They're narrow as whale eyes. Her nose, on the other hand, is absurdly large. From the looks of it, she'd taken it from elsewhere and planted it there. Like the stone lantern of Shōkonsha transferred into a small garden, it exerted its dominance yet failed to make the place its own. It was what's referred to as a hooked nose. It soared upward with unbridled zeal, thought better of it midway, and from there on humbled itself, discarding its initial vigor and drooping back to peer down on the lips below. So striking was this nose that the impression when she spoke was not of her mouth forming words, but rather her nose driving her mouth. To pay due tribute to this grand nose, I decided to henceforth call her Hanako. After dispensing with the formalities of initial introduction, Hanako surveys the room. "You've a lovely home," she remarks. "You've got to be kidding," the master thinks to himself as he puffs away on his smoke. Meitei eyes the ceiling. "That's a curious pattern there. Tell me, would that be the wood's natural grain, or might it be water damage?" he tacitly questions the master. "Water damage, of course," the master replies. "Lovely," Meitei remarks with a straight face. Hanako, deeming the two of them socially inept, is immediately indignant. For some moments, seated there on the floor, they face off in silence.

"I've an inquiry to make, and that's why I've called." Hanako starts anew. "Oh?" The master expresses little interest. Dissatisfied, Hanako changes tact. "We're in the neighborhood -- that corner residence across the way." "That large, Western-style place with the separate storehouse? I see. I have noticed the nameplate. Kaneda, I believe." The master finally connected the Western-style place and its storehouse to his guest, but his deference toward Madam Kaneda was no greater than before. "My husband would have called himself, but he's occupied so by his business." She glances at the master to gage the effect of her words. The master is unmoved. Hanako's language, for a first-time caller, and a woman at that, has struck him as brash and stirred up his discontent. "He manages multiple enterprises, not just one, and as executive he's integral to all. -- But you probably know this already," she adds with a satisfied look, certain that this time she's put him in his place. The master, by nature, is exceedingly humble in the presence of a learned scholar or a university professor. Oddly, though, he feels no such deference toward industrialists. In his mind, the middle school teacher outranks the industrialist. Even if he doesn't fully believe this, he's set in his ways and sees no prospects of patronage from men of industry or men of wealth. However much

wealth or influence the other party might hold or wield, the master harbors no illusions of favor and hence feels no obligation to appease. This being the case, he confines his interests to academic circles. Who is who, and who does what where in the world of business is utterly foreign. What he does know evokes no interest. Hanako, for her part, has never imagined the world to house such eccentrics. She's made a great many acquaintances up to now, and never once has the name Kaneda failed to work its magic. At any gathering, however elite, Madam Kaneda is cordially received. She's called with every expectation that the mention of the corner residence alone, to say nothing of the Kaneda enterprises, should suffice to subdue an old academic of no repute.

"Have you heard of this Kaneda?" the master asks Meitei offhand. "I should say so. Kaneda's a friend of my uncle. The other day he came to our garden party." Meitei gives a direct answer. "Really? Who's this uncle?" "Baron Makiyama." Meitei is fully candid. Before the master can ask anything further, Hanako turns abruptly toward Meitei. Meitei sits demure, layered in Ōshima pongee and fine cotton print. "Oh my. You're Makiyama's -- You don't say. I had no idea. You'll have to forgive me. I've heard so much from my husband. Makiyama has always been so generous in his patronage." Her language is suddenly polite, and she even throws in a bow. "Really, now. Ha ha ha ha," Meitei chuckles. The master regards the two, dumbfounded and silent. "He's even sought Makiyama's counsel in regard to our daughter's marriage ..." "Is that so?" This was news to Meitei and, from the tone of his voice, had caught him a little off guard. "The truth is that we've offers from near and far, but given our station we can't marry her off without due and circumspect consideration ..." "Quite right." Meitei has regained his composure. "That's why I've called. There's something I wish to ask." Hanako turns to the master and reverts to her harsher tone. "I understand that one Mizushima Kangetsu frequents this house. What can you tell me of him?" "What's your business with Kangetsu?" the master responds unreceptively. "With respect to their daughter's nuptials, it would seem, they're seeking insight into Kangetsu's character and conduct." Meitei is one step ahead of the master. "If you could share what you know, it would help things greatly ..." "So you're saying you mean to marry your daughter to Kangetsu?" "I'm saying no such thing." Hanako pushes back. "There are many suitors. If one doesn't work, then another will." "Then you don't need to bother with Kangetsu, do you?" the master replies with annoyance. "What reason have you to withhold information?" Hanako assumes a defiant stance. Meitei, seated between the two, grasps his silver-stemmed pipe as though wielding a referee's war fan. "Gloves off! Sound the bell!" his inner voice cries out. He's beside himself with glee.

"Has Kangetsu ever stated, in no uncertain terms, that he'd like to take your daughter as his bride?" The master aims squarely and fires point-blank. "He hasn't said as much, but ..." "Has he even thought as much?" The master has decided one doesn't beat around the bush with this woman. "It's not to that point yet, but Kangetsu is hardly disinterested." At the edge of the ring she regains her footing. "Is there any indication at all that Kangetsu has feelings for the young lady?" The master puffs out his chest and challenges with his eyes. "Well, it would certainly seem so, wouldn't it?" The master's challenge is met full

on. Meitei, who up to now has been looking on in amusement, fancying himself in the role of referee, has had his curiosity piqued. He sets aside his pipe and leans forward. "Has Kangetsu been writing her love letters? This is delightful. Fresh gossip for a fresh new year." He's soaking it up. "We're not talking love letters. It's gone much further. Are the two of you really unaware?" Hanako queries them with an air of superiority. "Are you aware?" The master questions Meitei with a bewildered look. "I'm not aware. If anyone's aware here, it ought to be you." Meitei gives a befuddled answer, shrinking into modesty at an inopportune moment. "The both of you, in fact, know full well." Hanako is circling for the kill. "Huh?" Both men react at once. "Allow me to refresh your memories. Late last year, did Kangetsu not take part in a concert at the Abe residence in Mukōjima? That evening, on the way home, at Azumabashi, something occurred -- I'll not go into detail, for the sake of those involved -- That's evidence enough, I should think. Do you disagree?" Hanako places her hands, with their diamond-inset rings, neatly across her knees and primly straightens herself. Her magnificent nose asserts its prominence, having laid waste to Meitei and the master.

The master, and even Meitei, were blindsided and struck dumb. They sat for some moments in silence, like feverish patients emerging from a haze. However, as the shock wore off and they slowly returned to themselves, a sense of absurdity hit them anew. As if on cue, both men burst out laughing. Hanako, seeing no humor in the situation, was duly offended and fixed them in a stern gaze. "That was your daughter? Well, I'll be. You were right all along. What do you say, Kushami? Kangestu must really have fallen for her ... no sense keeping secrets, is there? Out with what you know." The master grunts a curt response. "Exactly. Don't hold back now. The secret is out." Hanako is back in command. "At this point, what choice do we have? We'll willfully share what we know. You're the host here, Kushami, are you not? Let's wipe off that grin and get down to business. Secrets are frightful things. Conceal them though we might, they always find the light of day. -- I must say though, Madam Kaneda, I'm intrigued. How did you manage to unearth this particular secret? I stand duly impressed." Meitei alone prattles on. "I'm not one to miss things," Hanako replies with a self-satisfied look. "You seem almost thorough to a fault. Who on earth was your source?" "The cartman's wife, from the property just in back." "That cartman with the black cat?" the master asks with wide-eyed amazement. "Yes. When it comes to Kangestu, I have to say she served me well. I wanted to know what he talks of when he calls here, so I employed the cartman's wife. I got it all from her, in full detail." "That's unconscionable!" The master raises his voice. "Don't worry. It's not about you. I've no concern for whatever you might do or say. It's Kangetsu who concerns me." "Kangetsu of whomever, that cartman's wife is a vile wretch!" The master loses his cool.

"She has every right, has she not, to approach your fence, on her own side, and stand there. If you're concerned about being overheard, then why don't you lower your voice or move to a bigger place?" Hanako is utterly unrepentant. "It's not just the cartman. I've learned a great deal too from the two-string koto teacher across the lane." "About Kangetsu?" "Not only about Kangetsu." There's a touch of menace in her words, but the master is loathe to back down. "That stuck-up prude who walks with her nose in the

air? Blasted idiot!" "Might I remind you we're talking of a lady? You'd best watch your tongue." Hanako's words begin to reveal her true colors. At this point, one wonders if she didn't come just for the fight. Meitei, being Meitei, is following the exchange with great interest. His countenance is fully unperturbed, like the Hermit Tekkai at a cockfight.

The master, realizing he can't best Hanako when it comes to trading barbs, is forced to retreat into silence for a moment. Finally, a thought seems to hit him. "You talk as though Kangetsu's fallen for your daughter, but that's not exactly how we heard it, is it now?" The master engages Meitei for assistance. "True. We were told it started with your daughter -- she fell ill and muttered something or other in delirium." "She did no such thing." Madam Kaneko dispenses with formality and responds bluntly. "But Kangetsu told us, if I remember correctly, that he heard as much from the wife of a certain scholar." "That was our ruse. We employed this wife to sound Kangetsu out." "And she knowingly acquiesced?" "She did. But favors aren't for free. It took a good bit of doing." "You're not leaving here, I take it, until you're satisfied that, when it comes to Kangetsu, you've left no stone unturned?" Meitei is a bit fed up with her now and his tone is uncharacteristically brusque. "Fine then. What's the harm in talking? Let's talk, shall we Kushami? -- Madam, Kushami and I will tell you, within reason, any pertinent facts concerning Kangetsu. We won't hold anything back. -- It would help if you could pose your questions in order, though, one at a time."